

Graces

A Sermon Preached by Rev. Julie Emery

At the Larchmont Avenue Church

May 8, 2011, Mother's Day

Text: Psalm 116, Luke 24:13-35

Luke 24:13-35

Now on that same day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem, and talking with each other about all these things that had happened. While they were talking and discussing, Jesus himself came near and went with them, but their eyes were kept from recognizing him. And he said to them, "What are you discussing with each other while you walk along?"

They stood still, looking sad. Then one of them, whose name was Cleopas, answered him, "Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have taken place there in these days?" He asked them, "What things?" They replied, "The things about Jesus of Nazareth, who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people, and how our chief priests and leaders handed him over to be condemned to death and crucified him. But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel. Yes, and besides all this, it is now the third day since these things took place.

Moreover, some women of our group astounded us. They were at the tomb early this morning, and when they did not find his body there, they came back and told us that they had indeed seen a vision of angels who said that he was alive. Some of those who were with us went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said; but they did not see him." Then he said to them, "Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared! Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?" Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures.

As they came near the village to which they were going, he walked ahead as if he were going on. But they urged him strongly, saying, "Stay with us, because it is almost evening and the day is now nearly over." So he went in to stay with them.

When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight.

They said to each other, "Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?" That same hour they got up and returned to Jerusalem; and they found the eleven and their companions gathered together. They were

saying, "The Lord has risen indeed, and he has appeared to Simon!" Then the (two) told what had happened on the road, and how (Jesus) had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread.

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Jensine Larsen was exhausted and overworked. She had already created a print magazine called "World Pulse," that lifted up women's voices from around the globe, telling their stories of oppression and suffering, sharing their stories with the world. But then she had a vision to harness the social network of the internet to connect those women to one another. She wanted to create a global communications network which connects women around the world into a powerful force for change.

She imagined that if these women could unite, they would become an unstoppable force. But she was tired, frustrated; she wondered if her vision was possible or only a dream that would vanish. And then, in the middle of the night in a moment of despair and doubt, she received a phone call over the internet through Skype from a poor, HIV positive woman from Kenya. The woman was calling to remind Jensine to get some sleep. She told her she was praying for her and the vision of a better future that Jensine had begun. She reminded her of who Jensine was called to be and the way her work could transform the world.

One of the highlights of my ministry here at LAC is an event that has almost nothing to do with LAC, but everything to do with the inspiring power of the stories of exceptional women. This past Friday I joined Rev. Crawford as a guest of LAC member Katie Dolan at Auburn Seminary's annual Women's Lives of Commitment breakfast. The event honors women across faith traditions "whose bold leadership bridges religious divides, builds community, and pursues justice." The women honored this year were among the most remarkable yet - working toward transforming the world for better by ending sex-trafficking, working for immigration rights, empowering women's voices around the world for justice, and speaking out for LGBT rights. Jensine Larsen was one of these women.

One of the most powerful aspects of this breakfast is the telling of stories. For a brief moment on a sunny morning, a roomful of people sat together over a meal, to hear and share stories. These aren't just any stories. They are the kinds of stories that transform and ignite fires of justice and passion, that draw people into community, that evoke tears and laughter. They are the stories of women who dream big, and then follow the Holy Spirit to help that dream become a reality.

Jensine Larsen was introduced to us by another honoree, the Reverend Minerva Carcano, the first hispanic woman to be elected as a bishop in the United Methodist Church. Serving the Phoenix area, she is the official spokesperson for the Council of Bishops on Immigration. Minerva told of the honor and blessing she felt in learning and sharing the stories of the immigrant population in our country, and her passion for caring for and pursuing justice for the stranger among us.

And then Jensine introduced Gail Reimer, who told of her inspiration to create the Jewish Women's archive, to record the stories of the past so that young women could hear the ways their ancestors had overcome great odds to change the world, and be inspired to do the same. Another honoree told of the day she met a 10 year old girl who was being prosecuted for prostitution, when the man who paid her and had gotten caught had been let off on a misdemeanor. This was the moment, she said, when she knew that she had to change things.

These women passed the stage one to another, honoring and sharing their own "Holy Spirit moments." You know, those moments when someone or something catches your heart and breath and says: this is what you were meant to do. This is who you were meant to be. When we hear a story and feel it resonate inside of us so powerfully that we know we must respond with action, investment, passion. These are moments that happen to the young and the old, the poor or the privileged. The only distinction is that you have to be looking...

This is perhaps the kind of story that was told in Jerusalem, that night, after those two disciples rushed back through the dark to share what had happened to them in Emmaus. The story of the stranger who helped to illumine the truth of what had happened that morning at the empty tomb, the one who quelled their fears and doubts, who reminded them of who they were before any of this had happened, this one, Jesus, who had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread.

It is easy to forget that the gospels seem to conclude at different places after the disciples discover the empty tomb. There are all kinds of reactions to what has happened on that Easter Day: fear, doubt, astonishment, curiosity. Not everyone responded in the same way. We forget that some scattered. Some did not believe. Some kept quiet. But the one thing that becomes apparent as we move further into the season of Easter and away from Easter morning, is that eventually, slowly, but surely, the disciples started to share what they had seen and heard, and the world began to be transformed.

The story they told began with their own doubts and confusion. They were trying to make sense of the things that had happened that morning. They had seen this Jesus whom they loved and followed captured without a fight, tried for a crime he didn't commit, and then crucified on a cross. They had heard the story of the women who had gone early in the morning with spices and found the body gone. They weren't sure what it meant. They were confused, they were fearful.

And they did not understand.

The disciples walked seven miles with the risen Jesus, not knowing that it was him. The story does not say that Jesus looked different, as some have claimed. It does not say, 'it was Jesus but he looked like a man changed,' Instead it says, "their eyes were kept from recognizing him." We do not know what it was that kept them from seeing Jesus for who he truly was - Perhaps the grief and confusion of the day had distracted them. Perhaps they were too enraptured with their own conversation to look in the face of this stranger on the road. Perhaps tears clouded vision.

Like the disciples many of our most important stories of faith are borne out of pain and suffering. The stories that were dredged up for many of us once again this past week when we heard of the death of Osama Bin Laden. Whatever we experienced when we heard that news whether joy or relief or complicated sorrow - those feelings are linked to the stories we have of that day we first heard his name - of watching images of horror from our living rooms, of waiting to hear news of loved ones, of confusion, doubt, despair.

For some our stories of faith are linked to the reasons why this day is so difficult for so many: the pressures of being measured against some ideal image of womanhood that no one can truly live up to, the disappointment felt when our own mothers could not live up to our expectations of who they should be for us, our stories of pain and loss and grief in so many forms.

We are reminded this morning that the disciples unseeing, tear-filled eyes didn't prevent Jesus from being there. Regardless of their doubts or confusion, whatever they had suffered, the one who they loved and who loved them was present, listening, guiding, walking with them along the road.

It took many miles before Jesus was made known to them in the breaking of the bread. Seven miles could have been an eternity. It took a moment when they were able to look outside of their own suffering and see the needs of this stranger in their midst. It took them opening up to the other - welcoming him in, inviting him to their own table, to

share what little they had. It took them gathering together and sharing a grace over a simple meal; only then were their eyes opened and they recognized the Risen Jesus in their midst.

These stories of the faith and hope of communities have often been entrusted with women: those wise grandmothers who gather up the gifts of the stories of the past and told and retold them to keep them for the future. But these were not always women, and not always elders. The psalm read by Arthur Washington just a little while ago is a deep and powerful testimony - a story of personal transformation and salvation. The psalms themselves are filled with these - testimonies of faith - stories of trial and tribulation and the grace of God. Stories of faith, passed down from generation to generation.

In some ways, that tradition of storytelling is disappearing. Where once we used to gather around tables, with several generations, and share the powerful truths of the past with the inspired eyes of the future - now so often our "sharing time" happens in front of a computer screen or across cyberspace if at all.

Sometimes this can be a powerful blessing - the way that Jensine Larsen is able to connect women from Kenya with women from Indonesia with women from Peru with women from South Africa. In other ways, we can sometimes lose the hope that is passed down within a community, as we become so busy and preoccupied that we forget how to share our stories with those most dear to us. If we cannot look him in the face, we will be unable to recognize the Jesus walking alongside us. We forget to look for him at all.

If we do have those stories - and many of us do - So often we keep these stories to ourselves, like they are our own little secrets. Many are so intimate and personal we feel scared to share them. Sometimes when we put these experiences into words they feel silly or contrived. Sometimes we think no one will understand or believe us. Sometimes, we feel like there is no one to tell.

And yet these stories make up the fabric of faith of the generations that come after us. Faith, that true enduring faith that resonates within us and binds us to one another, is more caught than taught. We can teach the stories and help our children learn the skills of bible study or community service, but if we want to pass down faith, we need to share ourselves. We need to grace one another with our stories about the power of prayer, about the glimpses of Jesus around the table in the breaking of bread, about our hearts burning within us when we recognized truth. We also need to be willing to

listen, to be graced with the stories of another - the burdens shared, the hopes painfully dashed, the stories that are only beginning to become stories of hope.

In many ways anyone who shares these stories with us is our mother or grandmother in faith - one who nurtures the seedling of faith within us. And so too anyone who listens and carries those stories into the world is a child of faith, nurtured in the love of the God that is parent of us all. This gift is not reserved only for mothers, but for all who are willing to share the story of their own journey on the way to Emmaus.

So now, I ask you to take a moment to remember one of your own Holy Spirit moments, when the world stood still and you experienced God's loving presence. Perhaps it didn't happen exactly to you - perhaps it is a story you've been told over and over again by that someone who planted the seed of faith in you long, long ago. Perhaps it was just last week, that glance of compassion you shared with the stranger on the train.

Because whether you see him or not, Jesus is with you on this road. Are you looking hard enough? Take just a moment and ponder...

And now... who will you tell?

In the name of God our Creator, our Redeemer, our Inspiring Spirit, Amen.