

“Speaking of Values” by Marjory Bankson



Paper doves symbolizing peace hang from the ceiling under a mural at the Church of the Most Holy Apostles Peter and Paul in Lviv, Ukraine. Credit: SOPA Images Limited/Alamy Live News

Easter Sunday

April 17, 2022

As we turn to the gospel text assigned for this morning (Luke 24:1-12), we see that there is NO resurrection appearance of Jesus here. (AND of course no Easter eggs, Easter bunnies or Easter bonnets either.) In fact, Luke’s gospel seems, on the surface, pretty bleak. Just an empty tomb and some frightened women.

Can you imagine what it was really like for those Galilean women, picking their way through a stoney graveyard, barely able to see in the early morning light and fearful for their lives? And what they found was a gaping hole where the heavy

stone had been rolled away. Nothing more.

But then two men in dazzling clothes DO suddenly appear – scaring them out of their wits. Their dazzling clothes provide a clue – these are angelic messengers. “Why do you seek the living among the dead?” they ask. “He is not here, but has risen.” And then their instructions: “Remember... Remember...”

The women DID remember what Jesus said about being killed, along with the promise of some mysterious risen form, and so they ran back to tell the disciples (who are apparently locked away in fear or despair), but Luke tells us that they considered the women’s account just “an idle tale.” The fact that the women ran back to tell the disciples what they had found suggests that they believed that Jesus could somehow be with them again in a new form – that what they remembered now made more sense to them. For them, Christ had risen!

This past week, in our *Sophia Speaks* class, we actually had a similar experience. I asked people to think of a dangerous or challenging situation which “opened up” because of an unexpected helper. And, it turns out, everyone had a story to tell. Nobody laughed. Several people named it “angelic,” and nobody considered it an “idle tale.” What that suggests to me is that Christ or the Holy Spirit, is alive and still active among us. It’s why we have an open pulpit – to bear witness to this spiritual presence, here and now. We too can affirm Christ is risen indeed!

Luke has mentioned this group of Galilean women before. In Luke 8, verses 1-2, he tells us that this group traveled with the disciples and supported them “out of their resources.” In other words, they were women who were both independent and generous, able to choose an itinerant life, and willing to share what they had.

Mary Magdalene, who is mentioned first whenever this group is identified, seems to be their leader. Luke says she had been healed of seven demons. She is NOT identified as a sinful woman, a former prostitute, or the woman with an alabaster jar of precious ointment. And she is NOT Mary of Bethany, who anointed Jesus before he entered Jerusalem for the last time.

What we do know is that Mary Magdalene was healed, was a leader among the closest circle around Jesus, and that her commitment and generosity supported their ministry. With regard to her healing, some scholars point out that seven is the number signifying wholeness or completeness. Maybe she had simply found her center, her wholeness, her "call" in Jesus' presence, and her leadership flowed from that.

We catch sight of these Galilean women again during the crucifixion, about the time that Peter is busy denying that he ever knew Jesus and the other disciples are nowhere to be found. In Luke 23:49, Mary Magdalene and the other women are clearly visible in public near the cross. Although they are not able to stop the terrible events that they see, they are willing to risk their lives in order to bear witness to what is happening – something we are seeing on our screens today as survivors bear witness to atrocities in Ukraine.

And when Joseph of Arimathea asked Pilate for the body of Jesus, Luke notes in 23:55, that Mary and the other women followed and saw where Jesus was buried so they would know their way in the darkness. They seem determined to find his battered body, now dead for three days, to give it the tender anointing with oil and spices that they would have given to any loved one at home. Let's remember that Mary and the other Galilean women were a long way from Galilee and in hostile territory when they followed Jesus to Jerusalem on his final journey. But together, they held deep values that gave them courage to act in the face of grave danger.

As I worked with this story in my morning meditation for the

past couple of weeks, I kept noticing how this group of women must have encouraged each other— must have prayed together and foraged for food as they traveled – how they continued to care for the disciples, who seem to be scattered and scared, going to sleep when Jesus needed them to stay awake, and generally acting like they had forgotten or denied the most important parts of Jesus' ministry.

It's interesting to me that Luke recorded the male disciple's dysfunction, and gave us this courageous record of Mary and her group. I pondered the deep values that must have held this group of Galilean women together – and the deep values that hold this community of Seekers together. At the risk of overlooking values that you think are essential, I'm going to let the text suggest three dynamic pairs of core values that I believe also characterize Seekers. In light of the Servant Leadership Working Group's suggested changes, I think we need to look at our deeper values so we don't inadvertently eliminate healthy tissue in this body of Christ.

The first pair of core values is commitment and call.

We do not need to know the details of Mary Magdalene's healing in order to understand that she had left whatever gave her status and wealth because, with Jesus, she experienced new life! Her commitment was simply a response to that call.

When I first read Elizabeth O'Connor's book, *Call to Commitment*, about the early days of this church, I was excited – but not ready for the demands of real commitment. Peter and I were living in Springfield, Virginia then, and we heard about Church of the Saviour from Lil Wilson, who was in a Potter's House mission group and, with her husband, was also in a small group with us at a Presbyterian Church in Springfield. We admired Church of the Saviour from afar but didn't even visit.

But the next time that call came, we were ready to explore

what a committed community might be. Most of you have heard this story before, so I'll keep it short. The first Sunday that we attended Seekers, Fred Taylor and Sonya Dyer blessed the elements on the communion table together and I cried through the whole service. It was 1976 and I had never seen a woman preside at worship! I didn't know how hungry I was to SEE equality in action and to FEEL truly welcome at the table. For me, their equality and shared leadership was a sign of holy ground, and one of the angry demons in my psychic basement was healed that day.

That call was something different, deeper than just a desire to belong. For me, it was a readiness for attention to my own inward and outward journey as well as binding myself to others in a different way. It was something like knowing Peter was the right person to marry. Making the effort to drive downtown for Seekers meant that we were both ready for something more challenging, something that would take us deeper into a spiritual realm that seemed more alive, more connected, and a little scary. I needed the encouragement of others who were farther along this path and valued the span of ages here at Seekers.

I wasn't at all clear that I would want to be a Steward some day, but I did know that the values underneath what I was seeing there at the communion table were values that mattered to me: honesty, respect, vulnerability, creativity and competence – with no flaunting of wealth, position or credentials. I was tired of church as a place to find new friends, and I was longing for other ways to find meaning and purpose.

Like Mary, my call to Seekers meant leaving behind some of the freedom to pick and choose how I spent my time, but my tears told me that my soul was ready to put down roots here. My first step toward this new call was taking a class in the School, both for the content and for getting to know the informal values of the community. Reassured by the classes, I

decided to try a mission group.

My first mission group was Mission Support, because I really didn't know what my call was. Then I tried the Artists Mission Group, because I was earning my living as a potter in those days. I appreciated annual recommitment because that yearly discernment period invited me to shift around until I finally found my call to "outreach teaching" in Learners & Teachers, where I've been most of the time since then. I believe that offering classes, year in and year out, is an important part of our life at Seekers and that is my call now. Because we have an open pulpit, I think classes in the School are even more important here than they might be in other churches – to lay the groundwork for self-reflection, spiritual growth, and focus on some specific outward mission.

Commitment and call are the first pair of core values suggested by our text for today.

The second pair of core values that I saw among the Galilean women is generosity and engagement.

Luke's cryptic note about Mary Magdalene and the other women supporting the disciples "out of their resources" should be shocking to us. What Jewish woman of that day had resources to share? Was it money? Or contacts? Maybe the protection of Roman citizenship? Whatever those resources were, it is true that women of that time did not generally own property or travel around with an itinerant teacher or provide for others who were not related in some way, but there is nothing in any of the gospels to suggest anything other than gladness and generosity were at play.

What Jesus did offer those women was respect. Welcome. Engagement. Opportunities for growth and spiritual development. Crossing social barriers. Practical experience in learning to listen, love and forgive – and they responded by providing what they could. When the disciples began to argue

about “who is the greatest,” Jesus called them on it, reminding them that in the realm of God, everyone matters and the task is always learning how to love one another. Their “resources” included financial generosity, but included time and energy too.

Generosity and engagement are core values at Seekers too. It’s easy to give what we feel is extra. It’s harder to dig deeper, and give time, energy and money to support people we don’t know well. Doing that out of “oughtness” can lead to resentment and burnout, but generosity grows in an atmosphere of appreciation. When we notice what someone else is doing and name it, we ourselves become conscious of what needs to be done. That’s how we learn as adults. We all thrive when people appreciate our efforts. Hands-on work together invites generosity and appreciation invites a joyful response.

Our consumer culture ridicules sacrificial giving and emphasizes providing for your family. Our faith invites a bigger perspective that goes back to our experience with the risen Christ. That is really the secret at the heart of our mission groups – often it is the common mission that holds us together when our personal likes might take us elsewhere. Commitment and call are thus interwoven with generosity and engagement.

We never had a mortgage on this building because more than 40 people made gifts and loans to pay for the renovation – and by taking care of many things with our own labor, we were able to pay off those loans AND continue giving to the organizations where we are already giving our time and energy. Even today, hands-on maintenance keeps this building from being the albatross that many church buildings are to small congregations. But it takes time and attention. Sacrificial giving is not a rule here. It’s an invitation to confront the hold that money has in our culture, so generosity and engagement go hand-in-hand.

The third and final pair of core values is courage and accountability.

It took courage for Mary and the other Galilean women to stand there in public during the crucifixion and then to follow those who took Jesus' body to the tomb. Think about it. They were scouting the site in order to come back after Passover to anoint his three-days-dead body with oil and spices. It was not the usual practice of full burial before sundown. I suspect they needed each other's encouragement for that dangerous task. Together, the women were being accountable for the life they shared – accountable to an invisible bond of love.

Courage and accountability may seem like strange values to hold up on Easter morning here at Seekers, but sometimes when I am standing out in front of this building with my hand-made sign for our weekly vigil on behalf of racial and ethnic justice, I remember those indigenous mothers in Chile and Guatemala who stood in silent protest with photographs of their disappeared sons and husbands in the 80s and 90s, steadfast in their commitment to love and justice – even when it seemed futile. In fact, it was their courage that prompted us to organize 17 work-pilgrimages to Guatemala, beginning in 2002.

Courage and accountability are not values that we can embody just because we would like to think of ourselves that way. Courage develops when we take risks to be vulnerable, give up an idealized image of ourselves, and learn to speak our truth and deal with push-back. Self-reflection in our written reports, forgiveness in our common tasks, and the reminder that we are part of God's unfolding story in our Sunday worship are the connective tissues of our life together in this community. Although our culture makes spirituality a private matter, the call here at Seekers starts with intentional commitment to others as the way to practice transformation over time.

We don't know what happened to this group of Galilean women after the revelation that we celebrate on this Easter morning, but fragmentary manuscripts buried in the 4th century as the church became more creed-based and orthodox reveal that Mary Magdalene was a recognized leader among the apostles. I suspect that she needed the other women as much as Ketanji Brown-Jackson needed her faith community to maintain her dignity and composure during the recent Senate hearings. I know that I need the loving accountability that I experience in my mission groups to keep growing and learning and practicing the mystical faith that keeps me here at Seekers.

Before we make major changes in the structures and practices that have sustained us for nearly 50 years, perhaps we can start with the core values suggested by our text this morning:

- commitment and call,
- generosity and personal engagement,
- courage and accountability.

And we can affirm once again the dazzling hope of Easter morning:

Christ is risen!

Christ is risen indeed!

Allelujah!