

“No Idle Tale”

April 26, 2020

Luke 24

A Sermon Preached by Reverend Debbie S. Osterhoudt

Prayer for Understanding: God of mighty deeds and quiet encounters, who came to us in Jesus of Nazareth, open our ears and eyes to your presence that we may not be startled and frightened but rather gladdened and empowered to share good news. Make us messengers of forgiveness, the embodiment of truth, representatives of the best you intend for all humanity. Amen.

Luke’s story of what happened on the road to Emmaus is one of seven post resurrection stories in the gospels. No one was actually present for the resurrection itself, so the gospel writers share with us various accounts of how Jesus appeared to his followers after his resurrection. The crucifixion story is verifiable – Jesus is nailed to a cross with a nameplate tacked above his head and he dies in front of a hundred eyewitnesses. His resurrection, on the other hand, is largely rumor. Someone said that someone said his tomb was empty. Maybe his body was stolen. Maybe he was resuscitated and walked away. It was women who first spread the story. But plenty of people never saw the risen Christ but had to weigh the evidence for themselves, to listen to the testimony of those who did and decide if and what they would

believe. To believe or not to believe in the possibility of new life. That was the issue which confronted those early believers and the church today. Do you believe in the possibility of new life - that the same Jesus who was crucified was also raised from the dead? Do you believe, as Jesus promises, that with God all things are possible? How you answer that question will often determine the choices you make in life.

This past week I remembered a story about a seminary graduate – a young woman named Heidi Neumark, who accepted her first call to a small Lutheran church in the South Bronx neighborhood of New York City. The South Bronx is an extraordinarily poor neighborhood. Violence, hatred and rage often erupt in the South Bronx. Heidi knew that this would be a scary and difficult first parish to serve. Upon arriving at her new parish, Rev. Heidi discovered unopened cans of paint and paint brushes tucked in the corner of her office. Assuming that her new parishioners had intended on painting her office, she inquired about their purpose. Patiently the church officers explained that the previous pastor had had to repaint the church's front doors so often that he kept extra paint cans in his office. Why the paint? Because weekly the locked front doors of the church were covered with profane graffiti, verbalizing and visualizing the community's hatred and violence.

In the coming weeks, Rev. Heidi spent time getting to know the members and the neighborhood. She visited homes and walked the streets and repainted the church doors. After she had come to the bottom of the second can of paint, she had grown tired of her dispiriting morning chore. Surely there was a way to transform the hatred which was expressed in the

visible graffiti on the church doors. Believing in the transformative power of the resurrection, she had an idea. She invited the children and the teenagers in the community to come to an afternoon art class at the church, opening the doors of the church to the neighborhood. Each afternoon they would read together the stories of the Bible. Heidi then armed the young people with paint brushes and invited them to illustrate those stories on the church's front door. Week after week, the youth replaced the violent images and profane language with vivid colors as they painted their hearts out. It was a joyous and messy process but soon, parents and adults took pride in what their children were doing and so the graffiti stopped. Even when closed the doors now shouted a new word of openness of new life and new possibilities amidst violence, rage and fear. Do we really believe in the power of the resurrection? Rev. Heidi's and the members of the South Bronx Lutheran Church did – they believed that with Christ all things are possible. They began to live as people of the resurrection amidst hatred and violence and even death. If we truly believe in the resurrection, then we believe in the transformative power of the Biblical story and that makes all the difference in our life choices.

And this is how the story in this morning's scripture reading goes.....

Two men are traveling the road of deep disappointment and hurt on the road between Jerusalem, the place which was the symbol of all their dreams and expectations, and their home in Emmaus. Two men journeying together. And didn't Jesus say something about wherever two or more are gathered in his name, he would be there with them?

They are sharing their disappointment and trying to unravel the meaning of the past 3 days - the trial, the crucifixion, the silent procession to the tomb. And then that incredible claim of the women - their vision of an empty grave and angels speaking. Verifiable death. Rumored resurrection. They are mulling it all over when this stranger suddenly appears behind them and startles them with his question about the topic of their conversation. Who is he anyway? "Are you the only visitor in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have happened there?" But, in the end, they are glad for the company and the opportunity to tell their story, so they match their stride to this stranger's as they pour out their hearts.

They tell him how everything looked so promising at first, when Jesus impressed everyone with his teachings and his miracles, and then how things had gone wrong, bad wrong. "We had hoped he was the one to redeem Israel," they say to him, admitting their defeat. "We had hoped." Hope in the past tense, one of the saddest sounds a human being can make. We believed things might really change, but we were wrong. He died.

It is over now. No more illusions. Back to business as usual.

That is when the walking partner explodes. "Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart! If you had read your Bibles, none of this would be a surprise to you. The Christ does not win the power struggle; he is the one who loses it. The Christ is the suffering servant, the broken one, who embraces his suffering so that God will overcome it."

Which means, they are not to despise the painful parts of their lives anymore, but embrace them. Which means that they are not to interpret their defeats as failures. Which

means that they are not to fear their enemies anymore, not even death itself. Sure, it doesn't make good sense, but they are to follow their leader into the scariest, more dangerous places in the world because, they, like him, are not fighters but wounded healers - whose credentials are their own hurt places. The good news is that they, like him, are not losers after all. Maybe, just maybe, there IS reason to resurrect their crucified hope.

When they arrive in their village, he turns to shake their hands goodbye, but they will not let him go. They invite him home to dinner, but he is an odd guest. It is their house, their food, their table, but when the three of them sit down, it is he, the guest, who acts as the host. He reaches out, takes the bread, blesses it, and gives it to them! There is something familiar about the way he shares the bread and cup with them - something they have seen him do before on a green hillside with five loaves and two fish, in an upper room with unleavened bread and Passover wine. He takes, blesses, breaks, gives - and through torn edges of the loaf he holds out to them, the scales fall from their eyes and they recognize him as the risen Christ, standing right there in their midst.

The blindness of the two disciples does not keep their Christ from coming to them. He does not limit his post-resurrection appearances to those with full confidence in him. He comes to the disappointed, the doubtful, the inconsolable. He comes to those who do not know their Bibles, who do not recognize him even when they are walking right beside him. He comes to those who have given up and are headed back home which makes this whole story a story about the blessedness of brokenness. A story about being somewhere on the road from where you

have been to where you are yet to arrive. Jesus seems to prefer to work with broken people, broken dreams, a broken world. If someone hands him a loaf of bread, he will bless it, break it and give it. And he will do the same thing with his own flesh and blood. Because that is the life God has shown him to show to the rest of us: to take what we have been given, whether we like it or not, and to bless it - to say thank you for it - whether it is the sweet, satisfying bread of success or the tear soaked bread of sorrow. To say thank you and to break it because that is the only way it can be shared.

There we have it- on the road to Emmaus - the gospel in a nutshell. Fellowship - when two or more of you are gathered in my name...., hospitality extended to a stranger, sharing of God's word and sacrament - all the ways Christ has promised to be present with us. New life dawning on the road of disappointment and shattered dreams and death. Take heart. This is no idle tale. Do not fear. This is the place he has promised to be, and this is the place where he returns to meet us again and again. Do you believe it? Do you believe that with God all things are possible? It makes a difference in how you live your life!