

Davidson College Presbyterian Church
Davidson, North Carolina
Lib McGregor Simmons, Pastor
“Christ is Alive...in you”
Luke 24:1-12
Easter Sunday
April 4, 2010

Theologian Marianne Sawicki has written, “Luke’s story of the empty tomb is a story about where Jesus is NOT to be found.” (1)

This may seem an odd statement to make in reference to Easter. After all, a lot of preparation has gone into this day, preparation so that we might experience the Risen Christ as present. Musicians, ushers, flower arrangers, communion preparers, our office and custodial staff...they’ve all been working like crazy this week. All of this preparation directed, on the face of it, so that upon coming to worship this morning, we might find Jesus **here!**

In this, we have something in common with the women who came to the tomb early in the morning of the first day of the week after Jesus’ death. They too had devoted themselves to preparation. They had risen early. They had gathered their spices. They had formed a little community to make their way together to the tomb.

However, as Luke tells the story, Jesus is not there. The Risen Christ never appears in this Easter story at all. The place where the women expected to find Jesus is NOT where he is to be found.

Where, then, is the Risen Christ? In order to find Jesus, according to Luke, we have to read on to the rest of the story. Literally.

We have to read on to verse 13 in Luke 24 where the evangelist writes about Jesus joining two people who are headed down the road toward the village of Emmaus. They don’t recognize him, but he is there, and they realize it when he takes bread and blesses it and breaks it and gives it to them, and then remembering the walk down the road earlier in the day, they exclaim, “Ah, he was here all along with us. We felt our hearts burning within us while he was talking with us on the road. The Risen Christ was with us all along in nothing more spectacular than an afternoon walk and an impromptu supper.”

And Luke doesn’t stop there. He can’t contain himself. The news is so good that he keeps writing. He goes on to write later in the chapter about the Risen Christ being found as he ate a piece of broiled fish with his friends. And Luke continues the story in the book of Acts where, after Jesus’ ascension into heaven, the Risen Christ becomes embodied in a whole community of people, the church.

Luke’s story of the empty tomb tells us that the Risen Christ is not to be found in a place. Luke’s story says that where Jesus can be found is in and among a faithful people.

Luke's story of where Jesus is and is not is an old story. And it is a story that is still being written.

Years ago, I read the story of Louise Degrafinried.

It all started one Tuesday morning in 1984, when Louise Degrafinried's husband, Nathan, got up from bed in their house in Mason, Tennessee, to let out the cat. "Cat," as they called him, stood at the edge of the porch, his fur bristled up on his arched back, and he hissed. Nathan asked, "What you see out there, Cat?"

A big man stepped from around the corner of the house and pointed a shotgun at Nathan.

Louise heard her husband shout, "Lord, Honey, open the door, he's got a gun." Before she could open the door, the man with the gun had shoved Nathan inside, pushing him and Louise against the wall.

He shouted, thrusting the gun in their faces, "Don't make me kill you!"

The couple knew immediately that the intruder was one of the escaped inmates whom they had heard about on the radio. He was Riley Arceneaux of Memphis, who, with four other inmates, had escaped from Fort Pillow State Prison the previous Saturday. Louise Degrafinried, a 73-year old grandmother, stood her ground. She said, "Young man, I am a Christian lady. I don't believe in no violence. Put that gun down and you sit down. I don't allow no violence here."

The man relaxed his grip on the shotgun. He looked at her for a moment. Then he laid his gun on the couch.

He said quietly, "Lady, I'm so hungry. I haven't had nothin' to eat for three days."

She said, "Young man, you just sit down there and I'll fix you breakfast. Nathan, go get this young man some dry socks."

With that, Louise went to work. She fixed him bacon, eggs, white bread toast, milk and coffee. Then she got out her best napkins, and set her kitchen table.

"When we sat down, I took that young man by the hand and said, 'Young man, let's give thanks that you came here and that you are safe.' I said a prayer and then asked him if he would like to say something to the Lord. He didn't say anything, so I said, 'Just say, 'Jesus wept.''" Then we all ate breakfast."

([When someone asked her later,] "Why did you tell him to say, 'Jesus wept'?" She said, "Because, I figured that he didn't have no church background, so I wanted to start him off simple; something short, you know.")

"After breakfast we sat there and I began to pray. I held his hand and kept patting him on the leg. He trembled all over. I said, 'Young man, I love you and God loves you. God loves us

all, every one of us, especially you. Jesus died for you because he loves you so much.' He said, 'You sound just like my grandmother. She's dead.' Nathan said that he saw one tear fall down the boy's cheek."

"About that time we heard police cars coming down the road. He said, 'They gonna kill me when they get here.'"

"'No, young man, they aren't going to hurt you. You done wrong, but God loves you.' Then me and Nathan took him by the arms, helped him up, and took him out of the kitchen toward the door. I told him, 'You let me do all the talking.' The police got out of their cars. They had their guns out. I shouted to them, 'Y'all put those guns away. I don't allow no violence here. Put them away. This young man wants to go back,' I said, 'Nathan, you bring the young man on out to the car.' Then they put the handcuffs on him and took him back to the prison." (2)

That would be an amazing enough story, in and of itself, but there is more. As I mentioned, I read this story a long time ago, and so when I started thinking that I would include it in this sermon, I logged on to the internet just to see if I could do a little research and make sure my remembrance of the facts was correct. What I found out was that the story didn't end with Riley Arceneaux's being led away by the police.

It turns out Louise Degrafinried kept up with Riley. She started writing letters to him while he was in prison. Her handwriting was shaky due to arthritis, but her words were always strong and clear. "I believe in you. Trust God to work in your life. Be patient, study your Bible and look for the good in everybody." She asked for his photo and put it in her family album. She went to visit him and kept talking to him about Jesus and even worked for his parole. In 1995, Riley Arceneaux who said that the lack of fear that Mrs. Degrafinried showed because of her Christian faith had influenced him to become a Christian himself in 1988, was released from prison. And when Louise Degrafinried died in 1998, her family invited Riley, who by then had found work at an awning company and gotten married and, along with his wife, begun to counsel inmates and their families about adjusting to life after their release from prison, to sit on the front pew at her church, Mount Sinai Primitive Baptist Church in Mason, Tennessee, to speak at her funeral and to be among the pallbearers who carried her casket to its burial place. (3)

As I moved toward this Easter Sunday, pondering Luke's story about where Jesus is and is not to be found, reading about Louise Degrafinried and Riley Arceneaux, I found myself thinking about Mount Sinai Primitive Baptist Church and what Easter is like there. I couldn't help thinking that it is not outside the realm of possibility that as Easter approached, Mrs. Degrafinried might have been going to choir practice or typing the bulletin for the Easter service or arranging the flowers in the chicken wire on the Easter cross.

I don't know for certain that Mrs. Degrafinried did any of these things. What I do know for certain is that while being a part of that little Baptist church may not have been Mrs. Degrafinried's whole story, it was a part of her story. The way that she herself experienced the love and the grace of God there, the way that she experienced Jesus saying to her, "I believe in you. Trust God to work in your life. Be patient. Study your Bible, and look for the good in everybody," prepared her for playing a role in a narrative that easily could have gotten written

another way. And what I also know for certain is that the Jesus whose story was told at Mount Sinai Primitive Baptist Church became the Risen Christ who was alive inside of her, so that when she encountered a person who was scared and hungry, hungry for food and hungry for someone to recognize that he was a human being and to treat him with dignity and compassion, Louise Degrafinried herself embodied Christ and reached out, not in fear, but with love, and fed him.

Perhaps you don't think of yourself as someone with the kind of courage, the kind of faith that Louise Degrafinried had. But you never can tell...if you take some time this Easter afternoon to blow the dust off the Bible that has been sitting on your bookshelf and read the rest of the story that is written in Luke 24 and if you come back to church next Sunday when we gather around the passage from Luke's sequel, the book of Acts, where the same, deer-in-the-headlights, shaking-in-his-sandals Peter who denied that he knew Jesus became so filled with the Holy Spirit that he was made able to stand before the high priest and declare, "We must obey God rather than any human authority," and if you yourself respond to the Holy Spirit's nudge to edge just a hair outside your comfort zone by volunteering to go on a mission trip to Iowa or to the Gulf Coast, or get involved in any of the ministries of this church or another church, thus opening yourself to becoming a part of something bigger than you and thus the recipient of joy like nothing you have ever known, then you just may begin to realize in ways that you haven't before that the Risen Christ is alive in you too.

1. Marianne Sawicki, "Recognizing the Risen Lord," *Theology Today*, Vol. XLIV, No. 4 (January, 1988), 443.
2. William H. Willimon, "Bless You, Mrs. Degrafinried," *The Christian Century*, March 14, 1984.
3. Riley Arceneaux, "The Woman Who Cooked Me Breakfast," <http://www.guideposts.com/story/woman-who-cooked-me-breakfast>.