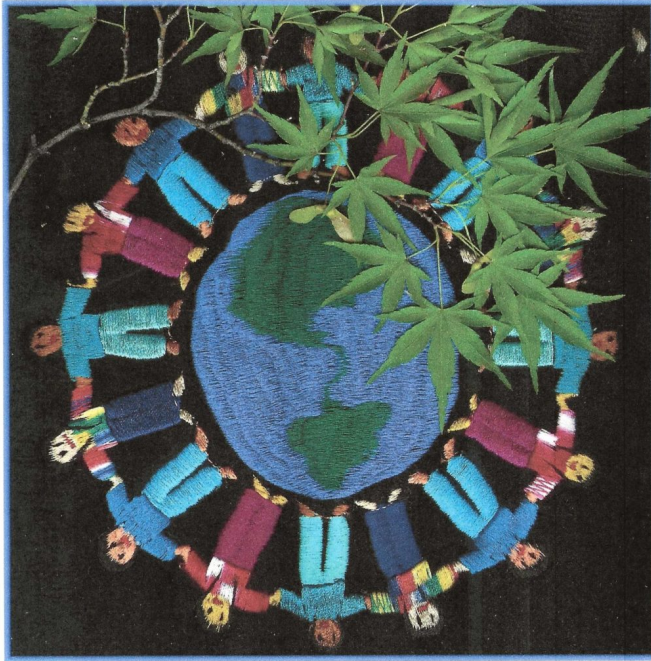


“Christ is Risen, Indeed. Alleluia” by Deborah Sokolove



The 2nd Sunday of Easter

April 16, 2023

Christ is Risen!

Yes, it is still Easter. In fact, it will be Easter all the way to the end of May. During this extended season of celebration, the scriptures the lectionary offers us tell several different resurrection stories and recount how the disciples struggled to understand the signs and visions that came to some of them and not to others. We will read of the rumors of Jesus being seen on the way to Emmaus and on a beach at the Sea of Galilee. We will hear the mysterious sayings of Jesus about being a good shepherd, about the many dwelling places in his divine parent's home, about vines and branches and being one in Christ and one with one another, and about the Divine Comforter who would be with us always. In this long, celebratory season of Easter, we are invited to travel

along with the disciples, sharing their wonder and confusion as they individually and collectively came to terms with the death of the individual they knew as Jesus of Nazareth and his resurrection as the Cosmic Christ, who walks through walls, appears and disappears at will, is only sometimes recognizable to his closest companions, and is still— somehow, mysteriously—both fully human and fully divine.

In today's Gospel reading we are still near the beginning of that transformation in the consciousness of the disciples. Today, the resurrected Jesus appears to his closest friends, who are once again gathered in an upper room, with all the doors locked to keep out anyone who might be looking for them with malicious intent. This time Thomas, who hadn't been with them the week before, has joined them after refusing to believe their stories about Jesus appearing among them the last time they were all together.

Centuries of Christians have been encouraged to make fun of "Doubting Thomas," the one who had to see the risen Christ for himself in order to believe that Christ had risen. Couldn't he have trusted his friends, the other disciples with whom he had followed Jesus for three intense, exciting, and puzzling years? But, no, Thomas says that he won't believe in resurrection until he sees and even touches the marks of the nails and the wounds in the body of whatever it is that the others claim to have experienced. When the risen Christ finally appears and invites him to do exactly that, Thomas recoils, crying out "O my God!" Even Jesus sounds a bit exasperated when he replies, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."

Like Thomas, most of us take a whole lot of convincing in order to believe that Jesus literally rose from the dead. That

is why I find it so helpful to think of resurrection, as Marjory suggested last week, not as once-and-for-all event that happened to Jesus long ago, but as an ongoing, recurring reality for us and for all of God's created universe. In her Easter Sunday blog posting "This is Not the End" on *Still Speaking*, the United Church of Christ's daily devotional, Molly Baskette explores the same possibility, writing,

Mark ended his masterpiece of a Gospel on a cliffhanger: a resurrection with question marks. Luke, Matthew and John, writing later, embellished the story, adding multiple appearances and new miracles by the risen Jesus. Maybe they had better intel than Mark. Maybe they created fiction for a people craving hope. Or maybe they had a lived experience of a Christ who kept showing up, shaping and saving their lives. A double-thousand years later, we pick up these four stories and find our own resurrections in them, every year. The original Easter story has still never ended. It goes on, in endless song, above earth's lamentations.

Baskette reminds me that while not everything will turn out the way that I want it to, and, indeed, many things that I cherish will come to an end, after every disappointment, disaster, or death, "there will be new beginnings—some of them visible, tellable; others beyond the veil of earthly death." Baskette continues,

Easter is not a history lesson with a tidy ending, but an invitation to look past death in all its disguises. After every death, new things get born. You may sometimes have a year of Good Fridays, but Easter will always arrive. It is as inevitable as sunrise after the long night.
<https://www.ucc.org/daily-devotional/this-is-not-the-end/>:

In the ongoing cascade of political, ecological, and personal disasters that all of us have been involved in, it certainly does seem like we've been having not one, but several consecutive years of Good Fridays. Even though the liturgy

tells us that Christ is risen, nothing much seems to have changed for the better when we read the newspaper or think of friends who are suffering with physical, mental, or economic challenges. It is all too easy to remain locked in our upper rooms, lamenting all that we have lost to covid, to racism, to gun violence, to fake news, and all the other ills that plague our society, our nation, our very existence. In the incessant drumbeat of the bad news of death and destruction of all that we value, it is easy to forget that there is also good news lurking around every corner, that Christ is always risen, if only we open our eyes and believe.

So, today I'd like to bring you some good news. It won't cure covid, it won't fix racism, and it surely won't make the climate change reverse course. But it may bring you a smile or two, or even give you some hope that good, new things are still being born, that resurrection is real even in turbulent times.

As many of you know, I serve as the liaison between Wesley Theological Seminary here in DC and Wesley House, a Methodist house of studies in Cambridge, England, for a Doctor of Ministry program offered jointly by these two institutions. While I somewhat jokingly say that my job is to translate between the English and American assumptions about education, one of my most important tasks is to be present to the students, to listen to their triumphs and their complaints, and do what I can to smooth out the inevitable problems that arise for students in an intense study-abroad program that challenges their thinking and their faith while living in community with one another in an unfamiliar culture.

There is a deep irony in the fact that even after my so-called retirement in 2019, I continue to work part-time in an institution devoted to the training of clergy while belonging to Seekers, where we ordain all Stewards to our work in the world and authority is held at the point of one's gifts and calling rather than as an administrative matter. What is also

true, however, is that is precisely our radical understanding of the priesthood of all believers that helps me be present to the trials and challenges of these mid-career ministers who are looking for new ways to understand their vocation, to serve in an unofficial way as their chaplain until they graduate from the program.

All of the students in this program already have at least one advanced degree in theology and have been in ministry (somewhat loosely defined) for at least three years. While most are ordained clergy and serve as pastors in one or another denomination, others work in extension ministries of various kinds or in non-profits. Unlike most doctoral-level programs, which at least promise increased professional opportunities and potentially higher pay, the Doctor of Ministry degree rarely qualifies anyone for a promotion or even a raise. Students sign up because they are burnt out and in desperate need for a renewed vision for how to live out God's call on their lives. They arrive exhausted, looking for new ideas, renewed faith, and companionship for the journey.

The group that started their studies this March arrived not only burnt out, but angry and upset. For reasons beyond anyone's control, their planned two-year course of study beyond this first, two-week session, had been cancelled, and no concrete plan for the future had yet been offered. They were excited about their courses, which were *Reclaiming the Hebrew Bible's Prophetic Tradition in Turbulent Times* and *Christian Ethics and Climate Change*, but dismayed about what they felt was somewhat cavalier treatment by the seminary. On the second day we were in Cambridge, I spent a long hour listening to their dashed hopes, at the unfairness of what had happened, and their frustration at having no agency in making plans for the future of their cohort. Over the next few days, and countless emails between me and the director of the program, many of the complaints were addressed, and they gradually became willing to accept the new plan that was

emerging from the chaos. Mostly, I think, they were just grateful that someone in authority had listened to their complaints.

Over dinner and during breaks over the next several days, the students shared their stories with me and with one another. One, who is considerably older than all of the others, told of being the first woman in an all-male field in her younger days, and of the difficulties of running a small non-profit ethically and responsibly. While she originally came to seminary thinking she was called to the pastorate, she realized that her true calling is to help her denomination rewrite its materials in inclusive language, so that other women and girls will be able to find themselves represented both in liturgy and in other areas of life. Her doctoral studies will help her do that.

The other students in this group are either senior or associate pastors at, for the most part, middle-sized congregations in small towns. While each of their congregations, and thus their stories, differed in detail, each of them spoke in equal parts sorrow and anger about the impossibilities of their jobs. Most of them entered seminary with deep faith and a profound sense of being called to minister to others, to pour out their lives on behalf of those who suffer, to preach and teach and celebrate the sacraments for the sake of the people of God. What happened to them when they were assigned to a church is that they came to feel like cogs in machine, spending most of their time in mandatory committee meetings, worrying about how to pay for repairs to the roof or the boiler, and fending off demands from their denominations to increase the number of bodies in the pews when the only way to do that in those shrinking small towns would be to poach from other, equally desperate, congregations. Generally more progressive than their congregations, they are afraid to preach prophetically, lest they lose half their membership or even their jobs. They are

on call 24 hours a day, constantly scrutinized about their behavior and that of their families, and never have enough time to find the inner silence that they know that they need in order to continue to function as pastor as well as preacher and teacher. The yearning to care for the souls of their flock that had brought most of them to seminary is being ground out of them day by day by the contradictory demands of what is, after all, a job that just barely pays the bills.

In sharing their stories, this small group of strangers became like siblings in a loving, healthy family, and I started to feel like their dorm mother. As they got to know one another's quirks and passions, they teased one another constantly but never cruelly, frequently collapsing with laughter and the relief of finding kindred souls with whom they could speak freely. During class sessions, they cheered one another on, competed in asking the teachers hard questions, and offered resources and ideas for each other's projects and ministries.

By our last day in Cambridge, they loved one another so well that some of them changed their travel plans so that everyone could have one last dinner together before they scattered back to their homes.

On Palm Sunday, when I finally checked my email after a long flight home, I found a message from one of them, which read in part,

I am forever changed by the experience we shared at Cambridge...As I discover more and more, amazing advocates ... who have demonstrated powerful courage, the smaller and more humble I feel for my "unknowing." I continue to read ... and am in awe of your collective contributions to the conversation and commitment of removing barriers to women and girls to see, hear, and experience God in unconstrained ways. [The course on the Climate Crisis] changed my life forever. I am eager to take the next steps to being part of the global solution...

Another one posted on social media,

This was hands down one of the greatest experiences of my life. Getting to explore Cambridge, study, learn, and work with some truly amazing and inspiring people. ... I can't wait for the next adventure this summer.

I am well aware that I am telling you a story of privilege, of people who can take time out of their ordinary lives to travel to another country, to eat delicious catered meals and sleep in comfortable rooms, all in order to study in a beautiful, historic place, and still have the nerve to complain that things are not going the way that they expected. I am well aware of the irony that a bunch of people flew across the Atlantic Ocean in order to learn about how to talk to their congregations about the climate crisis and invite them into the call of the Hebrew prophets to justice for widows, orphans, outcasts, and strangers. I am well aware of my own privilege as I get to live and work and pray with brilliant scholars and teachers and leaders of the church, learning from them alongside equally brilliant students who already are leaders in their own right.

Privilege, however, does not protect people against feeling sorrow and pain. In the two weeks that we were together in Cambridge, I was privileged to help the students turn away from their grief and anger and loss, and embrace a new reality that is still more fluid than the program they had signed up for with so much excitement. There, in the beautiful, light-filled upper room where classes are held at Wesley House, one by one they forgave cancelled courses, poor communication, and unfulfilled dreams. As I watched and listened, I had no doubt that the Risen Christ was among us, inviting us all into new life for the healing of the world.

Blessed are ALL who believe.

Christ is risen, indeed. Alleluia. Amen.