

“The Long Way Around”

I. Introduction. The long way round. There are times in our lives when the long way round to a destination is the best way. It may not be the simplest way or the most logical way, but it is often the best way. In this morning’s Gospel lesson from Matthew Jesus takes a side trip to the top of the mountain before he turns his face to Jerusalem. He can be thought of as taking the long way round. We journey with Jesus, Peter, James, and John to witness an extraordinary event known as the Transfiguration. The Transfiguration is the turning point in Matthew’s story. Prior to this, Jesus and his disciples have been ministering in Galilee – performing miracles and teaching people about the Kingdom of God. After the Transfiguration, the whole plotline of the story changes to Jesus’ impending trip to Jerusalem, where he will be crucified. But first he takes the long way round to the Mount of the Transfiguration where he talks with Moses and Elijah about his coming passion. Perhaps this morning he is encouraging us to take the long way round as well.

II. Why the long way round. In her book *When the Heart Waits* (1990), Sue Monk Kidd’s first chapter is entitled “The Long Way Round.” She tells the following story:

When I was a child, a woman named Sweet worked for our family. She cared for my brothers and me as if we were her own. One day, when we were playing at my grandmother’s house, we discovered a wheelbarrow full of rainwater. Swimming through it were hundreds of tadpoles.

We raced inside and asked Sweet for three jars. As she was handing them out, my grandmother appeared in the door. “Girls don’t catch tadpoles,” she said with a laugh. “Sue, you come along with me and I’ll teach you to play ‘Chopsticks’ on the piano.” My brothers dashed off to the wheelbarrow, and I ended up at the piano bench.

A few days later Sweet and I started out on one of our frequent walks to the city park about four blocks from my house. The park was the best of places, and I was anxious to get there. But that day Sweet took my hand and started in the wrong direction. “We’re taking the long way round,” she told me.

The long way? The words fell like a curse on my ears. Why would we deliberately go the long way? I made a small scene, but Sweet didn’t relent. Off we went the long way. Not four blocks, but eight! We had walked at least six, when she stopped beside a

ditch swollen with water and tadpoles. She pulled a Mason jar from her pocket, one with nail holes in the lid. “Now aren’t you glad we took the long way round? Ain’t no tadpoles the short way,” she said.

Inside my head I heard my grandmother’s words: “Only boys catch tadpoles.” Only boys. I hesitated, but Sweet nudged me with the jar. Soon I was elbow-deep in the brown water, chasing after the rich, darting life before me. I was reveling in a new universe, and it was one of the grander times of my girlhood. It was the day I learned to challenge the tight, tidy categories of what was expected and possible in my world. Like the tadpoles, I was molting into a new being. . . [Some years later] I read a poem by Henry David Thoreau . . . The last line [of which was] “We went on to heaven the long way round.”

It seemed to me that Sweet and Thoreau had touched upon the same genius. Transformations come only as we go the long way round, only as we’re willing to walk a different, longer, more arduous, more inward, more prayerful route. When you wait, you’re deliberately choosing to take the long way, to go eight blocks instead of four, trusting that there’s a transforming discovery lying pooled along the way.

In the same way that Kidd had an unexpected discovery that day with Sweet, so the disciples had an unexpected experience of new revelation on their trip to the mountaintop. They saw the glory of Christ in a new way as they watched him meet with Moses, the lawgiver, and Elijah, the first of the great Hebrew prophets. Jesus was transformed before their very eyes. Matthew wrote: “His face shone like the sun and his clothes became dazzling white.” Then they heard the voice of God. Oh the wonder and joy of mountaintop experiences. Then the story took an interesting turn. Peter rushed forward with a plan: Let me build three dwellings or booths, one for each of you. Peter’s offer stemmed from his interpretation of what was happening – in his mind the experience was joyful. What Peter did NOT understand was that Jesus, Moses, and Elijah, we believe, were talking about Jesus’ betrayal, torture, and crucifixion. Peter had just missed the point of Christ’s current and impending suffering and brokenness! One way to think about it is that Peter wanted to go straightaway to the happy ending, the Resurrection, without going through the painful good-byes of Maundy Thursday, the suffering of Good Friday, and the emptiness of Holy Saturday.

III. Brokenness and Resurrection. Why is it that so many times Jesus’ disciples then and now fail to comprehend the essential unity between brokenness and the Resurrection, between suffering and new life? I believe that it is in our nature – our human nature – to want to get right to the positive outcome. Perhaps that’s why Peter wanted to remain on the mountaintop for as long as he could and celebrate without focusing upon the cross. But great Christian thinkers have emphasized that it is impossible to become fully one with Christ in the Resurrection without also experiencing Christ’s brokenness. Whether you read Theresa of Avila, John of the Cross, Ignatius Loyola,

Julian of Norwich, Bonhoeffer, Merton, or Henri Nouwen, the message is the same: Our conversion requires participation in Christ's suffering and sacrifice as well as Christ's resurrection. There is an essential unity between experiencing brokenness and having new life. And, God uses our places of brokenness to minister to others and when we allow God to use us, God will put us in places where we can minister to others in their brokenness.

Many of you have heard me describe some of the tough experiences I had as a young boy – being born to parents who were in deep mourning of the death of my older sister, having a bad case of asthma throughout my childhood, and losing my father at an early age. These experiences have proved to be very helpful in working with others who have had a range of troubles. For example, while I was in South Carolina, I served as the spiritual director to an Epiphany program in the SC Juvenile Detention Facility in Columbia. Approximately 35 incarcerated teenagers were enrolled in this weekend. The staff and participants sat at tables together. I looked for an empty seat, and I thought, randomly sat down next to a young man. We started to talk. It seemed random, but it wasn't. The young man had come from Aiken County where I came from. He had attended the Episcopal Day School of the church where I was a priest. He had spent summers in Connecticut with relatives and spent many days in the Eli Whitney Park where I had gone to study while I was at Yale Divinity School. And he was in considerable need. He was alone, he was frightened, and he was really struggling spiritually. I understood his aloneness and gave him a Bible. The first night we were there he read the entire Gospel of John. The second night he read the Gospel of Matthew. We spent much time talking about his brokenness and his need for God. God had put us together. There was no question in my mind about that.

- IV. Resurrection: So, my friends, it is in our brokenness that we may encounter new life and others may encounter new life through us. It is in our brokenness -- our vulnerabilities, our losses, our failures, and our suffering that we can encounter Christ in particularly powerful ways. Paradoxically, recognizing our brokenness and asking God for help can create spaces of safety and strength. Comprehending our brokenness also allows us to be less judgmental and more loving of others. We become more capable of seeing others through the eyes of Christ and more available to become a healing resource to others in their pain and suffering. Out of brokenness recognized and brokenness given to God comes healing, redemption, and ultimately Resurrection.
- VI. Conclusion: Taking a Journey with Christ. For the next 48 days between today and Easter, we have some decisions to make about our journey with Christ to the empty tomb. We can take a very rich journey, the long way round to Easter morning, that can open new understandings of the transfigured, broken, and resurrected Christ. I'd like to make several suggestions for this journey. Try not to move too quickly. Don't

arrive at the empty tomb on Easter morning without first experiencing the fullness of Christ. Use this upcoming period for systematic reflection. Let's look at our own brokenness as an invitation for greater closeness with Jesus Christ and with our Christian brothers and sisters. I pray that we will not be afraid of our brokenness or feel a need to conceal it. Here are some more specific suggestions for the journey:

- Attend one of the Ash Wednesday services as the beginning of your Lenten observance. Use this service as a time to reflect on the meaning of your life and what lies ahead for you.
- Consider this Lent whether there are changes in your life you'd like to make. What discipline could you adopt that would help you draw closer to God? Consider joining one of the Wednesday night series on the Psalms or Prayer. Study is one of the ways that we can come to terms with our spiritual needs.
- Also consider participating in the Sacrament of Reconciliation, found in our Prayer Book. Either Father Harry or I would be privileged to walk through this process with you. God is powerfully encountered in the sacredness of forgiveness.
- Lastly, commit to attending as many of the Holy Week Services as you can. Let a Holy Lent lead you into your own experience of Holy Week, culminating in the empty tomb of Easter.

Let's go the long way round to Easter this year. Let's open ourselves up to new experiences, to new teachers, to new and deeper encounters with Jesus on his journey to the cross. Let's go the long way round together. *Amen.*