

July 18, 2021

Matthew 28:16-20

Freeing Jesus: Jesus as Presence...for Everyone

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Sermon and Scripture

If you've been around the church for a while, you have probably noticed that we change the cloths on the pulpit and communion table every once in a while. These cloths are called paraments. Each season of the church year has its own color. Right now, we are in what we call "ordinary time." As you can see, the color for ordinary time is green. Green symbolizes life, hope, and anticipation. Ordinary time is marked by the seasons of nature---summer's growth and fall's harvest. In ordinary time there are no grand holy days, no Easter, Pentecost, Christmas, or Epiphany, just ordinary days.

Yet, on these ordinary days, we still light the candles which symbolize God's presence among us and we continue to believe there is no place we can be where God is not...even in the mundane. I mean, we expect God to show up for Christmas and Easter, with our candlelight services and brass quartets, but God shows up even here, in the middle of July amid our vacations, low attendance Sundays, and informality.

I think that was the God Jesus embodied 2000 years ago when he showed up to talk with a woman at the well, when he showed up to eat with a tax collector, and when he befriended a few rough around the edges fishermen and traveled from place to place without benefit of 5 star hotels or a Platinum American Express card. Jesus and his friends inhabited the ordinary. And it's a good thing because, while we all have our share of important, special, even holy days, most of our lives are spent dwelling in the ordinary. I don't see much use for a God that only shows up on the day of the wedding, but doesn't show up for the day in and day out work of the marriage. Or a God that shows up for the birth

but doesn't hang around for the sleepless nights and terrific twos of toddlerhood or a God who is only around for our joyful celebrations but isn't present in the darkness of disappointment, failure, and chaos.

In the final chapter of *Freeing Jesus*, Diana Butler Bass writes about Jesus as Presence. It was this Jesus that discovered in the ordinary days and experiences of adult life. She wrote about a trip she took to Ghost Ranch, a retreat center owned by the Presbyterian Church. She talks about a moment when she looked up at the Shining Cliffs, a massive formation dated back some 165 million years and Psalm 18: 2 came to mind, "The Lord is my rock, my fortress, and my deliverer, my rock in whom I take refuge." She wrote, "The wind was still that day, the creek below, dry, giving rise to an eerie silence all around. God the rock." She joined centuries of scholars in wondering, when Jesus said, "On this rock I will build my church..." did he mean Peter or himself?

Almost on cue, she heard a low rumble followed by a thunderous crash. She looked to the sky, expecting to see a cloud of smoke as if a bomb had just been dropped. There was no smoke, but the Shining Cliffs were shrouded in clouds of red dust. The rumbling continued, and when the dust dissipated, she could see huge boulders rumbling from the top of the hills and landing far below, as the sheer face of rock collapsed. She wrote, "The earth literally quaked, not from within, but from massive stones smashing against the ground, as if hurled by angry gods." Jesus is that kind of rock, she thought...representing that kind of God, big and present and changing, the kind of God that "never ceases its restless, thundering work to make the earth anew."

And, this God was mysterious. Nobody knew when the face of that cliff would break off. It was perfectly natural but could not be predicted. There is so much about theology, "the study of God," that is a mystery. However, the mysteries of God aren't like the Nancy Drew and Hardy Boys mysteries of my childhood. In their book, *The Mystery of God*:

Theology for Knowing the Unknowable, theologians Steven D. Boyer and Christopher A. Hall write, “The whole fascination of a detective story lies in trying to solve the puzzle, and when one knows the solutions the mystery is solved---it is no longer a mystery...But the fascination of many of the New Testament mysteries lies in their peculiar character even after being revealed...A revelational mystery excites wonder, awe, amazement, astonishment...The is the way a revelational mystery works: we know and yet the mystery remains.” The more we know about Jesus and the more experiences we have of God, the more we realize there is so much more...more than we can imagine and that “more” is always there, waiting for us to discover it in spaces that surprise us.

At the end of her book, in the conclusion, which she titled, “The Universal Jesus,” she wrote about an experience she had when she was speaking at the 2015 Inaugural Women’s Assembly at the Parliament of the World’s Religions. She talked about how she felt sitting on the stage, waiting her turn to speak, seated between a Wiccan and a Hindu, one seat removed from a Muslim. She reflected on what it felt like to be in a room full of religious women, on a stage that Christianity didn’t own. She told this story when she stood up to speak:

Last week, I was at my neighborhood coffee shop. My favorite barista was there, a young Muslim woman, I noticed something different about her. She was not wearing her usual black hijab. Instead, she was wearing a bright green scarf edged with sparkling sequins.

“I love your scarf,” I said.

She looked pleased. “You know, they told me I had to wear black.”

“What?” I asked.

“The rules. They said I had to wear black. But I didn’t believe it. So I looked it up myself. I don’t have to wear black. I can wear any color I want.”

I didn't know whether she was speaking of some religious authority or her boss. But it didn't matter. She had searched the "rules" for herself, not listening to someone else's interpretations, but reading the text on her own: "I looked it up myself."

"I looked it up myself" has thundered throughout history. This is the stuff of what we Protestant Christians call Reformation, of a new spiritual revolution. When the women of the world take on words for themselves, when we seize our sacred texts and search them for the truth, for wisdom, for strength. To interpret our traditions for ourselves. Not to submit, but to claim authority and look it up for ourselves, to do that which we know to be beautiful and joyful and just. Women with the power of words can change the world.

As I mentioned, Bass was speaking to a room full of women from different faith traditions, so this story rightly highlights the ways in which women have been "kept in their place" for a very long time. But to you I would like to say:

LGBTQ+ people with the power of words can change the world.

Black people with the power of words can change the world.

Brown people with the power of words can change the world.

People who are differently abled with the power of words can change the world.

Children with the power of words can change the world.

Older adults with the power of words can change the world.

Our sacred stories are for all of us to read, interpret, and live...for ourselves.

I relate on a deep level to Bass's story of that conference, and I thought about that a lot this week as I considered God's presence in the ordinariness of my life. Over the years, I've had a lot of opportunities to share space with people who practice a faith tradition other than Christianity. In Illinois, my very best clergy friend was Rebekah, a Rabbi. I learned so much about Judaism from her and I learned so much about

my own faith as I shared it with her. We walked together often, and God showed up in those ordinary laps around my neighborhood, as we sprinkled our deep theological talks in between talk of whose flowers were looking good and saying hello to neighbors passing by.

Rebekah and I worked together on inter faith collaboration in our community. Once the church I served hosted a community interfaith worship service lamenting the lives taken by gun violence in this country. A Hindu priest chanted the call to worship. Rabbi Rebekah offered a prayer. A Black Baptist minister spoke about racism and the effects of guns on the Black community. I don't remember what I said. I am sure it was brilliant. But I do remember what the Imam from one of the mosques said. I expected him to tell a story of Mohammad or talk about the Golden Rule that shows up in so many sacred texts, including the Quran. Instead, he talked about Jesus. He talked about Jesus's way of bringing people together and how his life created a vision for a world that would be pleasing to God; a world made whole.

I was mesmerized. I sat in my seat on the chancel, next to Rebekah and tears ran down our faces. I turned to her and I said, "This is what God wants. This is who we are supposed to be." I don't think there was a dry eye in the sanctuary that night. That night, a room full of people from many faith traditions and no faith tradition, found the answer to all that is wrong in the world in the stories of Jesus. Just love each other.

So, that brings me to our text for today:

Matthew 28:16-20

⁶ Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. ¹⁷ When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted. ¹⁸ And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. ¹⁹ Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰ and teaching them to obey everything

that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

The traditional interpretation of this text has been that followers of Jesus should go into the world and convert other people to Christianity. But, I wonder what it would be like to see this text as a call for inclusion rather than a mandate for conversion? What if making disciples of all nations was about making the ways of Jesus evident in the world? What if the directive to baptize people was about welcome and making God accessible to everyone, not about something that is required? Like my friend the Imam, I believe the ways of Jesus are truly for everyone. Jesus’s way is the way of peace, compassion, justice, and love; the way of wholeness in a fragmented world.

Diana Butler Bass ends her book, *Freeing Jesus*, by talking about a thing called memoir theology. She writes, “Memoir theology is the making of theology----understanding the nature of God----through the text of our own lives and taking seriously how we have encountered God.” In other words, memoir theology privileges relationships and life experiences over doctrine, rules, and the interpretations of theologians with whom we have nothing in common. Bass encourages her readers to listen carefully to their own experiences. Listen to the voices that speak words of love to their hearts. Watch the ones who advocate for justice, who deescalate tense moments, who bring compassion when others bring judgement, and who prioritize the worth of all living things over money, power, and convenience. In them, in all these places, Jesus’s ways are present.

This is the truth of Jesus. That Jesus---the one known by some of us as a friend and by others as a teacher, experienced by some as savior or lord, the one we encounter as the way and who inhabits the ordinary... This Jesus is also the universal Jesus, the one who welcomes and

includes; the one whose ways can be for everyone because his ways are the way of life and the way of love...for all of us. Amen.