

May 5, 2024
The Sixth Sunday of Easter
Acts 10:44-48
John 15:9-17
Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Norwood, MA
Pastor Amanda L. Warner

Transformed

We have really been missing Abigail this semester. Last year, her freshman year, in addition to her coming home for spring break, we went to see her at college twice during her second semester, once to show her South Carolina grandparents her campus while they were here for a visit and another time to see a show that she was in. This year we haven't been able to do so that. All of the shows that she's been in have conflicted with things going on here. One was scheduled for Holy Week and Easter weekend, one conflicted with First Communion weekend, and the most recent one, this weekend, conflicted with Julia's prom and a field trip to New York City that Britton had scheduled with his students. So, it's been a long time since we've laid eyes on her and we're really feeling it. Prior to this semester we had never gone a month without seeing her. Now it's been two months. She hasn't even had much time to talk or even text because she's been so busy with her classes and with all of these shows.

That said, she did text us something exciting last week, the theater schedule for next year. She really knows my love language. I love to be able to plan ahead, to get things on my calendar well in advance, so that I can plan. On the schedule that she sent us was some big news. Next November, Susquehanna University will be staging Jesus Christ Superstar, a favorite musical—well, technically, rock opera—of the Warner family.

I've loved Jesus Christ Superstar since I pulled the vinyl concept album out of my parents' collection when I was in ninth grade, back when vinyl was still called

records and just about everyone still had a turntable aka record player to play them on.

My kids love for Jesus Christ Superstar began when we here at Emmanuel sponsored a “field trip” to see the 50th anniversary touring production of the show when it came to Boston. From that moment on all of our kids, especially Abigail, were obsessed. At any given moment, one of our kids is probably listening to Jesus Christ Superstar behind their headphones or ear buds. Needless to say, I know where we’ll be on the weekend of November 15th.

Cyrus has been listening to Jesus Christ Superstar a lot lately, and the other day we were talking the show’s about the portrayal of the disciples. Because they do not come off looking very good. They are by turns, clueless, self-absorbed, power hungry, and cowardly. But as we talked about it, it occurred to us that that’s often how the disciples appear in the gospels too.

As I warned in my sermon a couple of weeks ago that we would, in our gospel reading for today, we have yet another pre-resurrection, pre-Easter flashback for the disciples. This time it’s from what’s known as Jesus’ final discourse in the gospel of John, the final teaching that Jesus gave his disciples before his arrest and crucifixion.

It took place during what we would think of as the last supper. The gospel of John does not tell the story of Jesus feeding the disciples with bread and wine and instituting Holy Communion the way that the other gospels do, “Take, eat. This is my body”, “Take, drink. This is my blood.” “Do this in remembrance of me.” Instead, in the gospel of John, during his last evening with his disciples, at his last pre-crucifixion and resurrection meal with his disciples, Jesus washes their feet and talks to them about many things, but primarily about love, the kind of love that they are to have for each other and model for the world. The final discourse begins in chapter 13 of John and continues through chapter 17, so it’s a big chunk of John’s gospel.

During the final discourse the disciples mostly listened to Jesus words, trying to absorb them. They did ask a few questions that are recorded in the gospel of John, but mostly they just listened and toward the end of this mostly monologue by Jesus the disciples say this: “Yes, now you are speaking plainly, not in any figure of speech! Now we know that you know all things, and do not need to have anyone question you; by this we believe that you came from God.” (John 16:29-30)

And Jesus’ response to their statement of faith is, ‘Do you now believe? The hour is coming, indeed it has come, when you will be scattered, each one to his home, and you will leave me alone. Yet I am not alone because the Father is with me...’ (John 16:31-32)

The disciples listen and listen and listen, but do not understand, and then, just hours later, when Jesus was arrested, the disciples were indeed scattered. They vanished into the darkness, with only Peter and, in John’s gospel, another disciple, skulking around, watching the events from a safe distance, and with Peter, when he was questioned, denying that he even knew Jesus.

As I said, it’s not just in Jesus Christ Superstar where the disciples come off badly.

But as I’ve also said, it’s not hard to understand where the disciples were coming from. They didn’t have any idea what was going to happen and when Jesus was taken, arrested, put on trial, and sentence to die a traitor’s, a criminal’s death. What they thought they were seeing was the end of everything, the end of the promise, the end of hope, the end of Emmanuel, the end of the reality of the presence of God with them.

Even with all of the words that Jesus had spoken to them, all of the teachings, all of the promises, even “in three days I will rise again”, could they have been expected to anticipate what would happen, what God was going to do next?

Also, as I've said before, even knowing what we know, it's hard for us to wrap our heads around resurrection. How much more for those scared, threatened, confused, disappointed disciples, who did not know the end of the story, when the soldiers came to arrest Jesus, when Judas kissed him on the cheek, when Jesus stepped between them and soldiers and let them take him.

But now, I want to us look elsewhere to get our picture of the disciples, not in the gospel of John, where they might have had blank looks on their faces, while Jesus talked about abiding and keeping commandments and having joy and loving one another and bearing fruit.

I want us to look at the reading from the book of Acts. Because the disciples might not have known what would happen next, but we do. We know about Jesus' resurrection. We even know how hard it was for them to believe, when Jesus stood before them, alive again, breathing, speaking, eating, blessing.

But here's what we also know. We also know that the disciples rose to the challenge. The confused, clueless, sometimes even cowardly disciples who we see in the gospels and in pop culture representations of them, are not the end of the story. Instead, we have the stories in Acts, the Acts of the Apostles, where we find, for the most part the same people, but acting in very different ways.

Today, we find Peter, not denying Jesus, but proclaiming him and proclaiming him to a surprising group of people. The back story to our reading from Acts for today is a story of the church changing, shifting, growing, and realizing that God was calling them to break down the boundary walls between people, to step across religious, racial, and cultural barriers, to proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ to all people. Today we have the end of the story of Peter going to preach in the home of Gentiles, into the home of a Roman centurion and his family, non-Jewish people, who had asked to hear about Jesus.

It might be hard for us to understand the challenge that it must have been for Peter to overcome a lifetime of prejudice, to walk into Cornelius's house, the home

of a gentile and a leader of the Roman army, to extend the hand of fellowship to them, to sit at the table with them, to eat their food, and to believe that God could and work in them and through them.

Peter, in this moment was courageous, bold, and faithful. He trusted God, God's message, the vision God had sent him, trusted what God was doing in his life and in the world, trusted God with his whole heart and his whole life. At that moment, he believed and then he saw again, with his own eyes, that God could do anything.

For Cornelius and his family, who had been called, who had been chosen, received the gift of the Holy Spirit, and no one could deny them the water for baptism. And in that moment, the new community that God was creating in the name of Jesus Christ, the extent and the expansiveness of God's love and mercy, became even clearer.

So, what changed? How did the scared, confused disciples, who so often got the wrong idea about what God was doing in the world, turn into men like Peter, who trusted God with their whole hearts, whole minds, whole lives?

How did they find the courage to cross boundaries and extend God's love into the world in ways that they could never have imagined?

The answer is, they didn't. Even resurrection hind sight didn't make it possible for them to grow and believe.

What transformed them was nothing less than the presence of the Holy Spirit in their lives; the Holy Spirit who breathed on them and into them, who gave them courage and confidence, who gave them words to speak and who sent them to speak them to people and in ways they could have never pictured. The book of the Bible that we call the Acts of the Apostles, could well be renamed the Acts of the Holy Spirit, for it was the Holy Spirit that moved the apostles to their great feats of faith and obedience.

And, while we will be celebrating the coming of the Holy Spirit in a couple of weeks, on Pentecost, today we remember that the same Holy Spirit who inspired and transformed the Apostles, is with us. In us, filling us, and sending us out, to tell, to cross human made boundaries and barriers, and to invite all who need it to receive hope and mercy and joy and love in Jesus' name. We are invited and empowered to be book of Acts followers of Jesus. For the Holy Spirit is with us, and the world is crying out for the peace of Emmanuel. Amen.