

## The Road to Emmaus

One of my favorite movies is *The Way*. It's directed by Emilio Estevez and stars his father Martin Sheen. Martin Sheen plays a widower whose son, played by Estevez, is a bit of a free spirit. The son takes off to walk the Camino de Santiago in Spain, gets off track and dies in the Pyrenees mountains near the beginning of the journey. His father decides to take his ashes and finish the trek for his son, scattering some of the ashes along the way.

The Camino de Santiago is a famous pilgrimage that follows several centuries old routes, mostly through northern Spain. One of the most popular routes is 481 miles across the northern coast of Spain. All the routes end at Santiago de Compostela, or the shrine of St. James near the Atlantic coast of Spain.

Historically pilgrimages are religious in origin. In the Medieval Christian church, pilgrimages were thought to be a way to earn salvation. Another famous one you might know about is the hajj, one of the pillars of Islam. Devout Muslims are obligated at least once in their lives to make a pilgrimage to Mecca. It's meant to cleanse away sin and start fresh.

In the Christian church, pilgrimages are no longer thought of as a way to earn salvation – we believe Jesus grants us that as a gift. But pilgrimages are still often made by Christians as a way to deepen their faith and grow closer to God. The Camino de Santiago still fulfills that purpose for some Christians.

But the idea of pilgrimage spreads beyond any particular faith tradition, or really any faith tradition. Non-Christians might make a pilgrimage as a way to tap into something deeply spiritual that doesn't fit any particular religion. Others make pilgrimages as a journey of self-discovery or a way to test what they're made of. For others, it's probably less deep. One of the pilgrims in *The Way* is an overweight German man who walked the Camino to lose weight.

One thing is probably true of most people who undertake a pilgrimage...especially a grueling one...is that they are changed. In *The Way*, all the travelers Martin Sheen's character meets have some sort of wound or brokenness that needs healing. Even the overweight German discovers some much deeper things about himself and his image of himself.

One of the other things I like about the movie, *The Way*, is that it uses the name the early Christians used for themselves...the Way. You hear it really only in the book of Acts, although it reminds you that in John's Gospel Jesus said he was the way. The way is really kind of a metaphor for life as a follower of Jesus. So it's fitting that the resurrection church begins on a road. In fact much of Luke's gospel takes place on the road...on the way.

We are on the way. This little scene on the road and in the town of Emmaus are like a template for life on the Way.

So what happens when we are on the Way?

When we are on the way, we meet other people. In the movie and in other books I've read about pilgrimages, it's not just the walking that changes people, it's the people they encounter. Some of those people are irritating, some are fools, some are full of themselves. As people on the Way rub up against each other, they change each other.

But among those people one meets on a pilgrimage, you just might encounter Jesus. Jesus meets people on the way. In fact, with all the people you meet, you need to assume you are meeting Jesus. Because Jesus doesn't always look like we thought.

If we pull Matthew's gospel in here, Jesus may look like the poor, the refugee, the asylum seeker, the convict, the hungry.

And if we believe that somehow, Christ is in all, even if buried very deeply, he can look like anybody.

On the Way, our eyes will be opened. We will learn more about ourselves first of all. The travelers on that road to Emmaus did not know what to make of the day's events. In particular, they dismissed this idea that Jesus may have been raised from the dead.

They had all the information they thought they needed...the dead don't come back to life. Jesus tried but his mission ended in failure.

Being on the Way teaches us that we don't in fact know as much as we think we do. As Jesus opened the scripture to them, they begin to see how wrong they'd gotten things.

When we are on the Way, following Jesus, we will learn the importance of not being so quick to judgement...of listening and asking questions. In our anti-racist book group the other night, we talked about having actual conversations about controversial things. Our daughter is in the group and said she's found that just asking honest and open questions is the way she's found to best have those conversations.

We all agreed social media was less than helpful – traveling the way with other people is best done with actual conversation.

On the Way, we will sometimes learn things that are painful. We might see that things we thought we knew turn out to be wrong...

and that others we thought were wrong have it right...or that life is often so much more ambiguous than that.

We might learn that we struggle to love God and love our neighbor because we really don't love ourselves. That could be a whole other sermon. But when you take on something arduous, like a pilgrimage, or really hard training for an athletic event, or a challenging course of study, you learn more about your attitudes towards yourself and how they may have hurt you and caused you to hurt others.

On the Way, we learn that sharing a meal with others is one of the most profound things we can do. In that little village of Emmaus, it's when Jesus breaks the bread that the disciples finally see him for who he is.

We may not always appreciate its depth, but holy communion is that meal for us in which Jesus is revealed...and not just revealed but joined to us in our inmost being.

A pilgrimage is also filled with adventure and beauty. Some of the Camino is just mile after mile through a somewhat dreary landscape. But interspersed are scenes of great beauty.

On the Way, when we pay attention, we can see beauty even in that which we first thought was boring.

Because we are tuned in to Christ's presence in Creation itself, the Way is filled with that presence, not just in people and animals but in rocks and trees and skies and seas.

In the end, a pilgrimage is less about the destination than it is about the things you learn and discover, about yourself and the world, along the way. Walking the way of Jesus is also less about the destination. Our destination is eternal life and we are assured of that before we ever start walking the Way.

But the Way...the way that is Jesus is that adventure...that way of beauty and pain and eye-opening experiences. It's on that way that we meet people who will alternately charm and aggravate us, and whom we will ultimately come to love...and they us. It's the way that reveals to us the layers we have built over the years to protect ourselves and keep us from being hurt. And as those layers are peeled back, what is revealed to us is our very inmost being, and the God who's been there waiting for us all along.