

## Adelante, No Mas

April 19, 2020 at First Church in Cambridge, Congregational, UCC

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*Texts: Luke 24:13-35*

I'd like to begin today by sharing with you a few lines from T.S. Eliot's "The Waste Land."

*Who is the third man who walks always beside you?*

*When I count, there are only you and I together  
But when I look ahead up the white road  
There is always another one walking beside you  
Gliding wrapt in a brown mantal, hooded  
I do not now whether a man or a woman  
- But who is that on the other side of you?*

These lines in the latter parts of Eliot's great poem are almost surely a reference to the Emmaus story we just heard. Any witness to the two disciples first encounter with the Risen Christ on the road that first Easter night might have asked the same question. Who is the third man who walks besides you? Yet in Eliot's own notes about the poem, he writes: "[These] lines were stimulated by the account of one of the Antarctic expeditions (I forget which, but I think one of Shackleton's): it was related that the party of explorers, at the extremity of their strength, had the constant delusion that there was one more member than could actually be counted." Whatever inspired Eliot, we can imagine this notion of the explorers being at extremity of their strength ringing true for the disciples, too! Think about it. Having come through the events of Holy Week, sharing that last meal with their beloved teacher, witnessing his torture and crucifixion and having just heard the astonishing accounts of the empty tomb that very morning, they must have been at their wit's end! At the extremity of their strength, for sure. And at the extremity of their grief. At the 'extremity of human experience' and of their capacity to understand how any of it could make any sense at all.<sup>1</sup> These days, I wonder who among us can't relate to these extreme feelings? What's more, the disciples were finding themselves unwittingly embarking on a new expedition into a world that would never again look the same! Christ was not dead but risen, and with them until the end of the age, and it was now time to "return to Jerusalem." That's what the text says. Return! And yet were they really going back, or were they venturing forth into a totally new reality!

All this talk of extremity calls to mind for me a dear friend and former roommate named Adam who is an extreme sports enthusiast! He's a fanatical downhill skier, a wilderness EMT, an ace rock climber, a world traveler, a mean mechanical engineer, to boot! He also happens to be a highly trained and highly experienced white-water kayaker who's led kayak and rafting expeditions all around the world. Many years ago, he introduced me to the concept of putting in, which is the term kayakers use, not merely for putting in their boats, but for embarking on a new journey! "Putting in" he explained meant committing to let the river lead them, and hold them and take them where it would, whether for hours, days or weeks on end. There was no turning back! I have to imagine that the disciples, and maybe Shackleton's team too, had a similar sense of "putting in" as they embarked on their own extreme journeys. The shores of all they had known and believed about life and death were now moving. After what the disciples had seen in Emmaus, after they felt *that* 'burning' in their hearts, how could they turn back now? How

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<sup>1</sup> I am indebted to James Carroll among others for the connection between T.S. Eliot's The Waste Land and the Emmaus story. Carroll mentions it in his book, *Constantine's Sword: The Church and the Jews*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2001. pp. 122-123.

could they give up or lose hope now? Christ's love for them, God's love for them, was unbreakable and now it was theirs, to enter its flow and to share it with the world.

One day when we were walking together near Central Square, Adam happened to share with me a different kind of extreme story. He gave me permission to share it with others who might find it helpful. I've shared it with some of you before. He told me he had once lost a close friend when they were kayaking together on one of the more challenging rivers in Chile. Knowing that he continued to kayak long after this tragedy, I asked him how it was for him the first time he "put in" after his friend died. I'll never forget his answer.

He had to think for a minute about when that first "put in" took place, after his friend died. I thought it wouldn't have been for at least a few weeks after, to give himself a break, so he surprised me when he said it was on the same day, and not out of any desire to get back on the river, but out of necessity, to finish the trip and to get his friend home. He, his friend, and another experienced guide, all of whom had become close after months of leading trips for the same Chilean company, had taken some time off from their guiding and set out on the Futuleufu river, just north of Patagonia. Though the rapids were ranked with the "exceedingly" and "utmost" difficult Class IV and V designations, all three were experts. They had traveled these stretches many times before and had cultivated a deep respect for the river. There are some details that only Adam can tell. I'll simply say that the three of them entered a particularly difficult stretch of river. One of them did not make it through. After several hours of rescue attempts and CPR on half submerged rocks, Adam had lost his friend. As he and his other friend tried to collect themselves at the shore, an expedition of rafters with guides eventually caught up with them and offered to help get them all to the road at the bottom of the river, still a few hours away. Cold from the icy water, in shock, not even beginning to process their loss, they made their first "put in." He told me he paddled in silence, with the clarity of mind and presence that only death can provoke. The rafts, one of which now carried his friend's body, followed not far behind.

When the river grew calm and knowing they still had a good way to go before they would find a radio or phone, it came time for a break. Adam pulled off first and was amazed to notice a poor Chilean farmer standing by the riverside, with an ox. This was not heavily populated land. Adam had the presence of mind to give the man a warning that a friend had died up river, and that the boats were on their way down and would be stopping for a break. The man stood by quietly at the group rested and collected themselves once more. Just before their second "put in", before they were about to go, the farmer uttered an expression to Adam. He told me he could not imagine a more appropriate or comforting thing to say at that time. His expression was this: *Adelante, no mas*. Literally, it means "forward, no more" but the phrase "*no mas*" is not what it seems. It's hard to translate because the man was not telling him "look forward only, don't look back." No, it was the farmer's way of saying that at times like these, forward was the only option. *Adelante, no mas*. Have hope that if nothing else, you will move forward. *Adelante*, meaning "forward," or "ahead," or even "onward," at the very least points out a direction, maybe even a goal. Encouraged by these words, Adam "put in" again, aware that there would be no turning back, no giving up, only moving forward. *Adelante, no mas*.

Friends, I realize this is an extreme story, and a heavy one to hold on a gorgeous first Sunday of Eastertide, but these are extreme times and I share it in hopes that it might encourage us all. We are just beginning to wonder what it will be like when we too "put in" again to the waters of life and social interaction in the coming months! My sense is it will feel like an expedition and we will need all the preparation, all the guides all the compassion and encouragement we can find.

*Who is the third man who walks always beside you?*

God only knows what gave that Chilean farmer the wisdom to say the perfect thing. Words alone cannot do justice to what those men encountered on the road to Emmaus nor can they to what happened that day on the Futeleufu. But I remember this story and imagine the Risen One telling each of us right now, “Adelante, no mas!” We, and I dare say all of us, are right now living at the extremity of our strength, and of our grief and of our understanding! We’ve barely begun to process it. But I pray that we can keep the hope and promise and encouragement of this forward-looking direction in mind and hearts.

One thing has becoming increasingly clear to me. We can’t go back! Sure, I hope and pray that the time will come soon when we can gather again here in this space, when we can hug our friends and loved ones and indeed when we can break bread and drink new wine together in person! But, we can’t go back! We’ve seen too much and learned too much already, about our mortality, about what matters and what doesn’t, about the frailty of our systems, about the profoundly inadequate ways we care for elders who are dying by the dozens in nursing homes, about the shameful levels of inequality and about the structural racism that these times are revealing. As Rev. William Barber has long said of the growing, now nationwide Poor People’s Campaign and movement, “Not One Step Back!”

And after this Holy Week, after seeing the power of expert and extreme mercy shown by caregivers, after encountering the perfect mercy of the Risen Christ as we discussed last week, we can’t go back! Adelante, no mas! Adelante! Forward, and into a new different future for God is doing a new thing even now. Adelante, forward and those of us living lives of extreme privilege will learn anew what it means to live more mercifully, more justly, more sacrificially sharing our resources. Adelante, forward, into a new world where merely being “grateful for our blessings” isn’t enough, forward to where our gratitude is just the start of a new expedition of deep and shared responsibility for and with our neighbors who live outside of our bubbles! By God’s power, this crisis must give us hope that out of the same rivers of extreme suffering, extreme negligence and extreme inequality, will flow from each of us, extreme generosity, extreme love and even extreme sacrifice! We can’t go back. Adelante, no mas!

Beloved church, all of us are “put in” to the river alone, at our birth, and we “come out” alone, at our death. In a sense, this is true. Yet, as Christians, mindful of our baptism, we are “put in” to the river in the company of our church community. We come out of the river surrounded by a cloud of witnesses that have “come out” before us. And we know in faith, and most especially at those extreme moments of life, that God’s presence abides with us through it all. “God leads us beside still waters! Amen? God restores our souls! Amen? Yeah though we walk through the valley of the shadow of death, we will not fear, for God is with us! Amen? God’s presence is our mantle. The Risen Christ is our third person, walking beside us, always.

Can we let the Risen Christ kindle and burn a fire in our hearts now, one that decenters our very selves, and gives us a new direction, a new expedition, a new way for each of us to put in to the river of God’s love that will lead us to more just and caring ways of being in human community? Perhaps this is what it means to practice resurrection, to live the resurrected life. In this weary world, it falls on us to be a voice of moving forward, a voice of reassurance that the worst thing is never the last thing. With the living Christ always by our side, may we find the strength, love and understanding to do so. *Adelante, no mas. Adelante! Amen.*



