

Sermon for Third Sunday of Easter  
April 26, 2009

First Church of Christ Longmeadow in Longmeadow –  
Text: Luke 24:36b-48

Peace, Joy Hope

Dear Friends in Christ:

Peace be with you!

What is it that you would like to get out of going to church? Or, what is the goal of worship?

The first question “why do you go to church?” – I asked the chaplain staff that I oversee at the hospital. The consensus among the five people – three women, two men was: to find hope and peace.

The second question “what’s the goal of worship?” was raised by a fellow search committee member. The answer we got was: to help people to be spiritually reenergized, strengthened for the upcoming week.

What would you like to get out of worship today?

Needless to say, that I am hoping that we all will have a fulfilling worship experience today.

The lessons for today – Psalm 4 and the text in the Gospel of Luke – invite us to contemplate how to find hope, joy and peace in the midst of struggle and how to make sense out of Easter three weeks after the celebration.

Psalm 4 is a passionate prayer of someone who is experiencing struggle and looks it full in its face, while not being diminished in his confidence in God. For me, many of the psalms are testimony of an unwavering faith that refuses to give up in the midst of struggle and difficulty. The psalmist lies down in peace, the sure protection of God, the same peace declared in the greeting of the risen Christ ( Luke 24:36). The speaker in psalm 4 may be severely troubled, but all the trouble is confidently contained in the scope of a functioning, working, trustworthy relationship with God.

By meditating on this psalm, we are becoming witnesses of an inner process that transforms the lament from the beginning into an affirmation of peace and trust into the relationship with God. Witnessing the psalmist’s process invites us to think about our

own life. Where do we experience struggle, uncertainty, tiredness and fear? May be it is in school, at work, in our own or our families state of health or illness or in life transitions. And when do we experience a transforming of our concerns in to peace, joy and hope? The notion of the psalm says, you are not alone, I am with you.

The disciples in the Gospel reading today seem to go through a similar process like the psalmist. Their struggle is grieving the loss of Jesus and not believing in the resurrection. Grieving people often feel alone, confused and abandoned. They long for a sense of peace, for understanding, for making sense out of their confusion and a sense of belonging just like the disciples. By visiting the disciples in this state of mind the risen Christ conveys the notion of the psalm: peace, and you are not alone. In other words, Christ's love is shown in: bringing peace, inspiring joy and installing hope.

#### PEACE:

When they meet in private to discuss the plan for their next move, they were still frightened and confused. Their initial response to the reports and the evidence of the resurrection was disbelief. Now they were hiding behind locked doors, grieving in the safety of their own quarters. Life seemed to have closed in on them and it now seemed impossible for the to continue the ministry that they had when Jesus was with them. Their faith had been tried and tested, and when all was said and done, most of them ran for the hills. One had even denied ever knowing Jesus. We find this morning that they are still in disbelief. They were overwhelmed, just like some of us are.....

Anyone who has ever grieved the loss of a loved one, of a significant relationship or a meaningful work knows deep down what the disciples are going through – It is hard work to embrace life again, to find a new purpose and joy in life.

It is in this context that Jesus appears to the disciples. For me, at the heart of the story lies Jesus' love for the disciples. In coming back to them, he attends to their disbelief, confusion and grief, by reassuring them. Jesus reassurance comes in a couple of different ways. First the greeting: "Peace be with you" doesn't that sound like " don't worry, it's just me, trust me, everything will be alright" - the Hebrew word for peace "shalom" means fullness, wholeness. Peace comes by realizing that we are forgiven, that we have already passed our judgment test with God. Peace means that the grave is not the end of life, but that the Easter message can help us to face our realities with calmness, serenity, assurance and confidence.

It is reassuring when Jesus asked the disciples "why are you troubled?" and then goes on to show them in a very practical way his hands and feet. Eating a piece of fish compliments the concreteness of Jesus presence. In other words, Jesus is present in our lives in concrete and practical ways. Jesus is not the ethereal, otherworldly idea or thought or philosophy. Jesus is among us when we share a meal, when we attend to one another in times of sorrow and times of joy, when we genuinely care about one

another, by listening to another's lament and another's worries and successes, when we celebrate life together.

## JOY:

Which brings me to the experience of joy in this text, "they still did not believe because of joy and amazement", the disciples were surprised by joy, they felt the resurrection was nearly too good to be true; overcome with grief, they are now overwhelmed with joy. It's like being told you have won a million dollars – at first you can't believe your good fortune. Jesus gave his disciples some time to grasp this new reality. ( His eating a piece of fish, again the concreteness of this helped the disciples to realize his presence. )

Joy is often a companion of peace. What is meant here, is the deep joy that comes from being content with oneself, with life and being able to cope with life's circumstances. Jesus is modeling here, that joy is possible in the midst of sorrow and in the midst of dire circumstances. I was reminded of the stories, pictures and the accounts from our Haiti-travelers. You often reminded the rest of us, that the people of Haiti exude a deep sense of joy when they worship and in their daily lives, in spite of their dire circumstances. Jesus states to the disciples – and therefore to us today – in the Gospel of John 15:11:" These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full." Jesus is passing on abundant joy as his legacy – and it seems to me that the Haitian Christian have understood that.

Why is it so hard for us to be joyful? I mean genuinely joyful, from deep down in our heart and belly. Is it the pressures of life which give us no relief, or the suffering of the innocents, or the rampant injustice of the world? Is it perhaps the fact that we don't like ourselves and always feel some sense of guilt over something? Or is it the fear that seizes us when we think of tomorrow?

Frederick Buechner, the protestant writer, says:"The world is full of suffering indeed, and to turn our backs on it is to work a terrible unkindness may be almost more to ourselves than on the world. But life indeed is also to be enjoyed. I suggest that may even be the whole point of it. I more than suspect that is why all the sons and daughters of God shouted for joy when he first brought it inot being."

The fact that Jesus could have joy in the midst of sorrow shows that we can experience this too. Joy based on our Christian belief is transformative – and Easter is the proof of this – It is something we become. As Easter - people, we believe in a God that wants to help us change our character, and wants to help us to live out a joy that enriches our lives and that enables us to feel secure even when our circumstances are shaky. Joy is spiritual prosperity. Joy carries us through lives ups and down in a more confident way than mere happiness.

Joy can transform us into becoming more hopeful people. Hope is another quality of an Easter faith that Jesus installed in the disciples.

#### HOPE:

When Jesus started to explain to the disciples all the details of his life as being based on the prophecy of the Old Testament, and now coming into fruition, he lived out this promise. Jesus is the embodiment of God's promise to us. That life is going on, that love is going on, that God's presence is everlasting in our hearts and minds. When a promise is being kept, we tend to become more trusting in a relationship, and our hopes for the future grow.

Hope keeps us going. We need a sense of hope to survive and to live fulfilling lives. When I recently reviewed all the prayers that people write into our prayer book at Baystate's chapel, I was struck by the many people who were praying for hope and strength. A recent survey of similar prayer books in other hospitals showed that hope is the single most important prayer request of patients and families during an illness. Emil Bruner, a Swiss theologian, wrote about hope: "What oxygen is to the lungs, such is hope to the meaning of life."

What do you hope for when you get up in the morning?

My early morning prayer is often infused with a sense of hope because I believe that prayer is already an expression of hope, so I pray for a sense of peace, help me to find joy today and be patient with myself and others, help me to live this day with the awareness of your presence God, help me to be generous with others and live out your call for me. Otherwise Vaclav Havel's definition of hope helps me to stay grounded: "hope is a dimension of the spirit. It is not outside us but within us. It is not about everything turning out to be well, but hope is the dimension of the spirit that in the end all will make sense."

#### Conclusion:

Now coming back to the questions from the beginning: What do you want to get out of worship? What's the goal of worship?

I wonder what happened for you here today. I offer you a couple of suggestions:

- a renewed sense of what Easter means to us today.
- Indeed, the meaning of Easter can be – and I hope for all of us it is and will be - an opening of our hearts and minds, our eyes and ears, of our hands and feet to experience a deeper sense of confidence in our faith and trust to follow the living Christ by extending peace, joy and hope to one another, and to the wider community.
- Christ is risen indeed. Let it be known by how you live your life, how you celebrate life! Amen.