

3rd Sunday of Easter, Year C
April 10, 2016
St. Thomas

It was a dusty road.
And it was hot. Very hot.
And it seemed like we'd been on it for hours.
And I just wanted the journey to end.

It had started out so hopefully that morning.
I was in Australia.
In the Outback!
I was on the adventure trip of a lifetime.
We had spent the morning hiking
Over some very rugged terrain.
It was tough, but not so hard that I couldn't do it.
The scenery was spectacular.

But as the day wore on, I confess...
I grew more and more tired.
And scenery that seemed spectacular at 8 a.m.
Starting seeming just "nice" by lunchtime.
And by mid-afternoon, I was like
"Awww, you see one rock, you've seen 'em all."

I was tired. And cranky. And I wanted the journey to end.
But our tour guide insisted that there was one rock
That was not to be missed.
AND, he insisted, the best time to see it
Was at sunset.

The British settlers of Australia called this rock Ayers Rock.
The aboriginal people call it Uluru.
And it is one big rock.

It's a massive sandstone formation that stands more than 1100 feet high,
And it's almost six miles around.
It's like this big rock island in the middle of the flat, desert Outback.

So we got in our van after a full day of hiking,
And rather than heading to our campsite
So we could clean up and relax and have dinner,
We instead began our long, dusty, hot drive
To Uluru.

As we got there, I was less than impressed.
I thought, "Well, it's a big rock."
But we'd been looking at big rocks all day,
And I was pretty sure THIS big rock
Was not worth the long drive we'd just endured.

But then, the strangest thing began to happen.
The sun began to set.
And as it set, that rock began to glow.
In just a few minutes it went from normal reddish rock
To bright, glowing red rock.

I had never seen anything like it before.
It was astounding.
I was enchanted.
And as I watched that rock glow
It seems the tiredness just drained out of my body.
I was suddenly filled with a renewed energy,
A renewed strength.

All of a sudden, the road didn't seem so dusty anymore.
And the trip home didn't seem so onerous.
My crankiness was replaced with a sense of wonder.

And once again, I was able to look around me
And notice the extraordinary beauty EVERYWHERE!
Not just the rock, but the desert, the little scrubby bushes,
The sky, the emerging stars.
All were breathtaking.
Why hadn't I seen that earlier?
And I was so, so glad to be alive
And to be standing there, at Uluru
In the middle of the Australian Outback,
Drinking in God's handiwork.
I felt resurrected.

It was a hot, dusty road that Saul rode over that day.
He wasn't in a very good mood either.
In fact, we're told he was breathing threats and murder.
He'd gone to the high priest,
And asked for letters of authority,
That gave him the power to arrest and bring back to Jerusalem in
chains
Anyone he found who was a follower of "The Way,"
A follower of Jesus.

Those letters were a big deal for Saul.
They gave him power.
They were signs of his status.
With those letters in his pocket, Saul was a big man.

But then, in an instant, everything changed.
Suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him,
And he fell to the ground,
And he heard a voice saying
"Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?"
He asked, "Who are you, Lord?"
The reply came, 'I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.
But get up, and enter the city,

And you will be told what you are to do.”

Saul did what he was told,
Even though his experience on the dusty road left him blind.
His traveling companions led him by the hand into Damascus.
And for three days, he could see nothing.

But eventually, a man named Ananias
came and laid his hands on Saul.
And the scales fell from Saul’s eyes,
And his sight was restored.
And he regained his strength.
And by the time he left Damascus several days later,
He’d begun to proclaim Jesus in the synagogues,
Saying “He is the Son of God.”

Well, we know what happens to Saul.
His name gets changed to Paul
And he goes on to become a great apostle.
In truth, it’s Paul who lays the foundations of Christianity.
Peter and John and the other disciples were just simple fisherman.
They weren’t theologians.
But Paul...it took a trained mind like his
To grasp what was going on.
To understand the implications.

Yes, we know a lot about what happened to Paul
After that day on the dusty road to Damascus.
But curiously,
we never hear another thing about those letters.
Those letters of authority that gave him the power to arrest people.
Those letters that made him a big man.
We can assume they were left somewhere.
Paul couldn’t possess both those letters AND his new life.

There was no way.
He left them behind.

Just like Peter, presumably,
left behind a great big pile of fish
On a beach.

Peter, who just a few days earlier
had stood around a charcoal fire
Outside the high priest's house
And three times denied that he knew Jesus.
This same Peter now decides to go fishing.
Because after all, he's a fisherman.
That's what fishermen do: they go fishing.

And in the middle of his fishing expedition,
Peter suddenly finds himself face to face with Jesus –
and with a net full of fish.
A lot of fish, dragged up on shore.
Fish that were worth a tidy sum of money.
All Peter had to do was get those fish to market – quickly.
Before they started to rot.

But instead, Peter sits down to a meal with Jesus.
There's another charcoal fire.
And Jesus breaks bread with them.
And somehow, everything began to change.
Peter had a choice to make:
And the fish were left behind.

All those valuable fish
were left in the same place
where Saul left his letters.
They were left in the same place
where I left my crankiness that day at Uluru.

They were left *behind*.

Behind is a good place.
It's a place with plenty of room.
And it's a place where a lot of things get left.
There's a big pile there.
A pile filled with rotting fish
And dangerous letters
And weariness.
Truth be told,
Most of us probably have a thing or two
That we need to leave on that pile.

You know, both Saul and Peter learned a thing or two
About resurrection and grace.
They discovered that grace changes everything.
Saul discovered that everything he had done,
As totally wrong, as misguided,
As harmful as it had been,
All of that was so completely overwhelmed
By the reality of the presence of Christ
That none of those other things were even mentioned.

Saul was not condemned for this past.
Instead, he was told how to begin something new.
And those letters just drop out of sight,
As though they had never existed.

And Peter, he was not condemned for his actions either.
No, even though three times he had denied Jesus.
He was simply given an equal number of times
to proclaim his love for Jesus.
And those denials, well,
They weren't even mentioned, were they?

Peter's denials, just like the rotting fish,
Were left behind.
Peter didn't need to carry them around any more.

The road for each of us is long.
And sometimes, it's hot and dusty.
But along the way, there are wonders to be discovered.
Light from heaven may strike something
And you may see the beauty in something
In a way you'd never seen it before.

And you just never know
What may lie right around the corner
On some dusty road.
Or what you will be invited to leave behind,
Or what choices you may be called to make,
That transform that dusty road
Into a pathway paved with grace,
and beauty, and life-giving spirit.

Just get out there on the dusty road
And see where it takes you.