

The Park Road Pulpit  
*Sermons from Park Road Baptist Church*  
Russ and Amy Jacks Dean, Pastors

*Along for the Ride*  
*Psalm 118.1-2, 19-29; Mark 11.1-11*  
Russ Dean, April 5, 2009



After scaling the “seven summits,” that is, the tallest mountain on each continent on earth – including the almost six-mile-high Himalayan peak called Everest – Erik Weihenmayer accomplished another nearly superhuman feat on February 17<sup>th</sup> of this year. Known as one of the most challenging ice climbs in the U.S., Weihenmayer ascended Colorado’s tallest, free-falling waterfall, Bridal Veil Falls, near Telluride. He achieved the goal with his long time climbing partner, Mike Gibbs, and with Chad Jukes, who had to strap on a special prosthetic leg before the climb. After losing one leg in the war in Iraq, Jukes has had several activity-specific legs fashioned – this one with a built-in crampon (spikes) on it. Climbing 365 vertical feet of frozen waterfall would be a challenge for anyone, but can you imagine the challenge for Weihenmayer, who has to listen for the sound of that blue ice, which ice climbers prefer because of the more solid holds which this ice provides? Yes, Weihenmayer has been blind since childhood.

Last year, a South Carolina father-daughter pair, in celebration of the daughter’s recent graduation from high school climbed onto a Honda Goldwing and headed north and west. Day by day they motored, father north, and farther west, into Canada and then to the Pacific ocean on California’s coast. They then turned the bike into the rising sun and didn’t stop until they saw again the lights of home. They spent more than a month together, logging more than 10,000 miles on this once-in-a-lifetime, coast-to-coast (to coast) experience.

El Camino de Santiago de Compostela was first walked over a thousand years ago, when the remains of James, the brother of John, were purportedly discovered in a Spanish cathedral. The Way of St. James begins in the Pyrenees Mountains of southern France and traverses 500

hundred miles of the northern Spanish countryside, before the cathedral in Santiago de Compostela appears on the horizon. Over these ten centuries untold thousands of pilgrims have descended upon the cathedral. 2,491 pilgrims officially registered to walk in 1985. In a decade the number was ten times that. By 2005 nearly 100,000 trekkers were walking the route annually. And in 2004, which was declared a Santiago Jubilee year, 179,944 pilgrims left their homes in search of a prize that was not actually to be found at the destination of one Spanish cathedral, but along every step of the way.

Whether it is to be found scaling oxygen-defying mountain heights or frozen waterfalls, in the freeing wind of the open road, or in the slow pace of a day by day walk, human beings, it seems, just cannot sit still. And this is nothing new. Sixteen-hundred years ago St. Augustine knew of our restlessness. Augustine was the Bishop of Hippo, a city located in northern Africa, present-day Algeria, and in his famous work, *Confessions*, he writes in prayer to God: “Thou movest us to delight in praising Thee; for Thou hast formed us for Thyself, and our hearts are restless till they find rest in Thee.”

It is a restlessness that keeps us moving. Ever searching. Never tiring of rounding the next bend, crossing the next hill for the view on the other side. But, is it a hunger for adventure, a thirst just for the latest conquest, or is this inability to sit still really an indication of a much deeper-seated *hunger and thirst for righteousness*?(Matthew 5) Maybe our obsession with travel and adventure, which has grown with an increasing standard of living that has made world-wide travel more attainable, maybe our obsession is actually an indication of our restlessness for God, which resides deep within each individual soul.

Today is Palm Sunday. The beginning of the journey of Holy Week – that week when Christians around the world travel day by day Jesus’ “passion” – the last moments of his life. As I looked at today’s texts for some reason I was struck by the “movement” within them. Psalm 118 is perhaps the praise of a king who has traveled to Jerusalem that he may enter the Temple and give thanks to God for a military victory. *This is the gate of the Lord...* gates are for entering... movement. *Bind the festal procession with branches...* You hear the foreshadowing of another procession involving branches. There were often grand processions, parades if you will, as the people moved with much pomp and fanfare into the Temple area for the celebration of a religious festival. *Blessed is the one who comes...* who moves, travels, journeys to us... *Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.* Which brings us to the New Testament text, as the disciples *approach Jerusalem*. The whole text moves, to Jerusalem, and then through Jerusalem in this event which we now call the Triumphal Entry.

This idea of movement caused me to reflect on the concept of movement as a metaphor for faith itself. Of course there are times to *Be still*, as the Psalmist says, *Be still and know that I am God...* (Psalm 46.10). But the faith of our heritage is an active faith. It seems to me more a life of movement than of monasticism, of adventure more than asceticism. So often we find the characters of our scriptures moving, and their movement becomes part and parcel of the faith it signifies.

In the beginning, Adam and Even found God, *walking in the cool of the day...* (Genesis 3.8) Abram, the father of the faith was called by God, renamed Abraham, and was told by God: *Get up and go to a land that I will show you...* (Genesis 12.1), which is just a way of telling us that all of our life with God is about the journey, the importance of which is not the destination, but the conviction and the commitment to put one foot in front of the other. Step by step to a

place God will show us. It is the journey that counts. The pilgrimage to Jerusalem is an important aspect of Israel's life of faith, which we find throughout the Psalms: *I was glad when they said unto me, let us go into the house of the Lord* (Psalm 122.1). The freedom of the people of God comes through a great Exodus. A leaving. A moving from bondage to captivity. A liberation that would come only after wandering in the wilderness for a generation.

Movement is found throughout the New Testament and the life Jesus. When his mother learned she was pregnant, what did she do? She took a trip, to see her cousin Elizabeth. And when she arrived, the child in Elizabeth's womb jumped, leaped, moved with joy (Luke 1)! Magi in the East see a star and they say to one another, "Let us go and see what this means" (Matthew 2). After his birth, his parents flee to Egypt, in fear of Herod, and so the prophecy can be fulfilled some years later when they return: *Out of Egypt I have called my son...* (Matthew 2.15; Hosea 11.1).

Jesus' ministry begins as the Spirit *leads* him into the desert, the Spirit moves him into the desert to be tempted (Mark 1). Throughout his ministry, Jesus' life is marked by a deep spirituality of prayer and meditation – but we are told that he practices his discipline by going to the desert to pray. And when his disciples ask for a primer on prayer, he instructs them: *Go to your closet...* (Matthew 6.6) Even in the quiet act of prayer, there is movement that precedes it. (And the great Jewish theologian Abraham Joshua Heschel has reminded us that we should pray not only with our hearts and minds, but with our hands, and with our feet.<sup>1</sup>)

Jesus' ministry was an itinerant one, as he traveled throughout the country of Israel. We get the best picture of this through the book of Mark which indicates nearly forty times an almost frantic movement from one event to the next. Mark loves the word "*immediately*." We find it

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<sup>1</sup> In 1965 when Heschel marched in Selma, AL with Martin Luther King, Jr., someone asked why he had come from his academic post in New York to march, and he replied, "When I march in Selma, my feet are praying."

twice in today's reading. Jesus did this... and *immediately* he did this... and *immediately* he did this... Apparently, Jesus was always on the go.

Jesus took his disciples for a hike, to a mount we call transfiguration, and this is just one of a number of mountain-top experiences recorded in scripture (Matthew 17). The road from Jerusalem to Jericho is the site of one of our greatest lessons on love, as a Good Samaritan passes by a situation of great need (Luke 10). The road to Emmaus and the Damascus Road are prominent in our faith story (Luke 24 and Acts 9). And when we come to what appears to be the end of the road... there is still movement. Resurrection. A raising up. Those first astonished disciples, witnesses to this strange miracle are told, *Go to Galilee... there you will find him...* (Mark 16). And even as he leaves them, alas, there is no rest for the weary: *Go... and make disciples...* (Matthew 28) *go... from Jerusalem, to Judea, to Samaria... go... to the ends of the earth* (Acts 1).

If you don't like to travel, maybe you got in the wrong line to sign up! For Jesus said, anyone who would be his disciple must *take up his cross, and follow* (Mark 8)... *must deny herself, and follow* (Matthew 16)... must leave father and mother, home and job, comfort and convenience, and follow (Luke 9)... must give all they possess, all that possesses them, and follow...

When the road leads us into temptation, we are called to follow. When it leads over the high mountains of transformation and ecstasy, we are called to follow. When it leads through the fleeting experiences of an exuberant but fickle triumph, we are called to follow. When it turns its face to Jerusalem, and the jeering crowds that will turn their backs, we are called to follow. When it leads us to the *valley of the shadow of death* (Psalm 23), we are called to follow.

Paul reminded that young church at the town of Colossae, *As you therefore have received Christ Jesus the Lord, continue [to walk] in him* (Colossians 2.6)... for, in the words of Dr. William E. Hull, “Christianity is not a place to stand, but a road to walk...”<sup>2</sup>

But the journey of Jesus is not one on which we can simply go Along for the Ride. The journey of Jesus, because it leads over the high mountain pass and through the deepest valley, must be chosen, deliberately, intentionally. Erik Weihenmayer didn't just find himself one day at the dark height of a frozen waterfall. He set out to see that feat accomplished. And the journey of Holy Week, and a life committed to finding the holy even amid the mundane, must be undertaken with the same manner of spiritual resolve if Easter is to bring the joy that it holds in promise.

So as you enter this week, I send you forth with this good word of benediction from my mentor and friend, Bill Hull:

Christ go before you, to prepare a way of service;  
Christ go behind you, to gather up your efforts for his glory;  
Christ go beside you, as leader and guide;  
Christ go within you, as comfort and stay;  
Christ go beneath you; to uphold with everlasting arms;  
Christ go above you, to reign as Lord supreme.

May it be so!

Let us pray.

God of the journey,  
Go with us  
every  
step  
of the Way  
That the journey may become holy.

Amen

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<sup>2</sup> This quote is from *The Broadman Commentary* on the book of John.

