

Native American groups were understandably upset this week when they learned that the United States had given Osama bin Laden the code name "Geronimo."

Perhaps instead his code name should have been Jesus.

I wonder if that would have offended anyone.

There are some striking similarities between the author of life and that author of death; antichrist always copies Christ.

Both seemed to have a knack for hiding in plain view.

Both were charismatic leaders who appealed to religion in controversial ways.

Both are pictured with a beard.

Both died violently at the hands of soldiers as enemies of the state, threats to the peace of the empire that targeted and killed them.

Both were rumored to be alive after news of their death.

And both left behind disillusioned and disappointed followers, two of whom we see on a long, slow walk in today's gospel.

*We had hoped that he was the one*, they say, in words that sound like they drop fresh from the lips of a faithful al-Qaeda disciple.

They are walking now toward Emmaus, a small town with a Roman garrison, an outpost of military power, away from Jerusalem, away from their community, away from the values of peace and justice and non-violence and freedom and life-giving healing and attentive care for the vulnerable that their dead leader had taught them, away from creative resistance to imperial values, in the direction of military power and its idols of security.

It is the same sad walk the church too often takes, away from Jerusalem, away from the shame of the cross and the uncertainty of confused community, and toward the reliable, predictable gods of patriotism: political power, public policy, economic stability, military security, the usual suspects for our misplaced faith.

It is a walk of shame, a long, sad stroll of expediency and compromise and regret, with grudging acknowledgment that the world's ruthless ways have won.

Violence trumps values; death snuffs out life; ugly power triumphs again while beauty bleeds limp on a cross.

And so the church shuffles along, kicking the dirt, wishing things had turned out differently but needing to pay the bills and protect the assets, drifting from Jerusalem toward Emmaus, drifting from compassion toward complicity, discussing Scripture and current events but struggling to make sense of them, afraid to confront the powers after what happened to the leader, unsure which way to go.

The conversation becomes so heavy, so clouded with disillusionment and hand-wringing and despair, that the church does not realize who it is that is walking with them.

Thank God the presence of Christ among us doesn't depend on our recognizing it.

And thank God the presence of Christ among us doesn't depend on us going the right direction, either.

There will be time enough for revelation and repentance down the road.

For now, Christ the stranger is a companion, a word that unites the Latin words for *bread* and *with*.

For now, Christ hides in plain view, present in sacred, even misdirected conversations about Scripture, working to turn us around, to kindle a fire in the ash heap in our hearts.

For now, Christ walks with us, no matter which direction we've decided to go, and he is willing to go a long way, seven times more than one was allowed to carry a soldier's burden, the whole length of the day.

He keeps opening the Scriptures to us until we are open to them.

He keeps going until we ask him to stay.

He stays with us until finally we glimpse him, in the opening of the Word and the breaking of the bread, and then see once more which direction we really need to go.

This story is at the heart of our wider church's global mission strategy of accompaniment, from the same words for *bread* and *with*, in which we walk alongside others in a relationship of solidarity and mutuality, listening first.

It is an approach that we've finally learned, after many long and misdirected walks through the mission field, from studying Jesus on the road to Emmaus and taking seriously the idea that now we are the body of Christ, the often unrecognized presence of hope in the world.

It also takes seriously the story's reminder that the stranger may well be Christ among us, ready to teach and reorient us if we are willing to keep walking and listening.

It is why we are still walking and working in Japan, and Haiti, and New Orleans, and Southeast Asia, and yes, Ground Zero in New York City, and places of disillusionment and long, dusty trails to restored community around the globe.

The powers of violence and devastation and despair are sudden and strong.

The powers of Christ and companionship are frustratingly slow and hard to see, but they are stronger still.

Military might can never outlast the power of the loving mother.

The rumor is true.

Christ lives; Easter wins.

The Easter story of the road to Emmaus, the recurring and ongoing biography of Christ's church, starts afresh again today.

Two new disciples set out on the road together.

Noel and Vasu, baptized this morning, begin their long journey with Christ.

They probably won't recognize him, but he knows them.

They probably will wander off in the wrong direction, but even so, Christ won't leave their side.

They probably will walk long stretches of confusion and uncertainty with only quickly vanishing moments of real clarity, but those will be enough.

Eventually they will see the one who accompanies them.

They will see him in the pages of Scripture and in the twists and turns of their own journey, in the bread they share with one another and with the strangers they welcome with kindness.

Vasu and Noel, we pray, will walk many miles and questions and insights with Christ before their day is over, and they also reach Jerusalem, and they see him and all the rest of our companions gathered together, risen indeed, and delighted to hear their story too.