

For the people of St. Philip's
Easter Day, Year C

April 8, 2007

Maria Hoecker, preacher

Inspiration for this reflection:

Sarah Dylan Breuer "Further up and further in."

"Why do you look for the living among the dead?" the messengers asked the women.

Now there's an intriguing question. The women were doing what women have done for all of time . They went to prepare the dead body of their beloved Jesus, and lo and behold, they discover that there was no body in the tomb. A couple of dazzling guys remind them that Jesus said this would happen and the women are the first to go out and tell this Good News to all the rest of them. *Alleluia! Christ is Risen! The Lord is Risen Indeed. Alleluia.*

Of course, no one believed them. Why believe a bunch of hysterical women telling idle tales? "Yeah, right," say the rest of the disciples, "let's go see for ourselves." Isn't it divine that even at the Resurrection, God was still choosing those with the least amount of authority to bear the most glorious of Good News.

I stand here at this pulpit today, a woman , proclaiming the resurrection of Jesus. In our culture I have considerably more authority standing here than any of these women we read of today, these faithful disciples of Jesus. We need to remember, always remember, that most of the women, in most of the cultures, through out most of our time, had no authority. Most of the women, in most of the cultures in OUR time, have no authority, still. No voice that is heard. Yet God chose these voiceless women to first proclaim the Gospel . Perhaps, precisely because they had no voice, they could never speak with outwardly imposed authority.

I know a bit about feeling as though I've lost my voice. While I was in seminary, I regularly spoke with my spiritual director (who was also my theology professor) with concerns about my "voice." I felt that I was losing my voice in all the cacophony of readings, liturgies, books, authors, seminarians, priests, and professors. In academia, everyone wants to be heard. I felt like my words were naive and feeble, and that no one would notice if I kept silent for awhile, till I got my bearings.

I missed the easy one-sided conversation I had previously experienced with God . While I was in seminary, I could feel my voice ebbing away. I couldn't find the words to name my awareness of God. My prayer life felt broken open and raw. . I prayed the Daily Office, but the words just flew past. I prayed the psalms but they seemed to bounce off of me. I prayed the prayers for the church and the world and I listed my own concerns. I was also quite good about making sure that my plans for the future were clearly spelled out for God. God would need to know what I expected would come to pass.

I also spent a lot of time in silence -- I came to rest in that gift of silence. Previously I had always thought that prayer was a one-way conversation, with me doing all the talking. If I didn't talk, and talk fast, nothing would happen. I discovered that by sitting in silence, God had way more to say than I had previously realized. God's presence was felt through God's first language, which is Silence. . I discovered that I was weeping during that time set aside for quiet communion with God. This was not just a weeping of sadness-- some was, some wasn't--- but I found myself weeping at the enormity of all that is, seen and unseen. I felt a deep grief, at my own unfolding, but I also felt a deep release. Which is what happens as we grow.

"You have been given the gift of tears," my spiritual director said. "You've walked into a bigger room, The walls are further away and you can't see them, so you're not quite sure where you are. But you're where you need to be. As with all things, Maria, this too shall pass."

I was where I needed to be. My life was far fuller than it had ever been, and so was my weepy , voiceless prayer life. I had taken up disciplines of contemplative and corporate prayer that were growing abundant fruit in my life. I had a hard time seeing that, though, when I was focusing on what used to be rather than on what was in that moment. I was looking for a living spirit among memories of things that were long gone, but that's not where abundant life is found.

"Why do you look for the living among the dead?" we ask?

The life Jesus gives is always beckoning us onward.

My daughter Chloe loves to read over and over the series of books by C.S. Lewis called the Chronicles of Narnia . One of the most vivid images of our life in Christ comes from the conclusion of The Last Battle, the final book from the series, in which the heroes finally enter Aslan's country, Narnia's vision of heaven. Once there, they find that Aslan's country is a little like the wardrobe they climbed into so long ago and found themselves in a whole new world, the world of Narnia. The inside is bigger than the outside. In Aslan's country, the cry is always "**Further up and further in,**" and as one journeys toward the center, things seem increasingly more *real* somehow. The wonders left behind from the last step seem like shadows in comparison to the increasingly more vivid and wondrous country one journeys through in the present. (Breuer)

Whenever I find something -- a spiritual discipline, a ministry, a step in my relationship with God -- that "works," something that brings me closer to God, the temptation I find is usually to look upon it as a sign that I've "arrived," (whatever that means.) Like Peter on the mountain of Jesus' transfiguration, I'm tempted to build a house right there and box it in. Have you all noticed my "Prayer box " on the shelf outside of my office? Kathleen Elliott (9 years old) made it. I bought it at the silent auction that the Godly Play classes were holding to raise money for Katrina disaster relief. It's a white square box that you can put over your head. On it Kathleen wrote, "Leave me alone, I'm in my quiet place." I just love that !

But Jesus' call is always "Further up and further in!" If I should stay there in my box, I may be comfortable, but eventually I'll find I'm no longer growing in there. It doesn't mean that something's wrong with the place, and it doesn't mean that something's wrong with me; it simply means that abundant life lies ahead, and I'm called onward into the journey.

A few weeks ago, I started a blog. I like to put bits and pieces of thoughts on the blog as the seasons turn. You can access it through our church website. This week I wrote a reflection about the challenge of call. A very short one. I call it "**remember**".

We are called to just be right here, right now. Remember: trust the Holy Trinity-- Lover, Beloved, and Love itself-- to carry us through all places at all times.

These feel like uncertain times for many of us; I hear a lot of fear and confusion in conversations about our church, our nation, our world, and where we're called to go next. I also hear a lot of anger. I *feel* a lot of anger. Did you know that usually when we feel anger it is because we *fear* that we are losing something? Whether that loss is real or imagined, it's true---think about it. Anger springs from fear of loss: Where is the church I knew as a child? Where is the world I used to know?--it's *my* church, *my* world. Who took it away? How do we get it back in the box we so carefully built?

I understand this sense of loss, having experienced enough profound losses in my own life. But when I feel the palpable fear that often follows such a sense of loss, the words of the messengers in this Sunday's gospel come to me:

Why do we look for the living among the dead?

Even what was good before may not be what I am called toward now.

We are called to just be right here, right now. Remember: trust the Holy Trinity-- God the Lover, Jesus Christ, the Beloved, and Love itself--

The Holy Spirit which binds us into one body, the Risen Christ. That love carries us through all places at all times

Further up and further in! Jesus is not dead. He is alive -- and furthermore, he is on the move! We will meet him not as a mummified body in a tomb anointed with spices, but as the stranger on the road whose wounds are still with him. Even in the resurrection, Christ still carries his wounds from the crucifixion with him always. .

Further up and further in! Come to the table with your fellow companions ; Jesus opens our eyes as we break bread together. Jesus is not gone, he has been transformed, and we are called to follow.

Abundant life lies ahead . There's no time to pack -- the journey starts right now!

Let's Go! Further up and further in!