

“Be Who You Are”

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UCC@The Villages, FL
Easter, April 24th, 2011

Luke 24:1-9; John 20:11-18;

Luke 24:10-34; John 21:1-19;

Luke 24:35-53

“Then they told what had happened on the road, and
how he had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread.”

Luke 24:35

Let us pray... O God,

Help us to know you better and to recognize your handiwork.

Help us to live in such a way that people recognize us by
deeds worthy of our best selves.

Amen

Today is Easter and it has been a year and a day that I have served
as pastor here at The United Church of Christ at the Villages!

And in that time, we have accomplished a lot together –
mainly the completion of this ‘still-new church building’
as our own worship space and spiritual home.

This year has also been the occasion for me to grow spiritually and
theologically as I have been getting to know you as a congregation.

To be ‘Open and Affirming’ is something this church has taken to heart –
though I expect like any other organized group of human beings,
we need to be reminded from time to time
of our higher calling to love one another.

Yet there is something deeper and broader going on here and
that is true for other churches that have embraced
this identity for themselves –
to be a church that believes that God is still speaking
and calling us to truly welcome people
no matter who they are and where they are on life’s journey.

Since joining this church’s pilgrimage of faith,
I have come to believe that to be open and affirming
goes beyond gender and racial politics –
though not to take away from this specific concern of
the gay community for legitimate acceptance.

But in the process of defining a ‘new normal’ for what it means to be human,
we are re-examining what it means to be a ‘Christian’ in our time as well.
It is the Way the church must go.

Willard, p.2

It would seem that to accept and be accepted by one another
despite differences, is what Christianity is all about –
and needs to be about as we proceed into the 21st Century.
But the reality of our religion's history is that Christians can be just as diverse
and narrow-minded as anyone in their view of the world.
This situation is both challenge and invitation to use our imaginations
to explore the way things could be
like for Christians to be more accepting of others –
or at least patient with others, as we would hope they would be of us.

And for us as Christians, we need to begin with
how we understand who Jesus Christ is himself.

Who is Jesus Christ?

The answer could be as different as there are people in this room
and as true for anyone who claims Jesus as 'Lord and Savior',
because it still comes down to a person's experience.

And I think that is a good thing,
because we aren't simply stuck with somebody else's idea about him,
but free to encounter this remarkable being on his terms
and then come to your own conclusions.

But what keeps us from just inventing something out of our imaginations,
to "create God in our own image" as it were?

Well, we do have the Bible stories, our ritual, and historical traditions
to keep us from reinventing the wheel.

But experience is what keeps our faith from becoming a static tableau
and allows our faith in God through Christ to be dynamic
like a theatre-in-the round with audience participation.

With me, you will get a heavy dose of the narrative
to help you recognize the character of God through Christ,
to challenge superstitions you may be carrying around with you,
and to get ideas for how to apply your faith in a world
that desperately needs the creative options
that come from prophetic imagination.

Thank you for letting me be me through my ministry with you here –
my principal obligation will always be to preach the Word
and lead worship on Sunday as well as provide pastoral care.
In the process, I make a point to work in my particular style of creativity
through storytelling and art.

Willard, p.3

To me, this is not about showcasing your talent, but living your faith.
The word 'Israel' means 'those who struggle with God',
and that is what I am doing with my art –
as an example for you to do what you
could do.

When I was a seminarian, I remember a man who came
to Lancaster Theological Seminary and led morning chapel
by performing a dramatic monologue,
telling the story of Jesus Christ.

Now, Lancaster's main building is a beautiful example of architecture
from the 1800s – all red stone and brick.

Santee Chapel itself has an altarpiece of carved wood from Oberammergau
and ornate pewter chandeliers suspended in the nave and
beautiful stain glass windows depicting our Reformation heritage.
It was a wonderful place for imaginative worship.

I don't remember the fellow's name and his performance was...
not quite Broadway, but he got me thinking, 'I could do that.'

On another occasion, I heard Biblical storytelling that
really made an impression on me, when a fellow student chanted
the Book of Revelation.

It was a presentation that lasted several hours
on a dark, and stormy morning in late February
and demonstrated the power and beauty of these stories.

It is a privilege for me to share the Gospel from week to week,
but Holy Week has been an opportunity for you to hear church members
share these stories.

And in today's Gospel lessons, we heard about people
who encountered the Risen Christ and
were transformed from what they were –
to what was possible for who they could become.

Though Mary Magdalene and the other women who found Christ's tomb empty
were ignored at first because they were women –
they became the first apostles of the Good News
like the prophets of old.

Peter was a fisherman who became a shepherd to lead the flock
that Jesus had gathered and they would carry the Good News
to future generations of the Church.

Willard, p.4

There were blind people who became people who could see,
deaf people who then could hear, crippled people who could dance,
possessed people who found freedom from oppression,
people crushed by sin and guilt given a second chance,
and the dead raised to life thanks to Jesus' healing work.

The stories we heard today are about people who were transformed
from their limitations to be who-they-could become.

Jesus' work is about liberating people from lives of conformity and despair
to live lives of possibility and purpose – to become who they already are.

Jesus did not turn stone into bread,
he turned bread into more bread.

And Jesus himself was transformed
from being the ultimate victim of the worldly powers
to become the Way, the Truth, and the Life
for us to follow even defiant of death.

The Christian church is evolving and the United Church of Christ
is helping to lead the way.

Stillspeaking "ONA" congregations of the UCC are setting an example –
not only for other Christian communities,
but for other religions and societies as well
for transformation into the ways of justice and peace.

We anticipate a day when the Beloved Community of God's Kingdom
will be recognized for everyone, no matter who they are or where they are
on life's journey together.

In the meantime, open your eyes to see, listen up with your ears to hear,
cast off your chains – whatever that may be for you,
get up to dance, share your gift, teach a child a skill,
visit a friend who is sick, cook up a feast, perform a masterpiece,
seize the day and make something,
choose the life that has been given to you
as those who followed Christ before us have done
and as an example for those who will surely follow us.

Amen

Luke 24:1-9

24:1 But on the first day of the week, at early dawn, they came to the tomb, taking the spices that they had prepared.

2They found the stone rolled away from the tomb,

3but when they went in, they did not find the body.

4While they were perplexed about this, suddenly two men in dazzling clothes stood beside them.

5The women were terrified and bowed their faces to the ground, but the men said to them, 'Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen.

6Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee,

7that the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners, and be crucified, and on the third day rise again.'

8Then they remembered his words,

9and returning from the tomb, they told all this to the eleven and to all the rest.

John 20:11-18

20: 11 But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb;

12and she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet.

13They said to her, 'Woman, why are you weeping?' She said to them, 'They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him.'

14When she had said this, she turned round and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus.

15Jesus said to her, 'Woman, why are you weeping? For whom are you looking?' Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, 'Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away.'

16Jesus said to her, 'Mary!' She turned and said to him in Hebrew, 'Rabbouni!' (which means Teacher).

17Jesus said to her, 'Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, "I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God." '

18Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, 'I have seen the Lord'; and she told them that he had said these things to her.

Luke 24:10-34

24:10 Now it was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women with them who told this to the apostles.

11 But these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them.

12 But Peter got up and ran to the tomb; stooping and looking in, he saw the linen cloths by themselves; then he went home, amazed at what had happened.

13 Now on that same day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem,

14 and talking with each other about all these things that had happened.

15 While they were talking and discussing, Jesus himself came near and went with them,

16 but their eyes were kept from recognizing him.

17 And he said to them, 'What are you discussing with each other while you walk along?' They stood still, looking sad.

18 Then one of them, whose name was Cleopas, answered him, 'Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have taken place there in these days?'

19 He asked them, 'What things?' They replied, 'The things about Jesus of Nazareth, who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people,

20 and how our chief priests and leaders handed him over to be condemned to death and crucified him.

21 But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel. Yes, and besides all this, it is now the third day since these things took place.

22 Moreover, some women of our group astounded us. They were at the tomb early this morning,

23 and when they did not find his body there, they came back and told us that they had indeed seen a vision of angels who said that he was alive.

24Some of those who were with us went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said; but they did not see him.'

25Then he said to them, 'Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared!

26Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?'

27Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures.

28 As they came near the village to which they were going, he walked ahead as if he were going on.

29But they urged him strongly, saying, 'Stay with us, because it is almost evening and the day is now nearly over.' So he went in to stay with them.

30When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them.

31Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight.

32They said to each other, 'Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?'

33That same hour they got up and returned to Jerusalem; and they found the eleven and their companions gathered together.

34They were saying, 'The Lord has risen indeed, and he has appeared to Simon!'

John 21:1-19

21:1 After these things Jesus showed himself again to the disciples by the Sea of Tiberias; and he showed himself in this way.

2Gathered there together were Simon Peter, Thomas called the Twin, Nathanael of Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, and two others of his disciples.

3Simon Peter said to them, 'I am going fishing.' They said to him, 'We will go with you.' They went out and got into the boat, but that night they caught nothing.

4 Just after daybreak, Jesus stood on the beach; but the disciples did not know that it was Jesus.

5Jesus said to them, 'Children, you have no fish, have you?' They answered him, 'No.'

6He said to them, 'Cast the net to the right side of the boat, and you will find some.' So they cast it, and now they were not able to haul it in because there were so many fish.

7That disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, 'It is the Lord!' When Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord, he put on some clothes, for he was naked, and jumped into the lake.

8But the other disciples came in the boat, dragging the net full of fish, for they were not far from the land, only about a hundred yards* off.

9 When they had gone ashore, they saw a charcoal fire there, with fish on it, and bread.

10Jesus said to them, 'Bring some of the fish that you have just caught.'

11So Simon Peter went aboard and hauled the net ashore, full of large fish, a hundred and fifty-three of them; and though there were so many, the net was not torn.

12Jesus said to them, 'Come and have breakfast.' Now none of the disciples dared to ask him, 'Who are you?' because they knew it was the Lord.

13 Jesus came and took the bread and gave it to them, and did the same with the fish.

14 This was now the third time that Jesus appeared to the disciples after he was raised from the dead.

15 When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, 'Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?' He said to him, 'Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.' Jesus said to him, 'Feed my lambs.'

16 A second time he said to him, 'Simon son of John, do you love me?' He said to him, 'Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.' Jesus said to him, 'Tend my sheep.'

17 He said to him the third time, 'Simon son of John, do you love me?' Peter felt hurt because he said to him the third time, 'Do you love me?' And he said to him, 'Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you.' Jesus said to him, 'Feed my sheep.'

18 Very truly, I tell you, when you were younger, you used to fasten your own belt and to go wherever you wished. But when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will fasten a belt around you and take you where you do not wish to go.'

19 (He said this to indicate the kind of death by which he would glorify God.) After this he said to him, 'Follow me.'

Luke 24:35-53

35 Then they told what had happened on the road, and how he had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread.

36 While they were talking about this, Jesus himself stood among them and said to them, 'Peace be with you.'

37 They were startled and terrified, and thought that they were seeing a ghost.

38 He said to them, 'Why are you frightened, and why do doubts arise in your hearts?'

39 Look at my hands and my feet; see that it is I myself. Touch me and see; for a ghost does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have.'

40 And when he had said this, he showed them his hands and his feet.

41 While in their joy they were disbelieving and still wondering, he said to them, 'Have you anything here to eat?'

42 They gave him a piece of broiled fish,

43 and he took it and ate in their presence.

44 Then he said to them, 'These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you—that everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled.'

45 Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures,

46 and he said to them, 'Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day,

47 and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem.

48 You are witnesses of these things.

49 And see, I am sending upon you what my Father promised; so stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high.'

50 Then he led them out as far as Bethany, and, lifting up his hands, he blessed them.

51While he was blessing them, he withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven.

52And they worshipped him, and returned to Jerusalem with great joy;

53and they were continually in the temple blessing God.