

The Third Sunday after Easter 2017

“Follow me.”

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Last summer while driving through the Rocky Mountains I experienced what I can only call a kind of mental dis-integration. Some of this was shared in my letter to the parish last Sunday. It has all left me feeling a little bit like Hansel and Gretel, as if I had wandered into a dark wood and lost the trail home. In one of my final efforts to salvage things during my long drive last year, I took to listening to interviews with poets and other thoughtful folks, hoping that one of them might say something that would piece me back together. And though none did in any final way, I remember listening to the translator Joanna Macy discussing her work with the poet Rainer Maria Rilke (a poet I largely discovered here at St George’s twenty years ago) and she read a poem that I think makes some sense of this morning’s readings. The poet writes: God speaks to each of us as he makes us / then walks with us silently out of the night. / These are the words we dimly hear: / You ... go to the limits of your longing. / Embody me. / Flare up like a flame and make big shadows I can move in. / Let everything happen to you: beauty and terror.... / Nearby is the country they call life.... / Give me your hand.

Go to the limits of your longing; let everything happen to you; Give me your hand.

This Sunday's Gospel lesson is taken from Christ's final conversation with his friends before his crucifixion: "Verily, verily, I say unto you, that ye shall weep and lament, but the world shall rejoice: and ye shall be sorrowful, but your sorrow shall be turned into joy." The setting is the Last Supper, and the Lord tells them that he must go away and they will be sad; but he will return and they will be filled with joy. In the first instance, Jesus is speaking to the disciples about his impending death and resurrection. He must go away from the disciples when he is arrested; go away when he is hung upon the Cross; and go away yet again when he is buried in the tomb. He will return in his resurrection. More than this, Jesus is also speaking about those departures and returns that we will celebrate in the coming month: he will depart from them forty days after Easter, for example, when he ascends to heaven; he will return to be with them spiritually through the Holy Spirit on Pentecost. All of these dramatic departures and returns are anticipated from the very beginning of Christ's earthly ministry. As a child, for example, Mary and Joseph lose Jesus and must go looking for him in the Temple – he departs and returns; the Lord regularly withdraws from the disciples and the crowds only to return again; when he calls the disciples he says, specifically, *follow* me which suggests, strangely, that he is constantly withdrawing, calling them on. The whole rhythm of Christ's life with the disciples is the rhythm of departure and return.

But why? Why must the Lord live this rhythm of leave-taking and return?

At its most simple, I think, it is because it is by this rhythm that the Christian life grows in us. As Jesus says today, the disciples' sorrow is the sadness of labour pains – the sadness of something new being born. We have been learning since Easter Sunday what this new life being born in us looks like. “If ye then be risen with Christ,” we heard, “seek those things that are above.” And Paul went on to tell us what is above – that is, to tell us what the resurrected life looks like here and now: “put it all off: wrath, anger, malice, slander, and filthy talk out of your mouth; lie not to one another; cast off the old self with its evil deeds, and put on the new, which is being refashioned unto knowledge according to the image of its creator.” And in the two Sundays since Easter, we have been discovering more and more about this risen life: on the Sunday after Easter we saw in the Gospel that the risen life is embodied in a community of forgiveness; last Sunday we learned that the new life includes the willingness to suffer for doing what is good; this week we are called to obedience and love for all. The birth of this Kingdom in us can be painful, can induce a kind of sorrow as we struggle, and yet it is a sorrow that issues in joy.

This is one aspect of the sorrow described in the Gospel today – it is the birth pain of a new life. But there is of course something more to the sorrow described by Jesus – it is, in a deep and acute way, the sadness that arises when it seems for all the world as if the Lord has left us. This is the sadness of Good Friday, the sadness that arises when our own best efforts to manage the world and our lives come to an end. As the poet I heard on my mountain drive suggests, we go the limits of our longing, our

hope, we feel everything, only to find that our hopes are not enough, our strategies for navigating the world insufficient. Someone or something must come to meet us when our hopes come to an end. Fr Robert Crouse writes: “The death and resurrection of Jesus was not for [the disciples] an immediate occasion of joy, but of fear. They did not – could not – see the point of it all. They were afraid. They could not even find his body. They ran away and hid. But, as Jesus had promised, their sorrow, this fear, this bewilderment, this shattering of natural hopes and natural sufficiency was not pointless. It was only through all this that the disciples were able to know the risen Christ, and to receive a new sufficiency of knowledge and action in the presence of God’s Spirit.... In the perspective of God’s providence, in the pattern of salvation, sorrow and fear and doubt are not just unfortunate accidents; they are elements in God’s fitting us for glory. Christ’s wounds are the signs of his glory, and so must ours be. “A little while”, Jesus says, “and I will see you again, and your heart shall rejoice; your joy no man taketh from you.” *“I will see you again and your heart shall rejoice.”*

So much of the best of St George’s has been accomplished when the Lord has invited us, in the words of the poet, to take his hand when this congregation had come to the end of its natural abilities and hopes. In some way, this inspired the vision of Fr Petite and others in the 1980s that began the revival of a failing inner city parish; it is without question the means by which the church was rebuilt in Fr Thorne’s time after the fire in 1994. It is, I think, the vision that inspires YouthNet and the Soup

Kitchen – the trust or expectation that Jesus will *come to us* in the children of this neighbourhood and in the hungry, not simply that we bring the love of Jesus to them.

All of this is confirmed by a strange turn of phrase in the Gospel this morning. Strangely, I think, after telling the disciples that he must depart, Jesus does not tell the disciples that *they* will see *him* again. Rather, the lesson says that *he* will see *them* again. “A little while ... *and I will see you again.*” Not you will see me, but *I* will see *you*. This is our hope and our salvation – not just that we reach out for him, but more importantly that he desires us, he sees us. Jesus *sees* Peter at the moment of Peter’s betrayal and this look leads to Peter’s repentance; Jesus *sees* the crowds in the wilderness and has compassion on them; in the accounts of his Resurrection, Jesus always *sees* and recognizes his disciples before they know him. *I will see you*. As the poet writes, God speaks to us and tells us to go to the limits of our longing and there, when we cannot hope anymore, in that darkness, he says: Take my hand. The Lord sees us when we cannot see him. In some way this reality is embodied for us in every Holy Communion: The Lord sees us when the word of absolution is pronounced after our confession of sins – of those moments we have not hoped enough; he sees us when we come to the rail with empty hands and he fills us. But urgently, the Lord also wishes to “see” us in and through one another. This is the mystery of our friendships here: that your attention to my brokenness is the Lord seeing me; that my attention to yours is the Lord seeing you.

I am not sure which is most difficult – to pay attention to the ways another hurts or to allow others to see our own; to admit to someone that we have come to the end of our longing or to be the one who reaches out a hand when someone is at the end. But I do know that this is the shape of the Kingdom of God here and now, this giving up of burdens and this taking up of each other's burdens. This is how sacred sorrows become sacred joys. This is the lesson I learned at St George's twenty years ago, it is the message I have tried however failingly to proclaim in my too short time as Rector, and it is for this revelation that I am eternally indebted to this place and to you. *AMEN.*