

The End is the New Beginning
 Preached by Rev. Ridgley Beckett 09/21/25
 Luke 24:14-35

We made it! Today is our final Sunday in our summer sermon series on El Camino de Santiago—Along the way, I’ve been recounting my reflections from my own journey along the Portuguese Camino— a collection of medieval trails that all find their way across Spain, Portugal, and France to the ending point— a cathedral in Santiago de Compostela where the Apostle James’ remains are interred. James was believed to be responsible for evangelizing the Iberian Peninsula. For centuries people have walked on these sacred trails by churches, through villages, and staying in hostels with strangers. Some come to make a religious pilgrimage, some to take a spiritual pilgrimage, some to figure out life by taking a long walk in the woods. I was lucky enough to be given a grant to bike the Portuguese Camino by myself in January from Porto, Portugal to Santiago de Compostela, Spain. Over those 7 days and 200+km I discovered more about God and life than I thought I would.

Our series this summer incorporated popular “sayings” from the Camino through the lens of both my experience, but the experiences of pilgrims in scripture. We don’t always notice it, but many of our scriptures incorporate language about *travel* and *movement*. It is in this in-between from one place to another, God shows up, often when we least expect it—showing us that our life journey and our faith journeys are inextricably tied together. Our faith and our human experience are woven together so much that God uses our very lives to speak to us in meaningful ways. This is what people discover on the Camino.

Each week of our series, we discovered the ways God met me on the Camino, but also how God meets us on our journeys. We began with Abraham, remembering that the road is made by walking, and that God journeys with us. We learned through Abraham’s welcome and the Good Samaritan’s compassion that there are no strangers, only friends we haven’t yet met. We heard Israel’s complaints in the wilderness and remembered that life may not always go the way we hope, but that God still provides. We found encouragement in the witness of saints before us, knowing that in life we are never alone. Last week, we joined the Magi in taking a different road, discovering that life does not always give us what we want, rather it gives us what we need to find ourselves.

The evening leading up to my last segment on the Camino was spent in Caldas De Reis— a thermal town in Galicia. As I sat soaking my feet in one of the town’s hot springs I journaled about the week I had had— I had come to love this adventure. It was teaching me so much about life, God and myself. I also loved the disconnection from it all. The only thing I had to worry about each day was eating meals, and getting to destinations. My body adapted and began to relish in the chance to live life, rather than sit behind a desk on a computer all day. There were no meetings, there were no obligations. My only obligation each day was to live. To take in life and be. What a freedom that was. I struggled with the idea of returning to business as usual, even if the remainder of my sabbatical awaited me on the other end.

My last day of the Camino flew by because I was pedaling so hard in excitement. The more road signs I saw that said “Santiago” filled me with great joy. Every turn, I wondered, is this it? Is this it? Will I turn a corner and see that cathedral in all its magnificence? I felt like I was circling around and around the city, never to reach the center. Finally after a HUGE hill, I encountered a city that seemed bigger than the others. Buses started joining me on the roads, students walking to class. This felt like it was it.

Then, I crossed a bridge and I heard something. Bagpipes—my little presbyterian heart leapt for joy. I knew it. I was there—as I navigated closer and closer, the white stone streets got more and more narrow. I kept following the sound of bagpipes playing until I saw it: the square of the magnificent Cathedral of Santiago de Compostela in all its glory. By then the sun was shining and the tropical storm was just a distant dream. The wind blew my hair wisps back and I just stared at every single little spire, savoring the music the bagpiper was

playing in the distance. Tourists and pilgrims were filling the square, city life was happening—people were moving through this square on a mission. And all I could do was sit and take it all in. This was it. I had done it.

My trance was broken by a young woman tapping me on the shoulder—from the looks of her dusty shoes, she had just finished too. “congratulations!” she said! “do you want a picture?”

I beamed the BIGGEST smile and I looked REDICULOUS in my cycling outfit that both kept me warm and dry that past week. But I didn’t care. That HUGE smiles was filled with relief, joy and a touch of disappointment that this journey had come to an end. Each day was teaching me so much, each day was filling me up. What was I to do next?

That night I roamed the streets of Santiago, watching the Spaniards sip wine and converse with friends, breaking bread at tables and laughing into the night. *They’re truly living* I thought—look at their connections, their lives. I dreaded the idea of going back to America where we are too busy to even take a break like that, much less every day.

As I packed up my suitcase and pared down my items for the trip home, I wondered what life would look like post camino. I had done it- I had my certificate. All that was left from my journey was my memories, my passport, a shell.

After returning home from Spain, I was a little dazed. The intense shouting of billboards, radio, and the news, felt like a daily assault. I tried to ease back in slowly, but America...doesn’t do slow well. And neither do I. I longed for the days back on the Camino where the sounds were of creeks rushing, and pilgrims greeting one another. How do I bring the Camino back home with me? I wondered this often in the weeks following. I felt like I saw the Camino in everything, everywhere.

As I wrestled with how to live differently after the Camino, I realized I was not the first to face such a question. I thought my Camino had ended — but it was only beginning. And I think the disciples on the road to Emmaus knew that same tension. Two disciples, walking on the road to Emmaus, also thought their journey with Jesus had ended.

I can’t help but wonder if the disciples on the road to Emmaus had the same feeling I had. The rush of an experience of following Jesus, seeing these unbelievable miracles, and it all coming to an end with his gruesome crucifixion at the hands of corrupt religious and state officials. They must have been scared, dazed, deflated, confused. Life may have looked a little dull, I bet they also wondered how to come back from that—do you just continue living life as if this experience didn’t happen? In some ways you feel completely different, but unsure how to live life completely different.

In the middle of all of that, as they journey on a road to Emmaus a stranger joins them in conversation. That stranger turns out to be Jesus. The risen Christ meets them, and shows them that what looked like an ending was in fact a beginning. The end of the gospel of Luke shares a resurrected Christ who invites them to live life in a new way. That what they thought was an ending was actually a beginning—marked by a new mission to share God’s love and mercy as evidenced in the life of Jesus with all whom they meet. Scholars invite us to read the gospel of Luke in tandem with the book of Acts—for the life, death and resurrection of Jesus leads straight into myriad stories of the early church. People continuing their journey of faith that they thought had come to an end, but instead led them to a new beginning. And that leads us here today.

The disciples thought their journey had ended in Emmaus. But Christ met them on the road, broke bread with them, and sent them out with a new beginning. I thought my Camino ended at the cathedral in Santiago, but it was only the beginning of seeing life itself as the Camino. And friends, that is true for us too. Every road, every table, every moment is part of the journey. Santiago is not the end. Emmaus is not the end. LIFE is the Camino. And our only task is to keep walking it—with Christ, in love.

An author I follow on Substack, Sean Detrich, walked the Camino Frances with his wife this Spring and wrote about his (bumpy) travels along the way. It brought comfort to know that I wasn't the only one with an...interesting Camino story. I will spare you the details because his writings are just too good for me to summarize in a sermon, but one entry stuck out to me the most.

In his blogpost, he spoke of the radical hospitality He speaks of radical hospitality and the ways he saw God everywhere he went on the Camino. He writes:

When you first begin the Camino, you think the most meaningful pieces of the magic are going to come from the countryside, the villages, the spirituality, the food, the historic significance of the route, and the charming locals. But it's not about those things...

Some of the most powerful lessons we pilgrims have learned...have been in relation to each other.

How do we handle each other? How do we treat one another?

And where does God fit into all this, you keep wondering. How come you feel His presence so much more out here than at home? What's the reason?

Is it because you're not surrounded by the trappings of ordinary modernized life? Is it because, currently, your whole world is crammed in a 32 liter backpack? ...Or is it because despite each predicament, you somehow know it will all work out.

Because it always has worked out.

...like being trapped in an isolated pueblito, with an injury, and no available beds. And the townspersons make space for you, innkeepers shuffle you from bed to bed, to help you out. A local woman goes to town for you, buys you new shoes, out of pure generosity.

What is this? What is this unique charitable behavior called? This kind of thing would, after all, never happen in real life.

Or would it? Maybe this stuff happens all the time. Maybe it's always around us, and yet you never notice it. Maybe the milk of human compassion is always available to you and me; maybe the sweetness of heaven's love is always there, lingering just within arm's reach, but we fail to notice it. Maybe THAT'S the Camino.

Then again, maybe—just maybe—there is no Camino at all. Maybe the Camino itself was always inside your breast, locked away in your heart. Maybe you were already WALKING the Camino, for your whole life, always walking, you just never realized it. Maybe life itself is simply one long Camino, and your only job is to love it. ¹

The Camino isn't just a trail in Spain. It's our very lives — our only job is to keep walking it, with God, exhibiting God's love.

Like the disciples, I too discovered that the journey doesn't end when you arrive at a cathedral or return home. The biggest thing I learned on the Camino is that *LIFE* is the actual Camino. The point is not just to arrive, but to keep walking, recognizing God along the way. When we find ourselves having finished experiences that inherently change us, it isn't the end—God invites us into a new beginning, using what we have learned and how we have grown to keep journeying.

Each step, each stranger, each act of love is part of the Way. So let us keep walking, for Christ meets us on the road, Christ feeds us at the table, and Christ sends us out to love the world.

¹ <https://seandietrich.substack.com/p/dispatches-del-camino-fbf>

