

The Liberating Message

A Sermon from Mount Auburn Presbyterian Church

The Rev. Susan Quinn Bryan, Pastor

May 20, 2007 – Ascension Sunday

Scripture Readings: Acts 1:1-11; Psalm 47; Ephesians 1:15-23; Luke 24:44-53

I'm going to begin by telling you I am not sure where to begin.

Perhaps some of that is jet lag.

Perhaps it is because while I was in Italy I felt like I was on 'sensory overload.'

In some ways I felt like I was in a time machine of sorts . . . walking among ruins of civilizations that predated the Greeks and Romans . . . as well as all those that came after . . . including modern cities . . . layers of civilizations that rose and fell in power and status.

It didn't help that I was on one of those 'whirlwind' tours through Italy . . . flying into Milan and then seeing northern Italy and then traveling down, Lake Como, Bellagio, Milan, Bologna, Venice, Florence, the regions of Tuscany and Umbria, down to the Amalfi coast, Sorrento and Capri, and then finally back up to Rome. It was so fast they all run together now like a carousel moving too fast . . . like the carousel we saw in -- was it Florence?

It wasn't easy to keep up with what city I was in, what time it was, what day it was, let alone whether to focus on the Etruscans, the Romans, Medieval times or the Renaissance . . .

(I'm not complaining, mind you. I am just trying to prepare you for the rather scattered thoughts you are about to hear.)

I guess if one lives in places that have so many layers of history exposed to the light, one must get used to it after a while, and take it for granted.

But I didn't have time to get to that mindset.

I'm still trying to process it all: grasp the history and the scope. The meaning. The lessons.

I am still trying to figure out where I am.

In a cosmic sense.

In a spiritual sense.

Let me give you just one example:

I visited the Vatican and St. Peter's on the same day I visited the catacombs. (I wasn't prepared for that . . . it was not originally planned that way, but the agenda changed because of events going on in Rome when we were there.)

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There are so many beautiful things to see in Italy, and I was very aware of the human need to create . . . through buildings, paintings, sculpture and song, not to mention food and wine!

I believe that urge to create, that ability to imagine, comes from God, and I was astounded and amazed by so much beauty.

Already on overload, needing time to absorb and process, near the end of my glorious Italian holiday, after seeing the Vatican and the Sistine Chapel, after seeing the elaborate burial places of the popes and a couple of their bodies displayed for the faithful, I found myself deep in the ground in the winding, narrow passageways of the catacombs -- the same catacombs about which I had heard all my life. The catacombs, as you know, are burial places; some just shelves carved into the sides of the wall. Most of them are very small. Tragically, desperately small, since the infant mortality rate was very high in those days and life expectancy was short.

There is nothing elaborate about the catacombs. Even the most elaborate of burial sites there, were just little houses carved in the lightweight volcanic stone. Most of the graves are simply niches --shelves on which to place a body.

There are over sixty catacombs that have been located . . . all outside the city walls, as was the law. Some are Roman (or pagan) some Jewish, and some Christian.

I know many of you have been to see them.

They are not remarkable in terms of engineering or design or creative expression.

There was quiet there. More quiet than almost anywhere else. There was a rest for my eyes and the rest of my senses.

But not for my mind.

On the Christian graves, I saw the drawings on the wall of the good shepherd and a fish and a Chi Rho and people feasting at a table, and pictures of doves (or a bird, at any rate) and what interpreters describe as resurrected people.

Historians differ on how much of what my Sunday School teachers taught me about what happened there might actually be true.

Whether worship services may have taken place in those underground 'safe' areas. They were public, after all, and anyone could come and go. I'm not sure my Sunday School teachers knew what scholars now know about what happened in the catacombs, as well as the Coliseum. Myth and folklore are not usually historically accurate.

Oh, Christians were persecuted. But where and how many and how may still not be known. And because of that, they did have to be secretive and worship in hidden ways.

One of the things that hit me in the cool dark walkways was the contrast between the ornate splendor of the Vatican and the stark simplicity of the catacombs.

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But what has really held my imagination has been the image of small groups of people gathering to worship and share a meal and their lives and their joy-filled faith with one another in homes and later, in hiding, whether it was actually in the catacombs or in homes or other places. There is no doubt that in the early years, to be a follower of the Way was risky business. Costly business. There is also no doubt that there was vitality to that early faith that has managed to continue to inspire down through the ages.

I have been thinking about the humble beginnings of that little band of followers of the Way, and contrasting that not only with the Vatican, but with our own denomination, where schism has begun and churches are fighting in the courts to keep their buildings as they leave the body. They are leaving, we are to assume, because the rest of us are apostate. Not Christian enough. Not biblical enough. Too liberal. Too far from what they consider the truth.

I imagined myself in a time machine sitting in a circle of those early Christians and telling them what was going on in so many of our churches today, and I could almost see those little groups of people gathered in the safest place they could find, risking their lives to be together . . . and the love in their eyes for God and one another, and the sadness they would have over what has happened to followers of the Way.

When the church began, they did not have any scriptures over which to argue. The New Testament didn't exist yet. The only scriptures they had and read were the same scriptures that Jesus preached from: the Hebrew texts. And, of course, they only had the ones they had memorized. No one had a King James Version to carry around and use like an assault weapon.

Those early Christians were considered a sect of the Jewish faith in the beginning, not a new religion. They considered themselves to be Jewish.

And yet, based on stories they had heard, based on the relationship they had with the spirit of the resurrected Jesus, and the love they had experienced from others in the movement, they gathered to worship God and live their lives differently. Those with wealth shared with those who had nothing. They freed their slaves. Liberation and freedom are words one finds over and over in the catacombs.

They were not talking about the after life. They were talking about a movement that liberates in **this** life.

They were breaking down the walls between race and class in profound ways.

What they did, how they worshipped and lived with one another, was so radical and so threatening to the status quo that it provoked the persecution that was sure to come.

Let me say again that it wasn't what they said, it wasn't doctrine, and it wasn't their agreement on any theological treatise that was the threat to the status quo.

It was their lives. Their actions. Their hospitality. To all. It was the counter cultural nature of their egalitarian family gatherings.

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It was the sharing of their resources and the freeing of slaves and breaking down the walls between the classes . . . seeing each and every person as a valued brother or sister. . . that was so radical and so threatening and so life giving and empowering. In Rome and in Ephesus and in other places, it was these small churches that prompted others to write letters like this one in our letter to the Ephesians, “I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love toward all the saints, and for this reason I do not cease to give thanks for you as I remember you in my prayers . . . “

I know today is Ascension Sunday and I have read and pondered these texts in light of the fact that the early church knew nothing of Ascension Sunday.

What they knew was the love of Jesus. Even though he was no longer with them in the way he once had been. They felt his presence, his spirit among them. It lived on, it continued to inspire and give life.

What they experienced was a relationship with Jesus through that love shared in the midst of that small rag-tag group of people and it was that love that empowered and encouraged that little group.

I have come to understand Ascension Sunday as a metaphor for the church.

We, as the church, are to be lifted up above the class struggles of this world. Lifted up to live liberating, freeing lives.

Karl Rahner said, “The Ascension is a festival of the future of the *world*. The flesh is redeemed and glorified, for the Lord is risen forever. We Christians are, therefore, the most sublime materialists.”

Seeing gorgeous church after gorgeous church, I was touched by the need in human kind to express somehow the glory and splendor of God, or of a higher power of some kind . . . even as I was troubled by how much of that need to glorify a higher power was done at the expense and exploitation and cost of so many other lives.

In the catacombs, I experienced a different way to glorify God, through the building of a community that values all people.

I was reminded of something Dorothy Soelle wrote, and I quote,

“The glory of God, the splendor, the fullness of God—I prefer to translate this mysterious word with the ‘beauty of God.’ To be comforted does not mean that we receive something, a thing, an object from God but that we catch sight of the beauty and splendor of God. Where, then, do we see that? Where can we find that?”

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The Bible is quite clear on this point. The beauty, the splendor of God is visible in all those who prepare God's way. The messianic work of liberation awaits us. God entrusts us with preparing the way of the Messiah. God does not say to anyone, "You are just a simple housewife or a mere employee and understand nothing of complicated necessities." Prepare the way of God, comfort the people in their weakness, make them into street workers on God's way. No man is too small or too large, no woman is too young or too old, too educated or too ignorant, God has given all of us a part, God comforts us, and we prepare God's way. God's voice calls to us and we answer. God's spirit wants to make us courageous and capable of truth. God wants to be born in us."

(Dorothy Soelle, *Theology for Sceptics*, trans. Joyce L. Irwin (London; Mowbray, 1995; Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress Press, 1995), P. 126

I want to say that I missed you while I was gone. I want to say that I was thinking all along, "Is it possible to affirm creativity and encourage people to use their special gifts without exploitation?"

And I kept thinking, "That's what happens at Mt. Auburn! It is possible to value both beauty and creativity and all people, because I've seen it at MAPC!"

That is not to say we can't continue to be inspired and encouraged by those early Christians. That is not to say we can't continue to grow. Of course we can. But it is important to recognize and affirm what we are doing right.

I believe the hope for the larger church is found in those small gatherings of liberating hospitality. And I believe that same spirit moves in this place, in this time.

We need to claim that liberating hospitality IS a ministry. A profound and valuable and world changing ministry. That hospitality need not stay within these walls, but will take us out into the world. It **must** take us out into the world.

In the Acts text, when Jesus has ascended, they were standing and looking up at heaven. And two men in white robes (an allusion to angels) ask this question, "People of Galilee, why do you stand looking toward heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven."

Why do we look toward heaven, when we should be looking into the faces of one another? Into the faces of the stranger for the Christ. Jesus leaves the work to us, and the power of the Spirit gives us the courage and the strength to do the work we are called to do.

George MacLeod tells this story, "There is a very old legend, and all legends that persist speak truth, concerning the return of the Lord Jesus Christ to heaven after his Ascension. It is said that the angel Gabriel met him at the gates of the city.

'Lord, this is a great salvation that thou has wrought,' said the angel. But the Lord Jesus only said, 'Yes.'

'What plans hast thou made for carrying on the work? How are all to know what thou has done?' asked Gabriel.

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‘I left Peter and James and John and Martha and Mary to tell their friends, their friends to tell their friends, till all the world should know.’

‘But Lord Jesus,’ said Gabriel, ‘suppose Peter is too busy with the nets, or Martha with the housework, or the friends they tell are too occupied, and forget to tell their friends – what then?’

The Lord Jesus did not answer at once; then he said in his quiet wonderful voice, ‘I have not made any other plans. I am counting on them.’

George MacLeod, *Daily Readings with George MacLeod*, ed. Ron Ferguson (Glasgow: Wild Goose Publications, 2001)

God is counting on us.

I want to end with a Creed from Dorothy Soellee:

Dorothy Soellee’s Creed

"I believe in God, who didn't create the world finished like a thing that is always the same... who supports the protest of the living and the change of all conditions through our work and through our politics.

I believe in Jesus Christ... who worked for the change of all conditions and focused on root causes... Everyday I am afraid that He died in vain because he is buried in our churches, because we have betrayed His revolution in obedience and fear of authorities... who rises from the dead in our life so we can become free from prejudices and arrogance, from fear and hatred and drive his revolution toward his reign.

I believe in the Spirit that came into this world with Jesus to the community of all nations and our responsibility for what becomes of our earth: a valley full of lamentation... or the city of God.

I believe in the just peace realizable in the possibility of a meaningful life for all people in the future of this world, God's world."

Excerpts from Dorothy Soelle's article, *Justice is the Foundation of Peace*.

Beloved, let us continue to live in the creative love of God with one another!

The Rev. Susan Quinn Bryan
Pastor, Mount Auburn Presbyterian Church
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Mount Auburn Presbyterian Church
103 William Howard Taft Road
Cincinnati, OH 45219
(513) 281-5945
<http://www.mtauburnpresby.org>