

Scripture: Luke 24:13-35

Sermon by Rev. Susi Kawolics 6/21/2026

When your pastor and my dear friend Gene asked me to come and to preach on the subject of labyrinth – I immediately said Yes – because I love talking about labyrinth! I am a certified labyrinth facilitator, and a member of the Labyrinth Society, Regional Representative for Ohio for the Labyrinth Society, and have a goal of walking a labyrinth in every state. I love talking and presenting about labyrinth. But then the reality hit that I have never preached about the labyrinth! It is a different, and kind of backward way of sermon preparation to have a message, and then look for a scripture passage to back it up. A preacher's work is usually to take a scripture and wrestle it into a sermon.

What I have to say is actually going to be part sermon, part presentation, and therefore I will warn you that it will be longer than a usual sermon. I hope that I can at least give you an appreciation for labyrinth as prayer practice, while also remaining true to scripture.

When pondering what scripture passage to use, since labyrinth is not mentioned anywhere in the Bible, I thought of this Emmaus passage. I love this story of these two apostles whose world has just blown up, who just didn't know what to do next - deciding to go for a walk. We can imagine their circumstances - they had witnessed the torture and crucifixion of their rabbi, their leader, the one they thought had come to save them – just 2 days prior. And they knew that to be affiliated with him in any way meant that a target was on their back as well. So on that Sunday morning, they decided to get out of Jerusalem, and head towards Emmaus.

It was during this walk that someone came to travel beside them. Although he was a stranger, he seemed an open, trustworthy person, so they told him all about their troubles. The path they thought that Jesus would have taken as their Messiah was not the path he actually took. The way of salvation was not supposed to go like this, ending in the death of their leader. Jesus was the promised new King David, the conquering hero, who would destroy the Romans, and give Israel back to the Jewish people. But it didn't work out that way at all – and these disciples just didn't know what next steps were going to be.

Turns out that the stranger they confided in was Jesus, even though they didn't recognize him. He opened their eyes, he led them to see everything differently - their spiritual paths, their circumstances, in a different light. He enabled them to come to an understanding about something that had left them completely perplexed. And after this encounter, after this walk, they traveled back to Jerusalem the same way they had come, yet totally changed.

Just like these two followers of Jesus had to come to a new understanding of what they believed, I would guess that has been true for many of us as well along our spiritual paths. I know when I reflect on my own journey, it has often taken unexpected turns, and is much more labyrinthian and circular than direct. I love the aphorism "God writes straight with crooked lines" – because that really describes my journey. And it is this journey that created in me a love of labyrinth as spiritual tool.

I started off life in a Methodist Church, the granddaughter of a minister. I was very involved in my church growing up, and then I ended up marrying a wonderful man, who happened to be Catholic. We started attending a Catholic church, and for wanting our family to go to church together, I converted to the Catholic faith in my early thirties. And, as our God has a wonderful sense of humor, it was about a year after that that I felt a call to ministry – now that I had closed the door to ordination. But that was ok. I would become a pastoral associate at a Catholic church, and I could live with that. And so I went to Ursuline College to pursue a Master's in Ministry degree.

And it was at Ursuline that I walked my first labyrinth – on their campus.



This was in the late 90's, and honestly, while it was not in any way a bad experience, but it didn't change my life either. In the next few years I would periodically go back and walk that labyrinth with friends, and while I enjoyed it, the practice did not significantly deepen my spirituality.

Until... in 2004. An announcement in our church bulletin encouraged us as good Catholics to vote for the Defense of Marriage Act – you know the one – the Ohio Constitutional amendment declaring that marriage can only be between a man and a woman. This was the tipping point in an already precarious relationship that I had developed with the Catholic church teachings. So I guess it's appropriate that I share this story during PRIDE month – because it was this issue that led me to make the painful decision to leave my church community that I loved.

The conundrum in my life became: what could a girl who felt called to ministry do with a Catholic degree if not work for some kind of Catholic organization? Where could I find a new spiritual home where I could use this degree? This is the question that led me to walking labyrinths.



And the labyrinth that I love the most turns out to be about 1 mile from my house, and on property owned by Federated Church, which is now my church home. It had been there for a few years, and I wasn't even aware of it. But once I discovered it, I did a lot of walking and praying on that labyrinth.

Labyrinths are great places to go when your path takes an unexpected turn, or when you have to make a decision, and you just can't figure it out. St. Augustine once said, "Solvitur ambulando" – meaning "It is solved by walking" – and for me that has so often proven to be true.

Some of you may already be familiar with labyrinths, so please bear with me while I explain a bit about them in case this is all new to folks. Labyrinths are prayer tools, spiritual tools, and they have been around for thousands of years, pre-dating Christianity, transcending cultures and religions. While they are not for everyone, I would encourage you to try walking one sometime. Maybe even today!

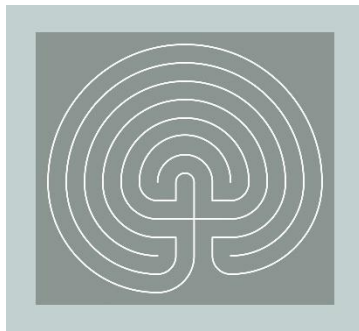
There are many different labyrinth patterns, but the two most common ones are on your trifold - the medieval and the classical. The Medieval labyrinth looks like this:



and the most famous one is found in the Chartres cathedral in France.

It was probably built to offer a way for Christians to honor the practice of making a pilgrimage to Jerusalem when it was too costly and dangerous to actually go there.

Walking the labyrinth represented this pilgrimage, and in fact, sometimes the center of the labyrinth has been called the New Jerusalem.



The other common labyrinth is the 7 circuit classical. Circuit refers to the number of paths to get to center. This one is easy to draw and make, and many people, including myself, have created them. Here's the one in my backyard and if you're interested, I have sheets showing how to draw this pattern.



I know looking at these pictures, the labyrinths look like mazes – a bit chaotic and confusing. But I want to assure you that they are not, and there is a big difference between a labyrinth and a maze.

Labyrinth is a connected path with no diversions, no tricks, no dead ends. There is no having to decide which way to go. It is because of that that a labyrinth engages the right side of the brain – rather than the left side that is the side needed to solve puzzles. That active side can rest for a while and this allows your creativity, emotions, intuition to rise as you walk. Labyrinths are not places to get lost and confused, they are tools for helping you find your way. When mind is quiet, and is stirred by the act of walking the structure of the labyrinth – Sometimes streams of thoughts and insights often come into awareness, sometimes we have the answers to the conundrums that we face deep inside us, and we just can't access them, and walking labyrinths can help with that. Walking a labyrinth is an embodied prayer practice, a way of uniting both body and soul while praying. Most are designed with one path to the center, and journeying to the center of the labyrinth is a metaphor for journeying to your own center, and becoming more centered.

Another beautiful metaphor of labyrinth is that of a hopeful sign of order emerging from apparent chaos. It symbolizes for most of us that life never takes you straight to your goal, that

spiritual journeys are filled with twists and turns. Those early apostles had that experience, and while we might not encounter Jesus in the flesh as they did, I think that Jesus can be encountered while walking the labyrinth, his spirit can open us gently to a new understanding of scripture, to and to become aware of how God is working in our lives.

While any labyrinths can be a tool for providing a spiritual experience, there are some that I have walked which have been particularly moving to me.



This one is in Boston's Northend, a memorial to Armenian Genocide victims . Walking this inspires a prayer peace, summoning us to hold victims and families in our hearts, and to advocate for an end to violence and war.

Here is one in Blacksburg, Virginia, which was built in 2007 after the Virginia Tech shootings to help the Christ Church and the entire Blacksburg community take steps towards healing. One can truly feel a sense of sadness, but also a spirit of care and compassion when walking this labyrinth.



Another favorite labyrinth of mine is in Zurich Switzerland, special feminine labyrinth was founded in 1991 by a group of women.





It was built replacing a military compound on that space that had closed. These women petitioned the city to change that area from a place that supported war to a place that invites and promotes peace.

As you can see, labyrinths come in all different shapes and styles, yet they all remind us that

our journeys will take unexpected turns, that our own paths often feel like two steps forward and one step back, feeling like we're getting to center, but then finding ourselves heading in the opposite direction. This is true not only for own individual lives, but for arcs of history as well.

Those apostles who walked on the Road to Emmaus knew all about the twists and turns of their own sacred history – the victories and defeats of their patriarchs and kings. And just when they thought they would be saved by their Messiah from the tyranny of the Romans, they felt defeated and crushed again by his death.

As today we are celebrating Juneteenth, I thought I would share a perspective of a piece of black history - an excerpt from the book "Möbituaries" – by comedian and historian Mo Rocca. ((Rocca, Mo and Greenberg, Jonathan, *Möbituaries-Great Lives Worth Reliving*, New York, Simon & Schuster: 2019). He does an excellent job of conveying the lives of people in historical contexts. Here is a section from his *Chapter on the Black Congressmen of Reconstruction – 1870 to 1901*

After the Civil War, the formerly rebel states were reabsorbed into the United States. And with the passage of the 13th, 14th and 15th amendments to the ... between 1865 and 1870, former slaves became citizens, with African American men gaining the right to vote and exercising it. Eric Foner, Columbia University historian... estimates that a remarkable 90 percent of eligible black voters in the south cast ballots during Reconstruction. . . And during Reconstruction as many as two thousand black men attained positions ranging from sheriffs and school superintendents to a justice on the South Carolina Supreme Court. Fourteen were elected to the US House of Representatives and two to the US Senate. "I think of it as a pivotal moment in the history of American democracy," Foner said. "It's the first time in this country, or really anywhere, that an interracial democracy was created."

In terms of labyrinth, it seems this was a step towards racial justice, a step towards a center giving Black people power and voice. But Mo Rocca goes on to say:

And then it was over. A dispute over who won the presidential election of 1876 (think Bush v. Gore but without the hanging chads) led to a deal: Republicans could have the White House as long as they agreed to the demands of the Southern Democrats (aka the former Confederates) to withdraw federal troops from the South. Those federal troops were essential to protecting the rights of the newly emancipated black population. Rights that included voting. This so-called Compromise of 1877 brought Reconstruction to a swift conclusion as insidious voting restrictions – many of which lasted until 1965 – were instituted across the South.

Black representation in Congress (all of it Republican) quickly dried up. Between the retirement of Senator Blanche K. Bruce of Mississippi in 1880 and the election of Edward Brooke of Massachusetts in 1966, not a single African American serviced in the US Senate. A few

African Americans managed to be elected to the US House during the 1880's and 1890s. But there, too, representation disappeared for decades afterward

Worse still, the memory of this moment faded. The North won the war, but the South won the textbooks (blink and you might have missed Reconstruction in high school history class) . . .

I share this with you as a reminder that when we look at the history of the arc of racial justice, we see forward movement, and then backward movement, twists and turns along the path of this struggle. I pray that instead of leaving us in despair, this awareness might bring us hope.

The celebration of Juneteenth reminds us that when the Emancipation Proclamation took effect in 1863, Union troops travelled the Confederate territories declaring all those enslaved to be free. But for the quarter of a million enslaved persons in the westernmost Confederate controlled state of Texas, news of freedom would not reach their ears for another 901 days. On June 18, 1865, a detachment of Union soldiers arrived in Galveston Bay, Texas, and, on June 19, freed the last enslaved Americans who had been living under the brutality of bondage for an additional two and a half years.



Because Juneteenth took place in Texas, it seems fitting that I show you this labyrinth that I walked in San Antonio. It is one of my favorites, because it is so unique. I went to walk it in the morning, and guess what. It wasn't there! That is a metaphor in itself, that even when it appears there is no path before us, there actually is. It just may take a while to show up.

We have seen many twists and turns on the road to racial freedom and justice. We might have elected the first Black president, but policy brutality and incarceration still targets a disproportionate number of Black people. Efforts might have been made towards restitution, but legislation is being passed, and judicial rulings being made to dismantle diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives, and voting rights. The struggle persists.

I share with you now this Instagram post of Racial Healing Hub with a suggestion to walk labyrinth to commemorate Juneteenth: *As we look to heal the racial divide and to promote*

truth, reconciliation, and transformation, the Racial Healing Hub has chosen a labyrinth to symbolize change that begins within the heart. Before urgently moving toward outward action, we must courageously examine the influence of racist ideology and embedded racism in our own lives. ... This prepares us to engage and connect more authentically and compassionately with others to re-imagine and create a world that is just and built for all to flourish."

The labyrinth represents our internal journey to fight racism. Take a moment to reflect on the entrance question: "What prevents me from connecting to someone I receive as "the other"?" Prepare your heart as you approach the entrance. As you enter from the world, you begin your path towards the center. . . . Use your journey in to seek insight or gain awareness. As you approach the center, feel free to pause to reflect on your journey. The time spent in the center is a

time for openness to receive. Take a moment [with] ... the question "What is the next step I can take to understand another's cultural perspective?" representing the commitment you are making to an anti-racist future.

Continue on the rest of the path through the labyrinth. Your reflections on these thoughts are what you want to bring into the world. The pathway out is a time for union with healing. Allow this part of your journey to firm up a commitment to action for racial healing in the way that is most effective for you.

<https://www.instagram.com/p/C8uPbrgO7Po/>



Because of time constraints, I am not going to talk about other ways to walk a labyrinth, but you can read about it in the brochure. If you are looking for a labyrinth to walk, I of course would encourage you to come out to Bainbridge and walk my favorite one! But you probably want to be closer, so I highly recommend the website [worldwidelabyrinthlocator](http://worldwidelabyrinthlocator.com), which you can also find on the brochure. But there is a caveat. I did some scoping out of nearby labyrinths, and the ones listed on the locator are not necessarily as they are.

The one at Church of the Savior is still there, but a bit overgrown, and probably difficult to navigate if you are not experienced in labyrinth walking.



There is a beautiful labyrinth at John Carroll, which I walked last year.

And I was happy to come full circle to once again walk the labyrinth at Ursuline. While still there, there is construction happening nearby and it is a bit worn.



But also, you have one right here in your own church! I hope you will find many opportunities to walk it.

Just like those early apostles were changed by their walk, our labyrinth walks invite us to change as well. As we observe Juneteenth, let us remember the journey from bondage to freedom—not just as a historical event, but as a continuing call. May we take hope in a history that shows us that tides do turn, that our words and actions make a difference. And may we know the presence of the one who walks besides us, who encourages and strengthens us, and guides our feet while we walk this journey of life. Amen.

