

# Preparing Yourself to Re-enter Our Culture



## ■ Encountering God

### ■ Go Tell

Read Mark 16:1–20.



In this passage we read of Jesus' resurrection. The instruction to the women is: "Go tell." The different

endings to Mark's Gospel reveal several responses to the "go tell" directive.

We have likened the service-learning mission trip, and the travel/study seminar, to a kind of baptism, an immersion experience in which we go under the river of life, into the depths, and emerge different, changed, transformed in some way, large or small. Likewise we may expect that somewhere in the midst of the experience we will encounter death and resurrection in the place we visit, among the people with whom we talk. You may be

witnesses to the death and resurrection experience of one of the members of your traveling community. You may have a death and resurrection experience yourself. In the biblical account of Jesus' resurrection, the response of the first witnesses to the event may inform you in how to respond to your contemporary experience, whether as a witness or as the one resurrected into new life, new hope, new action.

In the face of a profound encounter with either death or life, the response may be terror. It is no accident that in the Hebrew Scriptures, the word for "fear" and "awe" is the same. In radical amazement, even amazing grace, we may be struck dumb. The most articulate among us may become speechless, without words to adequately describe the mystery, the miracle, the meaning of the experience. The first recorded response to the resurrection was fear resulting in silence. The women told no one.

It is possible that having been immersed in the experience of the trip you too may falter when someone asks, "How was your trip?" You may have been on a service project where the group built significant relationships with the local community. Or you may have been on a travel/study seminar where the group encountered both the evil of the world and the courageous survival of the human spirit. Whatever the case, in the first few days after their return, travelers tend to be overwhelmed by the enormity of what they saw, felt, heard, and thought, and how it has affected them. They may have difficulty reconnecting with friends and family and readjusting to our culture. For some, returning from a two-thirds-world country, simply going to a grocery store, much less the mall, may be an experience of extreme pain, further revelation, deep grief, contrition, even guilt. Alone, without the companionship and support of the traveling community, without those who shared the experience, a traveler may find it almost unbearable to tell the stories that touched the heart. Travelers may fall silent. They may elude their questioners by saying "good" or "fine" or "exciting," shutting down the questions with a minimal response.

A second possibility is that as you return home, as you re-enter your life and culture, the experience of the trip will seem unbelievable, even to you. You were there. You saw it with your own eyes; you heard with your own ears; did the work with your

own hands, and yet in the context of your daily home routines, it seems like a tall tale. You wonder if you really felt those feelings, or was it contrived, constructed somehow for your benefit, keyed to your sympathies?

Or the trip may be so very real, so clear in your mind, that it does not even seem like memory, but continues with you as a very present partner in your days—yet others dismiss your telling of it. They do not believe you. They may not want to believe that you have been changed by the experience. They may not want to hear about it for fear that it may challenge them to change as well. In both these cases, how to interpret the experience becomes a difficult question. It is good, then, to continue to have some contact with those with whom you shared the experience, for "reality checks," for support, for the continuing encouragement of community.

Biblical scholars have discovered ancient copies of the Gospel of Mark with different endings. There are at least two endings, more depending on how you count. Different translations identify the endings in different ways. Though the number of verses in Mark's last chapter is not clear, what is clear is that the response to resurrection includes both action and interpretation: "Go and tell" (verse 7). What is it that you will go and tell?

## ■ Reflection Questions

1. Was there a place on the trip where you saw crucifixion (a place where God's peace, justice, and joy are being snuffed out by greed, oppression, torture, war . . .)?
2. Was there a place on the trip where you saw resurrection (a place where new life is emerging out of experiences of poverty or hatred or death)?
3. What is the "good news" you can take home?
4. What is the most important thing for someone to hear about the experience you have had?

As with the early disciples and friends of Jesus, it may take a while for participants to know what they have experienced. Offer them the opportunity to reflect on the people and places they have visited, and to make the connection with biblical stories. Such reflection may assist them in sorting through the wide expanse of experience and distilling it into some initial impressions that can be shared when they return. People process experiences differently and on different time lines. Allow those who are ready to share to do so. Allow those who need more time to take time. Affirm everyone's process and encourage them to keep reflecting on the trip and letting new discoveries emerge even after they return home.

## ■ Stop and Think

Read Luke 4:1–13.



Jesus met the Adversary in the wilderness and was tempted. What about you? When you return home, some people will immerse

themselves in your story; they will hear, see, and feel with you to such an extent that they may also be transformed. The response to telling becomes appropriate action. What is the appropriate action response to what you have seen and heard and to what you tell others of your journey? It will, of course, vary for each trip and each person.

However, the passage from Luke offers some clues as to how to discern what action may be appropriate and what inappropriate.

At the beginning of his ministry, just after his baptism, Jesus went into the wilderness and was tempted by the Adversary (otherwise known as the devil). As he sought direction for his ministry, Jesus experienced the temptation to solve problems by using power inappropriately. Sometimes when we have met hunger, poverty, and the scars of war face to face, we want to "fix it" in any way we can. We may be tempted to "just send money." We may feel a personal need to deliver goods or services to the people we met on the trip, or perhaps to those whose stories we heard.

Stop. Step back from such impulses. Ask if the Adversary is tempting you with power. Is the Adversary luring you with the idea that

you know what is best for others, that you can exert control over others—with the best intentions, of course—making decisions without even consulting them? Don't be tempted. Work through the mission partnerships, the partnership churches and organizations in the area you traveled. That is the best method of honoring both the humanity of the people and addressing their needs.

The Adversary continued to wrestle with Jesus for his mind and heart. He tempted Jesus with public recognition, limelight, authority, and glory. It is possible for you, as you tell of your experiences, to attract attention, to become the center of the story rather than an interpreter of it. Sometimes it is important, even essential, to speak of one's own transformation, to tell one's own story as part of the overall story. But one can do it with humility. You have had a special experience, but you do not need to use it to make yourself seem special in the eyes of others. You are part of the beloved people of God who are called to share both the deaths and resurrections of the life journey with one another. This is a high calling, and not to be used for personal gain or glory.

Finally, the Adversary tempted Jesus to throw caution to the wind, renounce responsibility for his actions and let God take care of the consequences. In particular the Adversary tried to wheedle Jesus into throwing himself off the pinnacle of the Temple, trusting that God would not let him fall to his death. When we return we may be

tempted to forge ahead in unwise ways in telling the story of the trip. We may go off the deep end, thinking we should quit our job to go back to where we have been, so that we can help the people we met. We may make the experience into its own kind of idol, allowing it to dominate our lives, to take all our energy. When the trip becomes the object of our worship, instead of the One who calls us to ministry, it loses its creative place in our lives and may even become destructive.

There are other temptations as well. We may feel guilty about our role, or our country's role, or the church's role in the problems we have encountered. Dwelling on guilt is not a healthy personal lifestyle. Dwelling on guilt is not a powerful agent for change. It does not make a person available for actively working for peace. Facing our complicity, owning it, and taking the steps we can to change what we can in ourselves and in society is not only more healthy for our bodies, it is more effective in transforming the world. Likewise, there may be a tendency to feel overwhelmed and depressed about a perceived lack of creative power in the face of the enormity of the pain of the world. These feelings tend to produce more inaction than action. Feeling impotent or insignificant will not change the situation. Assessing what is possible, including the powerful action of prayer, is what will add transformative potential to the world community.

### ■ Reflection Questions

1. As you think about the temptations Jesus faced, do you see some of them present in the church or in individuals you know? Without naming names, describe how you see these temptations occurring.
2. As you think about the temptations Jesus faced, are there any that you find present in your own life? What makes you susceptible to a certain temptation? How do you resist it?
3. Are there temptations, other than the ones identified in Luke's Gospel, which you find present in your own life with regard to discovering "appropriate responses and actions" after this trip? How will you deal with them?

There may be other temptations that the group will name for themselves. You may find that in one group there will be named the temptation to talk too much and the temptation to be silent, the temptation to discount persons, things, practices, or systems, and the temptation to make such things into an idol, the temptation to guilt and the temptation to fix. No two people will have precisely the same response. As the group arrived with different backgrounds, as they offered their varying perspectives throughout the trip, they will choose different ways of interpreting the experience and different means of acting themselves and involving others in action. As participants prepare to go home, it is

important to spend time as a group talking about how each person will respond to the experience, what the temptations may be, how each will share the story, and how he or she discerns the call to action.

### ■ Leading the Group toward Re-entry

#### ■ Conversations on Going Home

Be intentional about providing the time and space for reflection as participants prepare to go home. In the final day or days of the trip, include some unstructured time that may be



used for play or informal relating, as well as for the necessities of packing and organizing for the return travel. Play is a creative act. In some ways it is akin to certain kinds of meditative practices where the mind is distracted by a mantra, a chant, or an object such as a candle. With the mind ostensibly focused on the mantra or object, the spirit is free to mull and muse and, sometimes, emerge with increased clarity. Playing together is a good way to affirm the traveling

community. Consider ending the trip with an element of celebration. This might be a special dinner or a ritual of some sort. The closing worship may be a celebration. You may hold the celebration on the same evening that you have a time for evaluation and a last reflection period, but keep these elements distinct from each other. As part of an intentional ending, include these components in any order that seems appropriate:

- final opportunities for reflection as a community
- an evaluation of the experience
- play time
- celebration
- worship

It may be helpful to schedule the play time early or to intersperse the other elements with several opportunities for more fluid, unprogrammed time, creating a rhythm that assists the total dialogue about going home. It is a good idea to reserve a full day at the end of the trip for this more spacious time.

The final reflection time may incorporate any number of things. The essentials include the following:

- a final opportunity for participants to process what they have experienced
- an evaluation of the trip
- a conversation about re-entry issues
- the generation of group ideas about interpreting the experience
- an opportunity to begin thinking about personal plans for action

- ways to encourage others to act after hearing participant's story

See Resources for Preparing to Re-enter Our Culture, pages 123–145, for suggested activities that will help participants prepare for going home.

## ■ Interpretation, or “How Was Your Trip?”

Participants on trips sponsored through the national offices of the denomination have made a commitment to share their experiences with others. Most participants on mission or study trips sponsored by congregations, presbyteries, or synods have made a similar commitment. Participants may need your assistance in order to understand what such a commitment means, and to know how and what to do. Since each person is different and is going back to a different setting, each will fulfill the commitment differently. There is no one way to do trip interpretation. Suggest that participants find what works well for them, but encourage them to stretch a bit, to go beyond what is most comfortable.

Spend enough time talking with the group about possibilities for interpretation and sharing ideas about interpretation so that each participant feels at least informed about doing interpretation, if not totally comfortable with the notion. The goal is that participants will go home with enough information about interpretation and how to do it that, when asked to give a presentation, they will be able to put one

together. Interpreting to others is how participants “go and tell,” how they witness to the death and resurrection they saw on their trip. In *Resources for Preparing to Re-enter Our Culture* you will find activities you can do with the group that will help participants focus on how to do interpretation. The activities correspond to Handout 7, “Interpretation Tools and Tips.” This handout will be a good reminder for the participants when they are at home.

### ■ Action and Involvement

Participants will discover as they go about interpreting that some people will be especially moved by the presentations and will ask what they can do. Offering ways for listeners to become involved is important. But continued action and involvement are important for the participants as well. Action and involvement are a natural result of a mission or work trip. Having seen with their own eyes, having heard with their own ears, having touched with their own hands, and having been emotionally touched by the people and issues, participants feel the need to do something. The “end” of the trip is not the same as some other endings in life. In many ways the end of the trip is the beginning of new opportunities for action and involvement. Likewise the people who hear a presentation, who have learned new information, who have had their

consciousness raised, are often eager to become involved. Refer to *Resources for Preparing to Re-enter Our Culture* for activities you can do with the group that will help them think about possibilities for action and involvement both for themselves, and for the people who will hear their presentations. (The activities related to action and involvement correspond to Handout 8, “Ideas for Action and Involvement.”)

### ■ Closing Worship

Closing worship may be short or long. However, in order to set it apart as an important occasion celebrating the total experience of the group, it would be good to adopt a different format than your usual morning and evening prayers.

You may want to design the experience yourself, choosing themes, experiences, hymns or chants, and portions of liturgy or Scripture that have been helpful during the trip. Once you have planned it, ask participants to take various leadership roles. Or you may ask for two or three volunteers to create a service reflecting the group’s experience.

The closing worship time is an opportunity to pray and sing together, offer insights, claim places of growth, and make commitments in the context of the community and in the sacred moment of worship. One way to invite this sharing is to

select, as the central text for the service, a Scripture that links with the experience the group has had. You might tell participants ahead of time what the text is and give them an opportunity to read and reflect on it in preparation for worship. When it comes time for the sermon or meditation, participants can take two or three minutes to relate the Scripture to their experience of the trip. It may also be appropriate to select two or three Scriptures and invite two or three people to reflect a little longer on the intersection of God's story and their story in terms of the trip experience.

If you have chosen to make a covenant commitment, it may occur as a separate piece of ritual in the service or it may be presented at the time of the offering. If you chose not to do this or not to use it as a part of the offering, you may want to ask people to write on a piece of paper what offering of their lives they will make as a result of this trip. These commitments may or may not be shared, depending on the preference of the worship leader. You may choose to celebrate Communion as part of the closing worship. If you do, you will need to receive permission to do so from a governing body prior to the trip. (Normally a session or a presbytery would grant this. See Resources for Worship, page 147, for a sample form requesting permission.) Consider using elements you have commonly found on your meal table during the trip. If you have continually eaten a certain kind of bread, you may want to use

that as the Communion bread. In Mexico this may be a tortilla, in Hungary, a crusty loaf, in Palestine, a piece of pita. If you celebrate Communion with wine, also provide a juice option for participants.

You may want to close with a time for participants to offer a blessing to one another. This may be done by passing the blessing around the circle. One person turns to the left and offers a blessing (either the same or different blessings may be used) to her or his neighbor. That person then turns to his or her left and blesses the neighbor, and so on around the circle until the one who began the blessing is blessed. Or you might select a spoken blessing that the group speaks together and follows with the passing of the peace. Another way is to have one person in the circle step into the circle and face the person next to her or him, offer the blessing and move to the next person repeating the blessing or offering one specific to that person. As the first person moves to bless the fourth person in the circle, person 2 blesses person 3 . . . and so on. The circle "peels around" until the first person has become the last person to be blessed by the whole group. This takes some time, but allows each person to be eye to eye as the blessing happens.



## ■ Love the Questions

Consider planting a few questions in participants' hearts as they head home. Here are some suggestions.

1. If you could relive one moment of the trip again, what would it be? Why?
2. What word or phrase from all that you heard still echoes in your head and heart?
3. What do your memories of the trip reveal to you about why you were on the trip and what you are to do beyond the trip?
4. What part of you has grown the most, or which part of you has come alive in the past days? How will you continue to nurture this growth and keep alive what has been stirred in you?
5. In the dialogue between your inner journey and the outer journey, which part did more of the talking? What is the most important thing that was said in this conversation between yourself and the world?