

Sunday, May 4, 2014

Rev. Diane Monti-Catania

Sermon: "Walking and Talking with Jesus"

When I was commuting to seminary, people used to ask me how I managed the 3-hour round trip drive.

I would tell them that I was commuting with Jesus, so the time went quickly.

They would smile at me politely and move on.

I was telling the truth.

On my drive to New Haven I would pretend that Jesus was sitting in the seat next to me and I would converse with him about any number of things – whatever was on my heart or mind that day.

I might comment on a news story or sing a new song, discuss my children, admit my struggles with the seminary workload, lament my inability to memorize the bible and generally just ask for a bit of support.

It was a tremendous comfort to me and did indeed sustain me for four years of commuting.

I was pleasantly surprised just a few years ago when I was attending a Clergy Leadership Retreat and our assignment for the afternoon was to take a walk around the grounds and pretend that we were walking and talking with Jesus.

Other conference participants looked skeptical – I felt vindicated.

I was not crazy – this is what we were supposed to be doing!

Walking and Talking with Jesus – what a great idea.

So often, we constrain ourselves when we pray.

We close our eyes, we sit quietly, we concentrate on our thoughts;

– but what might happen if we open ourselves up to let Jesus participate?

Prayer does not have to be one sided, or silent, or subdued.

The disciples in our reading this morning are walking down the road, leaving Jerusalem after hearing the women's report that the tomb was empty.

Of course, they are speaking about the events of the last few days – Christ’s arrest, conviction, execution and now, reported resurrection!

And as they walk, a man joins them – where did he come from this stranger who appears and seems to be unaware of the events of the day?

He listens to what they have to say and then he offers a lesson so deep and profound that it causes their hearts to burn within them.

They invite him to remain with them.

In the King James Version of the Bible, the invitation of the two travelers reads, "Abide with me; for it is toward evening and the day is far spent," words which were the inspiration for the hymn, "Abide with me."

The hymn was written by Henry Francis Lyte, longtime vicar of the parish at Devonshire, England, just three months before his death at age 54.

On Sunday, September 4, 1847 he preached his farewell sermon and went home to rest, broken in health and saddened by dissensions in his congregation. After tea in the afternoon, he retired to his study. In an hour or two, he rejoined his family, holding in his hand the manuscript of his immortal hymn.

The words are about the faith that faces life and death fearlessly and triumphantly in the light of the cross and the empty tomb. "Heaven's morning breaks, and earth's vain shadows flee/In life, in death, O Lord, abide with me."

While the hymn’s author was calling on the Lord at the end of his life, he was issuing the same plea as the disciples.

“Please stay with us – be with us – continue to be part of our lives.”

Back to our story.

The two travelers convince Jesus to join them for the evening and when they sit down at the table he blesses and breaks the bread – as he had done at the last supper just 3 days earlier. *Their eyes were opened and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight.*

Imagine.

Takes your breath away right?

Jesus is at the table and you don’t get it until he leaves.

Has that ever happened to you?

Have you ever overlooked the significance of something – not realizing what was happening at the time?

Or missed an opportunity, that you only recognize in hindsight?

The two disciples in Emmaus, just like the disciples in the locked room in last week's reading, experience the presence of the risen Christ and are transformed.

We, of course, are invited to the same experience.

In a few moments we will gather at the communion table and will have the opportunity to have our hearts warmed and our eyes opened in the breaking of the bread.

We gather at the table to remember, to be reminded of Christ's sacrifice for us.

We gather as one people, as the body of Christ.

We gather to be empowered to live out the commands that Jesus gave us, that we love God with our whole heart, soul and mind and love our neighbor as ourselves.

Those early disciples were bereft at the loss of their leader, the man they believed to be the Messiah.

We, however, live in the knowledge that the Messiah was not destroyed, but conquered death and lives.

Death, our ultimate enemy, has been defeated.

We are people who believe in life;

We believe in resurrection.

Easter is the reason Christians are people of perpetual hope!

Writer Michael Piazza says "despair is absolute arrogance."

He argues that "No one knows enough to give up hope.

"To surrender hope," he says "is to be a functional atheist."

Resurrection offers new life – renewed hope.

At last week's annual meeting I shared my hope that the year ahead would be a time of holiness for us as a congregation.

My desire is that we strengthen our relationship with God, learning to trust the one who abides with us.

This brief prayer resonated with me:

"Let me be reborn in you and see through you the world in the right way, so that all my actions, words, and thought can become a hymn of praise to you."

A hymn of praise to you.

This is my prayer for our congregation.

That in making our own commitment to holiness we will have an Emmaus experience.

We will realize that Christ is present among us, offering new life, new energy, new hope.

This week, I invite you to take a walk with Jesus. Talk out loud.

Look him in the eye.

Speak your truth.

Listen for his reply.

Let your hearts burn within you while he is talking to you on the road.

Come to this table with open eyes and open hearts and let yourself be transformed into the disciple you were meant to be.