

On the Road Again
Luke 24:13-35

Can it be true? After 27 years of standing in the chancel to lead worship, can this really be my final time? I can't even begin to express my gratitude for the responsiveness of this congregation to my invitations to serve and the love and support you have shown me for more than a quarter-century. I have so many memories of people and occasions and projects and shared ministries that my heart is full. But, although I'm leaving this beloved congregation, my heart is not full of sadness; it's full of joy.

Joy is a deep, down feeling - much more profound than just being happy. Joy fills me to my core. And I'd like to share with you this morning some of the things that move me so deeply. Ignore my tears if and when they come; they're all tears of joy.

I came to Plymouth in the late summer of 1984, a young wife with a baby in my arms. My marriage and my family have both "grown up" in the bosom of this congregation. It is a joy to know that my husband Mark and our daughter Kate have participated fully in the life of this wonderful church. Professionally, Kate has never known me to do or be anything besides being a minister at Plymouth Church. Plymouth has been the center of our daily schedules and the grounding for our way of life. Thank you for being our extended family.

I came to Plymouth to develop a program to involve Plymouth members in community service, social consciousness and Christian response. The job was undefined, and was wide open to possibilities. Through the years I have been encouraged to undertake projects and missions that arise from the needs of the community, and, while doing that, to incorporate my own personal interests into the mix. As a result, since my husband is an experienced mountain guide, and I enjoy developing programs, the two of us provided mountaintop experiences for groups of Plymouth members for many summers in the Big Horns and the Rockies. More than a hundred of you have gone into the wilderness with us - and you've all made it back! We haven't lost anyone!

Another special interest for me was the animal husbandry mission of the Heifer Project. Mark and Kate and I took a spring break trip to Heifer International's Demonstration Farm in Perryville, Arkansas. The farm animals were so impressive and the interpretation of the mission was so compelling that I came back to Des Moines with a new passion. Since then, Plymouth has raised over \$120,000 for Heifer Project, ensuring both protein and a livelihood to hundreds and hundreds of families around the globe. The knowledge of the difference Plymouth has made to those families and their communities brings me great joy.

Another interest of mine was to pursue advanced education in ministry. To my joy, I was permitted by the Personnel Committee to accept a Merrill Fellowship at Harvard Divinity School and, later, to pursue a Doctor of Ministry degree from a consortium of theological schools in the Twin Cities. Advanced study in areas of theology and ministry gave me renewed interest and energy to continue in my discipleship position here, and, I hope, made me more effective.

It has been a joy to get to know and love the members of this congregation as individuals and as families. I haven't counted the number of baptisms and weddings and funerals I've done over the years, but let me assure you that it has been a joy to share with you the most important times of your lives. You trusted me to minister to you during your most vulnerable and your most jubilant times, and for that I am grateful.

It is unusual to be in a place long enough to walk with families through entire life cycles. But there are some in this congregation for whom that has happened. For instance, a Plymouth member who has involved me in many of her life events is Jennifer Glover Konfrst. Jennifer was 13 years old when we took her to Wyoming with us to be a nanny to 3-year old Kate so Mark and I could fully enjoy a two-week continuing education program at Ring Lake Ranch. Since that summer, I have Confirmed Jennifer, celebrated her marriage to Lee Konfrst, and

baptized both their daughter Ellie and their son James. Now, Ellie is just a year away from beginning Confirmation herself, and the circle of life goes on. It has been a joy to be a part of your lives.

It has been a joy to share my life with you through preaching. Many of you have not heard me preach, but, long ago, when there were fewer ministers, I used to fill the pulpit nine or ten times a year. In my sermons, I always related personal experiences. You knew me pretty well. You knew about my family history, my hopes, my dreams, and even my fears. For instance, I told you stories about fleeing the earthquake in California, and weathering out a thunderstorm in a grizzly bear's den. And you were assured, through all those stories, of my faith in the constant presence and love of God, even if I feared I was facing death. You remarked about my loyalty as a wife and mother as I told stories about following my husband into difficult physical challenges in the wilderness, and you knew which of my sermons was written in the shelter of the ladies' room of Vet's Auditorium during the Monday Night Raw! performance of the World Wrestling Federation.

It brings me joy to celebrate things we've done together as a congregation. For instance, I celebrate the groundbreaking policy decisions that have been affirmed by this congregation through action of the Church Council! In 1993, we became an

Open and Affirming congregation. In 2010, we embraced a policy of marriage equality, thus making it possible for all our members to be treated equally when they want to be married. Both of those policy decisions were initiated by the Board of Christian Social Action.

It brings me joy to celebrate the outpouring of this congregation's generosity for the special offerings we receive at Thanksgiving, Christmas and Easter. Local non-profit agencies have served many more people because of your gifts. Disaster relief has become more available because of your participation in the One Great Hour of Sharing.

It has been a joy to work with you to build and rehab houses, and to welcome and resettle refugees from Laos and Bosnia and Kosovo and Afghanistan and Burundi. We worked together as a congregation to provide shelter for the homeless, first though hosting them in our Plymouth gymnasium one night a week, then through collaborating to build the Churches United Shelter, now called the Central Iowa Shelter and Services. We made breakfast casseroles together to serve to the homeless. Our boards and choirs and committees have been serving evening meals two nights every month at the shelter for almost 20 years. It is a joy to see our community better off because of your work to help people in need.

It has been a joy to walk beside you: to walk for peace, to walk for racial justice, to walk for religious tolerance, to walk to end hunger, to walk for pride.

It is also a joy to see how your faith has grown through your participation in these ministry experiences. I believe that, in God's eyes, all service is an act of **love**, and a sign of devotion and dedication. All service is an act of **faith**, a testimonial to the truth that God is present in all we serve. And, each act of service is an act of **hope** that, through all our deeds of service, God's love will be more present in our world. I have seen your faith grow as you have worked side by side in Christian service.

It has been my joy to work with talented and supportive colleagues on the Plymouth staff team, past and present. I have been guided and supported by two wonderful senior ministers, Jim Gilliom and David Ruhe. This congregation has riches in leadership. The staff team is a microcosm of the congregation. We worship together, work side by side, give each other support and counsel. Each of us has our own separate tasks and groups with whom we work, but together, we make a great team. I'm going to miss these colleagues and friends.

And last, but probably most significantly, it has been my joy to participate in worship at Plymouth Church. Worship is the most important thing we do together as a congregation.

Worship centers us, inspires us, moves us, challenges us. God speaks to us as we join in this corporate act. Through sermons and prayers and music we are taken to new depths of spiritual grounding and new heights of spiritual transformation. It is a joy to worship in this place.

Life is a journey. Now I've reached retirement age and the journey continues. My father used to sing the hymn "I Feel the Winds of God Today" as he embarked on a new journey. He knew that God beckons and we respond. God has called Mark and me to a new adventure. Our daughter Kate has graduated from college now and is an adult. Mark and I have chosen to go north for the next stage of our lives. We have built a seasonal bed and breakfast in Sioux Lookout, Ontario, where Mark serves as a fishing guide and I am the hostess. The name of our B&B, *New Occasions*, is taken from a line in a familiar hymn by James Russell Lowell: *new occasions teach new duties*.

The New Testament account of the disciples' experience on the road to Emmaus has always been a favorite of mine. The disciples were on a journey. Their minds were preoccupied by the meaning of recent events. They weren't expecting anything good to happen. They didn't realize the risen Christ had joined them on the road. It wasn't until they offered him hospitality, and at dinner, he took the bread and blessed it and broke it, that

their eyes were opened and they recognized that they had the Lord in their midst.

The lesson I take from our scripture today is that Christ is present on all our roads, whoever we are, wherever we are on life's journey. We may not always notice, but Christ is always there.

Now I'm on the road again, and I thank God that I will not walk alone. I will treasure this congregation in my heart, and I will think lovingly of you as you continue in faithful community engagement. Like the Apostle Paul said to the Thessalonians: *I will always give thanks to God for all of you and mention you in my prayers, constantly remembering before God your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.* (I Thes. 1:2-3) I love you all. God be with you. Amen.