

SERMON PREACHED BY
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AT
SCARBORO UNITED CHURCH

Sunday, April 18, 2010

Scripture: Acts 9: 1-19
John 21: 1-19

"People of the Way"

This past week as I was doing some reading in preparation for preaching I came across an interesting article. It spoke about a poll done in the United Kingdom by Durham University on behalf of England's College of Preachers. The results were quite startling to those who conducted the research. Now many folk say that the sermon has gone the way of the dodo bird or the LP or even the 8 track cartridge and yet of those folk attending church 96% said they look forward to the sermon. And yet only 17% report that sermons influence or change the way they live. Is this because we don't want to be challenged or transformed or because people like me who when we are preaching we don't challenge? I found myself doing a lot of soul searching this week about what I have spent much of my life and many many hours seeking to do.

These two passages today - the one that Paul read at theme time and the one that Ralph read at Scripture time are both stories that tell of post resurrection appearances of Jesus. In the study First Light with Marcus Borg and Dominic Crossan that some of us have undertaken this year Crossan shared with us his theory that these appearances are parables - stories told to explain and to teach the early church and the followers of "The Way". I found this helpful because it then challenges all of us to hear these stories and to apply them to our own lives and to the life of the church today.

In those early days and years those who were seeking and following were called "People of the Way" or were said to belong to "The Way". This fledgling movement was seen to be a journey rather than a destination. In fact the word Galilee can be translated into the word "circle" or "circuit". So what was important was being in the circle or on the circuit. Remember Jesus telling the women "I will meet my friends in Galilee" -- on the circuit/in the circle."

Today's readings are about two men. One of them Saul, later known as Paul, had as his mission the destruction of Jesus fledgling movement because this movement in Saul's eyes breached all the Pharisaic rules. In this day and age he would have been a radical fundamentalist on a holy war. The other man we meet is Peter. Peter is the center of many stories but he is the one who stumbled and fumbled, sank in the sea, said the wrong thing at the wrong time, got angry and lost his temper, misunderstood and in the end denied knowing Jesus three times. Yet he was chosen many times to lead this fledgling group in new directions.

Paul was certain, Peter was not.

Paul needed a dramatic transformation, Peter only needed a simple invitation.

Paul needed a 2x4 and he needed to see stars. Peter needed a simple experience and invitation to join the community around Jesus.

So if the lives of these two men could become parables for us what could we learn?

From Paul we receive the hope that transformation is always possible no matter how far down another road we have gone. No matter what mistakes we have made or harm we have done, pain we have inflicted or what choices we have made there is the possibility of new life, forgiveness and total transformation.

From Peter we learn that the church, or we as individuals, can stumble and fall, pick ourselves up and try again. We can say the wrong thing, misunderstand, try to walk on water and discover we are human and still come to understand that Jesus will work with us anyway and lead us to our best selves.

For everyone who takes up the journey these are our possibilities and examples. These are the parables of our lives. We feel at one moment we are called to do one thing and the next we are called to the opposite. We drop the ball sometimes and carry it securely at other moments. At one time we think we understand exactly what is meant and in the next moment realize we don't have a clue. And yet we keep on going and through it all we are still called to be the church, "The People of the Way".

I am very grateful to all of you for the opportunity to serve with you for the past 8 months. I had never anticipated such an opportunity and had not anticipated serving in a congregation again. I have learned a lot about myself and about ministry. It is a different experience to join a congregation "along the way" for a short time knowing that it is only for a specific time and knowing that it will end. You have been gracious and warm in your welcome. I have had an opportunity to participate in some wonderful projects with Worship Committee and Pastoral Care - to be part of several great Study Groups with wonderful folk and to have some really good conversations - I am grateful to those who were willing to step out in faith and try the Women's Brunch and the Lenten Reflection Booklet with me. It has been a privilege to visit so many of you in your homes and hospital, over cups of coffee and meals and I thank you for the conversations and the sharing of faith. I know that everyone on this path meets again and I look forward to seeing you again and again. I will be listening for news and praying for you in the days ahead.

And for you - the time is drawing near when you will be starting new chapters of the story of your journey. These post Easter stories are stories that you can use to inform how you go forward from here. These stories remind us that Easter is not done yet - it is not finished.

As we move forward in our individual lives these stories can stay with us giving us courage and challenging us as we make decisions and as we listen for God's voice and for the leading of the Spirit. Ask yourself "Do I live my life listening for God's voice or would I need to be hit over the head in order to get my attention?" Ask yourself "Am I holding myself back because I can't forgive myself or accept myself?" Are you willing to accept that God accepts you as you are and wants to work with you just as you are?

Those are not easy questions to ask yourself but they are important ones. Now what about the questions for you as a congregation ... "Are you and how will you together listen for God's voice speaking to you about ministry in this part of God's world?" Are you listening or will you need to be blinded by light so that you can see the stars and the possibilities? Do you trust enough in God to work through you? Can you risk making mistakes enough to love and serve God's sheep?

You can't be a congregation who serves and not make some mistakes but the secret is to make them together. To fix them together. To live with them together. To ask forgiveness together. To learn from them together. To trust God to be a God of resurrection and new life and to bring that here to you both as individuals and as a congregation in wondrous and amazing ways.

In the April Observer Mardi Tindal, Moderator of the United Church, speaks about Easter saying "God's heart was broken on the cross. And the paradox is that God's way of wholeness was made known through brokenness." She boldly reminds us that "whenever we pretend that our hearts aren't broken, we stand in the way of love. Only by being truthful with ourselves and with others can we take heart together and find our way back to Easter love and resurrection." So be honest with one another about where you hurt and what you grieve, what and who you miss and what you long for and hope for.

Going back to where I started from - to my question about whether we are willing to be transformed or challenged. Both Peter and Paul were men who were willing to be transformed - ready or not - when the opportunity came they really were willing, no matter how risky it was. So why not take a chance - give God a chance. Amen