Sermon series sometimes occur accidentally, and starting with Palm Sunday, I’ve been preaching around a metaphor of the roads we walk in our lives. You’ll recall the Jerusalem road of holy week, with its suffering and tragedy, and you’ll recall the Galilee road of Easter and the days thereafter, full of hope and bright future. And you know that in our lives we’re called to walk down certain roads. But as soon as I thought we were done with the roads for a while, I was struck by the starting revelation that there is no Emmaus. Or at least, they can’t find it. They, the teams of expert archaeologists and Biblical scholars have never managed to locate what should be Emmaus. Now, good scholars say that there really is nothing to this. They say that we should just ignore the fact that they can’t find Emmaus, and it isn’t that we should ignore it because they can’t find it and they are embarrassed, so much as it is that finding Emmaus isn’t the point of the story. I know all this, but it didn’t matter. I was captivated by the idea that a couple of disciples – who, incidentally, probably weren’t even part of the twelve apostles because the Bible doesn’t tell us – were just wandering around on the road, walking along going to a place that doesn’t exist. Tell me that’s not a captivating image when you’re down: walking along - going to a place that doesn’t exist. That’s when I knew there was at least one more road we needed to talk about.

You see, it wasn’t so much that I concluded that Emmaus didn’t exist as it was that I concluded that I could see how a couple of disciples could get to wandering around not really sure where they are going and if they even care if they get there. It’s not that big a stretch after the week they had.
I haven’t had a week like that, a dear friend, leader, mentor and teacher executed and buried. If all that I had cast my hope upon had come to an untimely and unseemly demise, I think I’d be wandering around too. It’s why assassinations and attempts at assassination are so unsettling. When Presidents and civil rights leaders are summarily killed, there is something visceral about the experience. It’s why the attempts on President Reagan and Pope John Paul were so hard to accept even by people who were not aligned with them politically and religiously. Our leaders are supposed to be untouchable. Maybe I’m wrong, but we want them to be made of a tougher stuff than we are. They are supposed to be bigger than life. Surely Jesus was bigger than life. Or at least his disciples and apostles thought so. Three times in Mark’s gospel narrative and Matthew’s as well Jesus predicts his own passion and death, and each time the disciples balk and rebel. This can’t be. It isn’t supposed to happen that way. “No, Jesus, no. Don’t talk like that, it can’t be. It won’t be; we won’t allow it. We can’t allow it, it’s not the natural order of things.”

And then it is. Then it was. Then the disciples watched in paralyzed fear while their world came crashing down.

Sometimes things come crashing down. Sometimes it is despite our best efforts to the contrary and sometimes, it can shake us to our bedrock. Joy and happiness can turn to mourning in the blink of an eye.

For too many of our families, this is a very present reality. What then? What do we say? That old television/movie image of the person wandering around in the night, neon street signs passing is what I think of when I consider the walk to Emmaus. Wandering with blind resolution, walking because there is nothing else to do, nothing else you can do.
It’s the moment of desperation that brings us to walk and walk and walk. That’s why the image of the walk to the non-existent city stuck in my mind so vividly: not because there wasn’t an Emmaus, or even because it wasn’t the point of the story, but because it seems so plausible that we could wind up needing to and walk and walk.

So these disciples took off on the road to Emmaus. We don’t know why, we aren’t even all that sure who. We know one name, Cleopas, and one is unnamed, which might suggest that it was a woman because the Bible so rarely bothers to give their names.

You know, if the other disciple was a woman, who had known Jesus and been validated and included and had her contributions valued for perhaps the first time in her life, her loss is all the more acute. She’s headed back to obscurity, to not mattering.

It’s hopeless is what that is. That’s really about the only word I can think of to describe the predicament: hopeless.

Hopeless is a terrible place to be. I studied history as an undergraduate. I studied a lot of history because I thought I was going to be a history professor, not a minister. And one thing that I learned was that through the course of history, insurrections and rebellions and revolutions never happened when people were hopeless, they overwhelmingly seemed to happen when people suddenly, unexpectedly got a glimpse of hope. If you want to keep people down, you get rid of hope.

Hopeless is a terrible place to be. So they started walking away from it all. Maybe they weren’t really wandering, but they sure didn’t seem to have any place to be. Maybe they just wanted to take a break from it. Because they sure weren’t done with the past. They were remembering. Remembering what had been, what could have been and what they
had hoped for before their hope had died. So when they picked up this hitchhiker on the road, they started talking.

I guess that’s as logical an action as walking. Talking seems to be what happens when we need to think. We start to talk, some of us, to think through what is going on. He asked them what they had been talking about and they started spilling their guts.

“Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem that doesn’t know about the events of the past days,” they ask? And they go on. They talk and talk. They share what has horrified them. They share what they had hoped, that he would be the messiah that would redeem Israel. Apparently he wasn’t, though, he was dead. And then they share how the women came to the empty tomb. And this stranger asks the strangest questions. He wants to know how it is that they haven’t believed that prophecies have been fulfilled.

So they and this stranger walk along a while until they come to the village where they are to stop for the night - the stranger was going to keep going but they prevail on him and he stays for the night.

You know how we say in the invitation to the Table when we celebrate the Lord’s Supper that it was at table that the disciples recognized the risen Lord? This is the story. They all sat down for supper and the stranger was asked to say the blessing. The most ordinary event, sitting down for supper and saying the blessing, and this stranger took bread and blessed it and broke it and they knew him.

And he vanished from their sight.

Sometimes it is that way with faith – a fleeting glance, a blink of an eye… Jesus appeared to them and walked with them and broke bread with them and disappeared.
We wander and wander. Jesus walks with us. We don’t know it, we just walk, and Jesus walks with us. And then we realize it and he disappears.

We can’t own the incarnation. It’s not ours to own. We just know that God is with us. We can’t ever nail it down and hang on to it. We just have to trust that the next time we are wandering, Jesus will walk with us again. Every time. Without fail. We can’t nail God down, but we can trust that God will be God and will be with us when we are wandering.

That’s the good news today. Wherever our souls are wandering, whatever roads we are called to walk upon, we know who is there, but we also know who walks with us. It is a journey, you know. We don’t always know just where it’s leading.

We want to, but we can’t. If you think we can, let me invite you to a simple exercise. Think back on your life five years ago. Where did you think you would be today? How accurate were you? I, for one, will admit to abject failure when it comes to predicting where I would be. There have been surprises and disappointments, delights and wonderments, but I couldn’t have told you the twists and turns along the way. I didn’t know five years ago that we would be here, together, today. We don’t – we can’t - know what is around around every bend.

We’ve been on the road to Jerusalem and then we were on the road to Galilee – the first represented the descent into hopelessness and the other the invitation into an unknown future, with a known Lord – and each road is a road we travel from time to time in our lives. You know, we preachers will flat beat a metaphor to death once we get one – I promise I’ll put away the atlas after this week’s sermon.
We wind up on the road to Emmaus from time to time as well, don’t we?

Confused, lonely, dispirited, in need of encouragement… that’s the Emmaus road, isn’t it?

But we’re never journeying alone. We have the assurance of Christ’s presence with us.

We also have the assurance of each others’ presence.

And that is church. That is church – that we’re on this trip together. Sometimes it’s clear where we’re going – after all, we hope we’re always following Jesus. But churches – all churches, if they’re worthy of the name share this in common: while we are walking together, we become a family. Families endure with each other and bear with each other.

That’s what families do. It’s what makes them families. We travel through this life together and we care for one another and we hold each other together. That’s what church is, a family that has been chosen by God for us. We decide to walk together because it is better to walk together than alone. We travel along together, and hold each other up and from time to time we catch a glimpse of Christ together when we are able, and the rest of the time we remember it.

That’s really what the disciples were doing as they walked along: remembering.

For some seasons of life, the travel feels more like wandering, and that is okay. But here’s the thing: we are wandering toward the same place. By whatever route we take, we are wandering home. And we will all get there, and we will all sit around a table with Christ. And we will remember.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, Amen.