

## **Sermon – Easter 3 – St Mary’s Lake Ronkonkoma**

### **Luke 24:13-35**

“May the words of my mouth, and the meditation of our hearts, be pleasing to you, O Lord, our rock and our Redeemer”

Over the last couple of weeks I’ve been taken in by the news of the planned executions of eight men in Arkansas. The Governor of Arkansas had decided to move forward with the large number of executions because their supply of one of the key drugs was to expire by today. Despite a number of last minute appeals most, if not all the men, will be dead by the end of today. As I read the news articles about the men, heard of the prayer vigils by Christians in Arkansas and elsewhere, I was struck once again by the awful nature of state executions.

The death of one of the men last Thursday night touched me. Kenneth D Williams had been convicted of multiple murders, including one of the prison guards from the very same prison that now held him. They were horrible and violent murders. The news article revealed that Mr. Williams had repented of his crimes and accepted Jesus Christ into his life. He accepted that he would pay with his life for his crimes. What really struck me was that the last meal he requested was the bread and wine of the Eucharist, the memorial symbols of the body and blood of Jesus who also died for all of us at the hands of the state.

We periodically hear of these state executions although they are becoming more rare as drug companies move to restrict supplies of the necessary drugs and public opinion largely turns against such drastic killings by the state. When we do hear the stories of the men and women who are scheduled to die we get to understand many aspects of their lives before and since their convictions. If you have read the book “Just Mercy” by Bryan Stevenson, you would be taken by the extraordinary stories of innocent people, often framed for crimes they didn’t commit but sentenced to die nonetheless. We can also consider how many convicted offenders on death row have been cleared of their crimes by new DNA testing? It would be frightening to be a “dead man walking” if you were indeed innocent.

If we can imagine the life of one of these people on death row and put ourselves into their shoes we could fantasize about how we would feel both before our execution and afterward. Theologian James Allison proposes such an exercise. Prior to our death we might see ourselves as an innocent victim, much like the victim for who’s death we have been convicted and for whom our lives will be taken from us. We might also feel resentment towards our families, the state and the system of justice that has brought us to this point in our lives.

At the moment of our death we would become free, completely free of all the issues that have impacted our lives and completely free of our emotions that might have so

consumed us as we sat on death row, probably for years, and free of any resentment held toward those that would kill us.

In our fantasy we are able to open our imaginations to a new life free of the constraints imposed by a structured society. We could choose one of two paths as we imagine what comes next. The first path would be to walk away to a completely new and free life, as far away as possible from the memory of the past life. Or we could choose a second path and desire to return to the world just left, to the community that just took our lives to help make it a better place. By the shedding of our past emotions and resentments we would see life differently and we would be able to be more present to others who might be on a similar path to the one we were on.

The reason James Allison calls for us to imagine this transition as a fantasy is because it is as useful as it is misleading, opening our hearts and minds in a new way. The exercise does help to provide us with an illustration of how Jesus appeared to Cleopas and his companion on the dusty road to Emmaus. Jesus was a dead man, made totally free from resentment and anger toward those that abandoned him and those that tortured him and took his life. He appears as someone who wants to use his life to open the imaginations of those troubled by his death, to free them and to set them toward new life.

When Jesus comes alongside Cleopas and his companion he is offering his witness so that they might slowly see the revelation of God in the world through a new lens. Jesus appears to them as an astute and wise man who is able to open their minds and hearts to the narrative of his own life journey and the foretelling of it by the prophets.

This in-turn allows them to live more fully into faith in God, rather than feel they will die, defeated by the state's violence against their long hoped-for messiah. If they can imagine a new freer life they would then be able to leave behind old ways of thinking and acting, leave behind lingering resentment, anger, retribution and sacrificial customs for a new life centered on hope and love rather than centered on the finality of death.

The three walk together the seven or so miles to a point where Jesus is prepared to leave them and to walk on alone. He frees his companions to make a decision about what to do next. Rather than say goodbye to this wise man they invite him to stay with them for the night. This act of hospitality becomes a bookend for our Eucharistic beginnings.

The Last Supper, and this first supper with the risen Lord, demonstrate that community and hospitality are the hallmarks of the new community of Christ's followers. The symbolic breaking of the bread by Jesus opens the eyes and hearts of these people so they see the man who accompanied them as the risen Lord. In this moment there is immense clarity for them.

Their time with Jesus is short as he soon fades from the room to leave them to ponder what had just transpired. What an amazing moment it must have been for them. Their journey from agony and loss, and bewilderment at the death of Jesus to a point of heartfelt clarity that Jesus had in fact defeated death and had risen from the grave, just as

the women had said, to come amongst them to consecrate once again the holy meal of remembrance.

We are all part of this long journey of faith, where our faith and emotions ebb and flow as we walk alongside each other for periods of time. We may experience moments of immense clarity that Jesus was right there alongside us as we journeyed, even in a form that we didn't immediately recognize.

It is in the hope of the resurrection that allows us to continue that journey staying open to the possibility that even in our darkest times Jesus will not abandon us. We are not dead but alive and we can imagine new possibilities, a new dawn and a new life. Without the spirit of the risen Lord in our souls death becomes the final moment of life. However with the spirit of the risen Lord death to our old lives gives rise to a new life in Christ, a life of hope, grace, forgiveness and love. It is a new life that we live into both this side and on the other side of our mortal existence. The arc of our new lives is not birth to death, but death to life. Death comes at baptism and rising to new life for all time comes when the spirit of God is sealed within us.

Together, you as a congregation are making a journey of transition together, a journey to a new life here at St Mary's. You will carry the memories of your time with Mo. Beth as you come to imagine a new life that will allow you to grow and to flourish, filled with the Spirit and grace of the risen Lord. The ending of relationships can feel like death and it can be painful and destabilizing. Just like Cleopas and his companion you walk the road together consoling and supporting one another until the moment of heartfelt clarity when you will know for certain that new life is filled with immense possibilities.

As the sun sets at the end of a long night you can look forward to sharing a meal together as we will do this morning in this holy place. We will soon turn our focus to the breaking of bread where Jesus Christ is made known to us. Jesus Christ is risen and comes amongst us as we journey and is always present to us, at no time more clear than when we celebrate this holy communion. For that we give heartfelt thanks.

Amen