“Stay”

A sermon by Rev. Rachel Wildman

Easter 3, April 26th, 2020

St. Paul’s Episcopal Church, Bedford MA

Especially after last sunday, I have been so very much looking forward to preaching this morning…. I’ve been dying to capitalize on the metaphorical authenticity of these post-resurrection stories we’ve been hearing since Easter…could anything speak more loudly of our own present circumstances than Mary Magdalene and the other Mary, out very early in the morning, so that they might avoid others…for the purpose of stealing some quiet time to mourn their losses and honor that which has now died? I’ve taken my own early morning walks these days with just the same purposes.

Or, even more evocative of where we find ourselves, the disciples, huddled inside their upper room?

In this time of social distancing—enclosed in our own versions of the upper room—I just couldn’t wait to joyously proclaim to you all that the risen Christ can make his way out of tombs and into locked rooms, even to those of us, like Thomas, who are doubting that God’s love is, indeed, powerful enough to survive all the suffering, death, and fear that is around us.

So…here we go!! It’s my turn!!! Give me a post-resurrection story… Great….Emmaus! Perfect!

OK…in this story, we’ve got disappointed, shocked, dejected disciples—That has parallels to where many of us are now….so, check!

We have a long journey…definitely, check!

We have the “can you believe that? And that?” hyper conversation between the two… Welcome to most of my phone calls with friends and family these past many weeks…So, check!

We even have Jesus, coming alongside them, despite that they don’t realize it’s him…yes!! I am convinced Jesus is here with me, despite that I very often cannot recognize him.…so, check!

And….he’s making their hearts burn with the scriptures...I am finding that now, more than ever, if I can grab a moment to slowly read them…. the scriptures are alive for me…the laments of the Psalms…the crazy family dynamics of the Old Testament…the miracles and healings of the Gospels….So, check, check, check!

OK…the story has definite parallels to our own, current, realtime experiences…It’s getting exciting….we’re gearing up for the liberating Good News….so, stay with me! Jesus is on the road with them…their hearts are burning…they invite him to stay with them….and then…

… noooo….they break bread together, and it is in receiving the bread that they finally realize it is Jesus who has been with them this whole time….

Seriously?

The one thing we cannot do right now is actually receive the real, physical bread, and that’s the liberating pinnacle of this story? The Good News on this particular Sunday morning in the midst of COVID-19 when we cannot take Eucharist is that if all else fails we can always find Jesus in the bread?

Come on!....I’ve been robbed!

So, what now? When many of us are, indeed, cycling through moments of feeling that all else has failed…where’s the Good News for us this morning, at the end of a long week of our own Emmaus-like journey, without the bread waiting for us?

I have let this scripture deep into my mind and heart and imagination this week…I listened to it proclaimed to me in my audiobible…I read through it slowly and contemplatively every morning…I sat with artwork representing it….and no matter how much time I spent with it, and in it, I couldn’t get to recognizing Jesus…I made the 7 mile journey, my physical and spiritual hunger growing with each passing mile….to Emmaus…I pulled up my chair at the table…but that is where I stayed…in all likelihood in the company of Jesus, but still not able to recognize him.

It is Eastertide, and we are promised that resurrection has happened, IS happening…and occasionally, we might internalize the idea that if we can’t yet see it or the risen Christ, then either our faith is lacking, or we are just too negative.

However, Eastertide, in the power of its scripture stories, hymnody, bright paper butterflies, and brilliant white vestments, flowers, and altar hangings, is meant to *buttress our* ***hope*** in resurrection, not *demand* that we see it around us…

It’s OK, even in Eastertide, that many of us can’t quite recognize Jesus alongside us….It’s OK that we are still grieving and shocked and confused, like the disciples…Jesus stays with them on their long journey despite that for miles and miles, they don’t realize who he is.

This Eastertide, especially, staying on the journey, or around the table is enough. Staying with one another is enough. Staying with the scriptures is enough.

Your Vestry met earlier this week, and one of the questions they considered was whether or not it feels right to be live-streaming a Eucharistic service when none of you can receive the bread and wine, rather than exploring the wealth of non-Eucharistic services our tradition resources us with in our prayer book. The overwhelming reaction was that our service, even though we cannot gather together physically around this rail and receive the actual bread, does feel right in this moment…After the long journeys of our weeks, coming to virtually rest around this table, Sunday morning after Sunday morning, and staying together in that moment just *before* the bread is put into our hands, *before* we realize Jesus is, indeed, among us, *is* holy and healing. It is nourishing our courage, stamina, resilience, and…most importantly, our hope…and hope does not disappoint, as own Patron Saint, Paul, promises.

We don’t yet have the sacrament—the bread…the wine--but these weeks of journey alongside one another, coming each week to virtually rest at the table together, has built in many of us that burning hope for the future moment of sacrament…that burning hope for the moment of seeing Jesus…that burning hope for the moment of joy and awe and wonder that, no matter how fleeting, has the immense power to fulfill our faith—to renew our knowledge that our relationship with a God who loves and heals and resurrects *is* real.

That burning hope, as it continues to build week after week, is sustenance, itself…and, indeed, it will not disappoint.

As I was feeling my way through this sermon, I turned to one of my favorite poets—Jan Richardson. She writes poetry exclusively in the form of blessings…and she, too, did not disappoint. So, I end this morning with a blessing she’s written, entitled, “Stay.” May we all virtually gather around this table in just a few moments, and, though we cannot receive the bread, stay together, in resurrection hope.

**Stay**, a blessing by Jan Richardson

I know how your mind  
rushes ahead  
trying to fathom  
what could follow this.  
What will you do,  
where will you go,  
how will you live?

You will want  
to outrun the grief.  
You will want  
to keep turning toward  
the horizon,  
watching for what was lost  
to come back,  
to return to you  
and never leave again.

For now  
hear me when I say  
all you need to do  
is to still yourself  
is to turn toward one another  
is to stay.

Wait  
and see what comes  
to fill  
the gaping hole  
in your chest.  
Wait with your hands open  
to receive what could never come  
except to what is empty  
and hollow.

You cannot know it now,  
cannot even imagine  
what lies ahead,  
but I tell you  
the day is coming  
when breath will  
fill your lungs  
as it never has before  
and with your own ears  
you will hear words  
coming to you new  
and startling.  
You will dream dreams  
and you will see the world  
ablaze with blessing.

Wait for it.  
Still yourself.  
Stay.

AMEN.