

Sermon – Third Sunday of Easter

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”

Coming from Australia to live in New York City some 9 years ago, I had to adjust to many of the ways of the American people. It has taken me most of the proceeding nine years to understand a little of the culture of the country. I had to confront why the country shies away from universal healthcare, seems unable to deal with a gun culture that destroys families and neighborhoods, has an incarceration rate unheard of in most developed countries and possesses a self-assuredness and patriotism like nowhere I have known before. As any immigrant knows this all takes time to figure out.

My interest in social justice led me to first dive into the civil rights era to try and understand racial inequality. When I was in seminary I wrote a paper for a class about the Diocese of Long Island’s response to the civil rights protests in Brooklyn in the 1960s. Coming from outside the country I had, and still have, a lot to learn about slavery, emancipation, the civil rights struggles, institutional racism, and the prison industrial complex. What I found disturbed me. The Diocese seemed to not have responded in any meaningful way. This seemed to align with Dr King’s critique of clergy indifference to racism at the time.

One of the most horrible aspects of racism has been the violent lynching of black people during the 19th and 20th centuries, and the transition of that injustice to the injustice of the modern prison industrial complex. Lynching was only outlawed formally in 2005 but from the late 1960s it was largely replaced by an overzealous movement toward incarcerating black men and women, driven in part of so-called “three-strikes” rule and the “War on Drugs” program, and also by the move from public to private prison infrastructure. Executions then became a type of formal lynching.

Executions ceased in Australia in 1967 not long after I was born. The execution of men, and they mostly are men, in some states here is a wrenching action that leaves me and many others shivering with rage. The Innocence Project has demonstrated time and again that many of the prisoners on death row do not deserve to be there, and in some cases are just plainly innocent.

The death of one man in Arkansas a couple of years ago resonated with me. Kenneth D Williams had been convicted of multiple murders, including one of the prison guards from the very same prison that held him. They were horrible and violent murders. The news article I read 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 his last meal request. It was the bread and wine of the Eucharist, the memorial symbols of the body and blood of Jesus who also died at the hands of 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 after their convictions. If you have read the book “Just Mercy” by Bryan Stevenson, or seen the recent movie about his work, you would be moved by the extraordinary stories of innocent people on death row and his immense efforts to right injustices.

I would like you for a moment imagine the life of one of these death row people and put yourself into their shoes. Try and fantasize about how you would feel both before your execution and how you might be perceived after. Theologian James Allison proposes such an exercise. Prior to our death he says, 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 however 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 imagining we are able to open our hearts and minds to a new life free of the constraints imposed by a structured society. We can 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 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 appeared as someone who wanted 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 came alongside Cleopas and his companion he was offering his witness so that they would slowly see the revelation of God in the world through a new lens. Jesus appeared to them as an astute and wise man who was able to open their minds and hearts to the narrative of his own life journey and the long arc of salvation history as revealed by the prophets.

This in-turn allowed them to live more fully into faith in God, rather than feel they would die, defeated by the state’s violence against their long hoped-for messiah. If they could 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 men walked together the seven or so miles to a point where Jesus was prepared to leave them and to walk on alone. He freed his companions to make a decision about what to do next. Rather than say goodbye to this wise man they invited him to stay with them for the night. This act of hospitality became a bookend for our Eucharistic beginnings.

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

Their time with Jesus was short as he soon faded from the room to leave them to ponder what had just transpired. What an amazing moment it must have been for them. Their journey was 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, and had come to be 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. At other times we might feel that Jesus is absent.

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, like these we are living through now, Jesus will not abandon us. We are not dead but alive. We can imagine new possibilities, a new dawn and a new life.

Without the spirit of the risen Lord in our souls, life is death, and death becomes the final moment of life. However, with the spirit of the risen Lord in us, 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, we as a congregation are making a journey of transition together, a journey to a new life here at St Luke and St Matthew. We all carry the memories of our time here in years past as we come to imagine a new life that will allow us 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 we walk the road together consoling and supporting

one another until the moment of heartfelt clarity when we will know for certain that Jesus is right there with us and new life is filled with hope and immense possibilities.

As the sun sets at the end of a long night we can look forward to sharing a meal together. One day soon we will share this holiest of meals in this holy place once again. On that glorious day we will turn our focus to the breaking of bread where Jesus Christ is clearly made known to us.

Jesus Christ is risen and comes amongst us as we journey and is always present to us if we allow him in. For that today and always, we give heartfelt thanks.

Amen