

"Already in Progress" by Deborah Sokolove

A Sermon for Seekers Church

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The Third Sunday of Easter

by Deborah Sokolove

Already in Progress

One of the benefits of working at a place where preachers are trained is that I often get to hear a sermon in chapel on Tuesday that wrestles with the same text that that we are looking at for Sunday. This week, I was in luck, as the preacher noted that in the Gospel reading for today, as is often the case when we follow the lectionary, we are dropped into a story that is already in progress. Our lives, she said, are often like that. For her, and for the many Master of Divinity students who, like her, are about to graduate and move into full-time ministry, the first thing they will have to do as a new pastor in an established congregation is to try and figure out what is going on. They will have to listen hard, to pay attention to the histories and dreams of those who have been there a long time, before they can understand how they will fit into the ongoing story of that community and help to move it forward.

Unlike the majority of Wesley graduates, most of us are not about to jump into a brand new situation in our lives. However, all of us have been faced with it at one time or another. We are born into a family that already has a history.

We move to a new town in the middle of the school year and have to find our way into a social structure that has already been established. We start a new job and do not know whom we can rely on as we feel our way into the office routine; we worship at a new church and do not know how to get beyond the first, polite "hello." If we stick around past that hello, we hear mysterious snatches of conversation about issues and concerns that we do not understand; inscrutable references to events that happened a long, long time ago; and enigmatic quotations from documents that we have never read. Eventually, we gather the gist of the story, but it may take a long time before we really understand the deeper meanings and nuances, even if someone takes the time to try to help us make sense of things.

As the student pastor noted, hearing the Bible read in church is often a lot like that. As we just heard, today's Gospel text begins, "While they were talking about this, Jesus himself stood among them and said to them, "Peace be with you."

While they were talking about this? While **who** were talking? And, talking about **what**? Unless you know your chapters and verses better than I do, the beginning of today's reading can be confusing. We are simply dropped into the middle of a story that begins with... wait! Where does it begin? I was about to say, it begins with the Resurrection, but then, no, it begins with the Crucifixion. No, it begins on Maundy Thursday, when Jesus washed the disciples' feet. But, no, it begins on Palm Sunday, when Jesus entered Jerusalem to cheers and hosannas. Or, no, I think it begins when his cousin John baptizes Jesus, and the Holy Spirit descends like a dove. Or maybe it begins at Christmas, with the birth of Jesus. Wait, no, it begins with Gabriel telling Mary that she will have a child. But that cannot be right; the story starts earlier than that. Maybe it begins with the prophets, speaking truth to power and calling

the people to a new vision, when Jerusalem will be a shining city on the hill, and justice for all the oppressed will roll down like flowing streams. Or maybe it begins with Moses, leading the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt. Or with Abraham, leaving Ur of the Chaldees, following God's call. Or maybe we just have to start telling the story all the way back to the beginning of creation.

Or, maybe not. After all, most of us have been following along as Jesus gathered his disciples, teaching and healing wherever he went. We have spent the night with him in the garden of Gethsemane, mourned with the disciples as he died on the cross, and rejoiced with them on Easter morning.

Oh. No, wait, that is not quite how the story goes. As we have been hearing for the last couple of Sundays, on the first day of Christ's resurrection the disciples were more confused than joyful, more frightened than celebratory. Just last week, we read in John's version of the story that they were hiding out in a locked, upstairs room, until Jesus appeared, showed them the wounds in his hands and feet, and breathed the Holy Spirit into them. I guess they went out after that, because the text says "A week later his disciples were again in the house," but now Thomas was with them. Then Thomas insisted on not only seeing but touching the wounds for himself in order to believe the story that the other disciples had told him about the risen Christ.

Today, instead of following along in good order with John's narrative, we jump to Luke's version of the story, already in progress. He remembers it a little differently than John does, but there are enough similarities that we know we are in the same general area. Where John mentions only Mary Magdalene,

Luke's resurrection narrative begins with several women going to the tomb with spices for anointing the body of Jesus. Instead of the body, they see two angels, who tell them that Christ is risen. As in John's recollection, Luke's seems to have a lot of breathless running back and forth. According to Luke, when the women run back to tell the other disciples, nobody believes them. Peter goes to check things out, but he does not see any angels. He just sees an empty shroud, and goes away wondering what is going on.

The chapter continues with two very sad people, Cleopas and someone else whose name we are not told, walking towards Emmaus, a town about seven miles from Jerusalem. A stranger joins them, talks to them about the scriptures, and they invite him to share a meal with them. As he blesses the bread, they suddenly realize that this stranger is Jesus. Of course, they had heard the women's story about the empty tomb and the angels, but they had not really believed it. Now, just as they begin to understand, Jesus disappears. Then they run all the way back to Jerusalem to tell their friends what has happened to them.

It is here that today's reading picks up. Some of the disciples (it does not really say which ones) are together (it is not clear where – maybe it is that locked, upstairs room that John mentions), trying to understand what Cleopas and his companion were telling them, when Jesus suddenly appears. They are startled and terrified, even though they had heard the stories of first the women, and now the two travelers. To calm their fears and to prove that he is not a ghost, he shows them the wounds of crucifixion in his hands and feet, and offers to let them touch him. Even then, they are torn between disbelief and joy, so he says, "Say, do you have anything to eat?" This is even funnier than I thought it was when Doug pointed out

the joke in his [Easter sermon](#), because Jesus had just blessed the meal in Emmaus, but disappeared without eating anything. So maybe he was hungry, or maybe he was just giving them a little time to let the unbelievable truth sink in. In any case, Jesus takes the time to eat some broiled fish, and then tells them that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning immediately.

Like the disciples, we often do not believe good news when we hear it, especially when it seems too good to be true. Our rational, questioning minds want hard evidence. Our vulnerable, fearful emotions do not want to take a chance on trusting someone else's report. Our ego-driven selves think that our explanations and ideas are more realistic than God's is.

The stories of the post-crucifixion appearances of Jesus are stories not only of his resurrection, but also of his ongoing call to the disciples. Who else, after all, was going to proclaim the good news, which in this passage he names as "repentance and forgiveness of sins," if not the very people to whom he was speaking? Those few, frightened, dubious disciples, huddled in that upper room, were called by God to spread the good news that they had heard and witnessed. So are we.

The notion of call is a fundamental organizing principle for Seekers, as it is for the other congregations that understand themselves in the tradition of Church of the Saviour. Not only does the church as a whole have a call, outlining its commitment to communal worship and personal Christian servanthood; but each mission group also has its call, a statement of its purpose and its members' understanding of how

that purpose relates to the purposes of God. Individual Seekers are encouraged to join mission groups or undertake certain tasks within the congregation out of their own, personal sense of call, as well as to continually listen for and act on God's call in every other portion of their lives.

How do we know when something is call, or when it is just something we want to do? One definition of call that I have heard is that it is the place where our greatest joy meets the world's deep need. This is not to say that what we do out of call is always fun or easy – indeed, often it is difficult, dangerous, tedious, and heartbreaking, as well as keeping us from other things we would rather be doing. Rather, we feel a profound rightness, an inner knowledge that our task is blessed by God and that we bear the good news to others in our doing of it.

Another aspect of call is its communal nature. A true call is affirmed by others. This, of course, is a little tricky. After all, many of the prophets in the Bible were misunderstood, rejected and decidedly unpopular. Jesus, as we know all too well, was crucified. However, we would not know the stories of the prophets or of Jesus if the community of faith had not affirmed their calls. While following call is not generally considered a good way to win a popularity contest, one of the ways that we test whether we have heard God's call is if other persons of faith can hear it, too. When others who are listening deeply do not affirm our sense of call, we may come to believe that the voice we have heard is not the voice of God.

All through Lent, and even before, many of you heard my prayers about unshakable sorrow, about the despair that had

taken hold of me and would not let me go. Sunday after Sunday, I wept through the service, sinking ever deeper into darkness and depression. Despite the heartfelt assurances of love and concern from many, I heard only the criticisms of a few, the third-hand reports that some un-named person or persons disapproved of something I did, said, or failed to do or say. At the depth of my pain, I began to think that my sense of call to liturgical leadership and teaching within this community was no longer affirmed, and that it would be better for me to join some church where I could just show up, sit in the back row, pray quietly, and be ministered to by people who were paid to do just that. Living deep within my own wounds, telling myself a story of pain and loss, I was like the disciples, hiding in that locked, upper room. I was unable to believe that this story would turn out well.

What I did believe, and continue to believe, is that call is integral to my sense of myself as a person and as a follower of Jesus. In fact, long before I came to Seekers, long before I became a Christian, I knew that I was called to teach. It seems odd to me now that I would have used that language, because "call" is not part of most people's everyday vocabulary. However, it is a word that came to me, one day as I was standing in front of a classroom of twenty squirmy, noisy primary school children, trying to figure out what I could do to keep them reasonably quiet and happy for the next hour.

At the time, I was a divorced mother in my early thirties, trying to raise three kids in a complicated shared custody arrangement and simultaneously get the college education I had rejected at the end of high school. My two younger children attended an alternative school with progressive ideas drawn from the principles of A. S. Neill's Summerhill. While more structured than Neill's utopian vision, it was nonetheless a place where the youngest students had an equal vote with

teachers and parents on matters of discipline and school governance, and the children followed their own interests and passions in learning rather than teachers' top-down lesson plans.

Every day started with "morning meeting," a time for each learning group to make plans for the day, and to talk about any problems left over from the day before. As I recall, everyone sat on a large carpet on the floor, and we began with a period of communal silence. Then, with a different child as moderator each day, the group as a whole made decisions about things like what was appropriate behavior; what would happen when someone broke the rules; or the nature of a big, group project to which everyone would contribute according to their talents and abilities. I remember one project that involved making painted clay pinch pots, bow and arrows made of sticks and vines, and a number of life-size tepees, as a way of studying Native American culture. Eventually, there was an elaborate, colorful encampment staked out over a large portion of the playground, and many kids running around whooping and hollering.

While all this was going on, other children marched to different, internal drummers. My daughter, for instance, was interested in math, and – with the encouragement and a few pointers from one of the teachers – worked through an entire year's problems in a couple of months. Other children read and wrote stories and plays; investigated the behavior of seahorses; or cultivated vegetables and flowers in the school garden by themselves or in small groups. In this inclusive, invitational social environment, even the youngest kids were outspoken and articulate, knowing that their ideas would be taken seriously. Now that I think about it, this kind of organic decision-making was a lot like Seekers.

Another way that the school resembled Seekers was that it took

a lot of commitment from every participant to make it all work. As you can imagine, it took a lot of parents and teachers to facilitate the varied learning interests and styles of all the kids. This is how I came to be standing in front of that group of little kids. Like most of the parents, I volunteered one morning every week to help. When they found out that I was studying art at the university, I was asked to offer an art class. It was not a required class – I do not think anything was required, actually, except that the students show up every day. Rather, this ad hoc art class was one of several learning activities that the children could choose among, if they did not have some strong idea of their own about what to do. So there I was, a second-year college student with no background in teaching, trying to figure out what I could possibly teach about art to a bunch of little kids.

In what seems now to have been a divine inspiration, I had the kids sit in a circle, each one facing the back of the other's head, and asked them to follow each hair with their eyes and to move their pencils on the paper as if attached to the movement of their eyes. Suddenly, the room fell silent, and an air of intense concentration filled the air. After some amount of timeless time, all the students seemed to be ready to put down their pencils at once. And when we pinned their drawings up on the wall, we could easily tell who was who by the characteristic whorls and tufts of hair, long or short or in between, caught up in ponytails or braids or left to fall naturally however it wanted, in every degree of stick straight to tightly wound curls. It did not matter, that day, if a kid had been labeled as "artistically gifted" or if another had never drawn anything but a house with a crooked chimney. These did not look l

ike any "children's drawings" I had ever seen. Everyone had learned to see in a new way, and everyone was justifiably

proud of what he or she had done. I knew, in that moment, that I had a gift and a calling, not just to teach, but also to help people find a way to see clearly, and to express the truth they had seen in their own, true voice. More than twenty years later, I still find a quiet, yet ecstatic joy in seeing that look of wonder on the face of someone who has just understood something in a new way, and I know that this is my true calling.

When I became a Christian and began to attend church regularly, I found a similar sense of quiet, ecstatic joy in worshipping God with others every Sunday. Even when the sermon was boring or the hymns were full of sexist language, patterns of liturgy spoke to my heart in a deep and mysterious way. These patterns helped me to know God's presence in ways that I found difficult or impossible in private prayer. When I came to Seekers, with its commitment to inclusive language, creative worship, shared leadership and language of call, I felt that I had come home.

Eventually, supported by the prayers and affirmation of many of you, I went to seminary and then on to doctoral work, trying to understand how Christian patterns of prayer and devotion came to be the way they are and how to help others find the same profound meaning and satisfaction in communal worship that I did. It seemed a natural part of my sense of call to this work that I join [Celebration Circle](#), which became a place to test my ideas against the practical realities of a living community. However, even though I had previously been in two other mission groups, I did not understand how Celebration Circle worked. I had come into the middle of a story that had been going on for a long, long time.

Because I neither understood nor believed the deep, collective wisdom of the group, at first I did not respect the collaborative process that was, and continues to be, integral to its call. I know that I made many blunders, the details of which – except for the feeling of embarrassment – have gratefully faded from my memory. I wanted our work to be more efficient, the writing to be more unified, the tasks to be divided out according to natural ability. Trained as an academic, where individual accomplishment is prized above all, my pride made it difficult to submit my carefully written liturgical efforts to the discipline of group editing. I was unwilling to believe the stories of grace that others told me. I had to see and touch the truth for myself. Only after many seasons of conversation about the intersection of scripture, theology, and communal life, many cycles of writing and editing liturgy together and then encountering it anew in the midst of worship, did I begin to understand that collaborative creation is not simply a strategy, but a revelation of Christ, living in us and among us.

Therefore, all this past winter, as I lived in doubt that my call to this work was affirmed, I felt that I had descended into hell. Everything that I believed about myself, my professional life and my life at Seekers, was called into question. If I could not trust that I have been called by God to proclaim the good news through teaching and worship, then what or whom could I trust?

Nevertheless, as Lent ended, I began to remember that doubt and darkness is a part of the life of faith. The mystics write of the dark night of the soul, of the silence of God, of the empty, dry places in which there is no consolation. In the days following the crucifixion of Jesus, the disciples were afraid, unable to believe the astonishing stories that they

heard from others, the good news that Christ is risen. Like them, I was so immersed in my own grief that I couldn't hear the stories that some of you were telling about the living presence of Christ, the stories of redemption and resurrection already in progress elsewhere in the world.

I cannot tell you exactly when my eyes were opened, when my ears began to hear again, or when or how I began again to know that I had not misheard God's call to me all along. I know that as I sat in the long darkness of the Easter Vigil, hearing the story that begins with the beginning of creation, that God whispered to me once again, and I was able to greet the dawn and proclaim the Risen Christ with profound, ecstatic joy.

Today, I know that my story, as yours, like Seekers', started a long time ago and it will take unexpected turns before it is over. I know that we come into the middle of one another's stories when we meet, and that often we do not understand what is going on or why other people behave the way they do or say the things they say. I know that it takes time to listen hard, to pay attention to the histories and dreams of those who have been around for a long time and of those who have just arrived, before we can understand how we fit into one another's stories, each of which has already been in progress since the beginning of creation. Moreover, I want to listen with you, to pay attention to the signs of what is coming next while respecting the truth that each of us has already seen.

In the meetings of Celebration Circle, we often struggle to find the right word, the right phrase, the right image that embodies the sense of a season. We disagree, we argue for our own positions, we wonder if we will ever be ready for the

following Sunday. Then, suddenly, Jesus is there, standing among us, saying "Peace be with you" and we laugh as we recognize God's blessing in our midst. Then I know again with certainty that I am called to spread the good news of repentance and forgiveness of sins through this work of worshipping God with all of you.