

Sermon Knox 3 April 2016 - given by Rev Yvonne Smith**Class Reunion Resurrection College or What does Resurrection Life look like?**

***May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in thy sight
O God our Rock and our Redeemer. AMEN***

Class reunions are one of those occasions where you can have the most wonderful time or the most awful time. The endless ‘whatever happened to’ and ‘what are you doing now?’ questions can be both enormously interesting as well as extremely anxiety producing. There is genuine fondness and desire to know where people are now – these people with whom you shared these formative years. Where are they physically – geographically – but also who are they travelling with – who are they being now? – What stirs them? What is hurting them? What are they passionate about?

Of course alongside this interest in people’s stories and reconnecting with the past is the underlying anxiety that comes from the fear of being measured by whatever the measures of success of the time are.

Imagine a class reunion for the followers of Jesus – twenty years down the track. Whatever happened to Thomas, Peter, James? We can fill in some of the gaps for them because of what was written thirty to sixty years on in the gospels and then in the later non- canonical books. But what about Mary of Bethany, Martha, Lazarus, Joseph of Arimathea, Mary Magdalene and all the others who show up momentarily in the gospels as minor characters but who were clearly close associates and friends of Jesus and the disciples. In today’s world they’d be a spin off film or tv series, part of the Jesus Franchise. I’m not trying to be facetious – merely wanting to point out that their stories subsequent to the Easter events would be fascinating and would probably have much to inspire us in our own stories of faith and mission. After all theirs was the resurrection life.

I was fortunate to be able to attend a couple of the reflective services here during the early part of Holy Week before Easter. The reading on the Tuesday evening was the reading used this evening from John’s gospel telling the story of Mary of Bethany anointing Jesus’ feet. I have wondered all Easter – whatever happened to Mary of Bethany? All that love and generosity she displayed. Where did it go?

What did they do, those minor characters, after the news began to spread that Jesus had risen? Their stories fade into the ether of time. After the resurrection Mary of Bethany is not mentioned by name in any of the canonical gospels, though we can assume she is among the disciples and friends who are mentioned without naming them in the last two chapters of John, and in the first two chapters of the Book of Acts, especially among the unnamed women. The non-canonical writings show Mary Magdalene continuing as a leader among the disciples, teaching, preaching, and healing. But we know very little else beyond that she was given the title Apostle to the apostles by the Eastern Orthodox church. There is some argument as to whether the Roman Catholic medieval church thought that the three women – the sinner of Luke’s gospel, Mary of Bethany and

Mary Magdalene were one and the same (*a fading into absence of a particularly pernicious kind*) but by the 20th C it was clear that they were considered three separate people and they had a resurrection of sorts.

Mary of Bethany along with her sister Martha are considered in some church traditions to be part of what are called the myrrh bearing women – the women directly involved in the burial of Jesus or who discovered the empty tomb.

They were the announcers, the heralds of the new life that was opening up before them in astonishing ways. Interesting that they became that whilst carrying the myrrh of mourning. It is a burden we often bear ourselves. Being heralds and bearers of new life in amongst the grief and sadness.

Church tradition particularly Eastern Orthodox tradition holds that after the resurrection of Jesus, Mary of Magdalene went to Ephesus, in Asia Minor, with the Apostle John and Mary of Nazareth. The house where Mary the Mother of Jesus is supposed to have lived still stands in Ephesus. According to tradition, Mary Magdalene died and was buried in Ephesus, and in 899 AD the Emperor Leo VI had her relics transferred to a monastery in Constantinople.

Legend abounds of course. Beginning at least as early as the Sixth Century AD, a legend developed that Mary Magdalene was set adrift off the coast of Palestine with Lazarus, Martha and Mary of Bethany, Salome the mother of John, Maximin, Joseph of Arimathea, and others whose names vary from account to account. According to this legend the boat carried them to the southern shore of France, where they were cast ashore at the mouth of the Rhone. They left Mary of Bethany and Mary Salome there where it is said the pair founded a church. Mary Magdalene traveled with the rest of her companions to Marseilles, where Lazarus was declared the first bishop, then went on with Maximin to what is now Aix en Provence, where Maximin became bishop in his turn. Which just goes to show that when there is a vacuum it will be filled – in this case absence is filled by presence.

From the 13th C there is a strong Black Madonna tradition in the south of France that is thought to have grown out of the legends and connects to the Gnostic traditions that developed around Mary Magdalene.

So – where am I going with this?

1. Narrative is powerful - stories of who, what , where ...whatever happened to? What are they doing now? It is through stories that we encounter and connect with people. It is no different when it comes to the Bible and to faith. The gospel writers certainly knew that. In the literary world today we see the rise in popularity of life writing – of memoirs that effectively are literature in which people tell their stories. These stories resonate with their reading public leading in turn to the reader reflecting on their own life and contributing to the making meaning project.
2. The Easter story – the Resurrection story – is an immensely powerful story on so many levels. Whatever happened to Jesus? Who was he? Who is he? How he's doing now? To answer those questions people told and then wrote stories, about the characters around him and what happened

next. How their faith developed? How they were inspired? What they came to understand was God and of God. Inspired stories – God inspired stories.

3. Those of us who have been listening to those stories and teaching for years kind of get used to them – much like we can get used to a stunning view. I suggest that our faith can be energized by exploring these stories of the minor characters as we hear them in the gospels and New Testament but also as we develop them in our imaginations post resurrection. Their real stories, I suspect, would not be that different to our stories. Their stories are our stories. The stories of how we live out life in the light of Easter.

Mary of Bethany along with her sister Martha were no strangers to new life – they had witnessed it in the raising of their brother Lazarus - Lazarus had experienced the sweetness of ‘a new start just as people who have experienced remission from Cancer experience the sweetness of a new lease on life. The anointing of Jesus’ feet with expensive ointment was Mary’s moment and action of ‘seeing’ into the death of Jesus and responding to that with great love and generosity.

Is this not what we are asked to do every year at Easter and then beyond? To see deeply into the death of Jesus – and to whatever it is that is the resurrection and to respond to that seeing with huge love and generosity in whatever way we are called to in this life and time. To live lives in the light of the resilience of hope.

If we take seriously the concept of the church as the body of Christ in the world then the questions, ‘whatever happened to Jesus? How’s he doing now?’ - are questions about us, the church? These are questions about what the resurrection life looks like now? It’s as though we are at a perpetual class reunion of Resurrection College.

What does Resurrection Life look like? If we were to share our stories we would probably find resurrection life full of ups and downs, of breakthroughs and setbacks. We would find it full of grief at the continual ability of humans to war against one another. We would find it full of love as we welcome children into the world, see the wisdom in the eye of a grandparent, hug a friend, welcome refugees , empower a woman who refuses to be abused anymore, acknowledge people acting with compassion and grace. And we would point to those places and say ‘there’s Jesus now’ – see how he laughs – see how he cries – see how he is crucified again – but see there he is risen.

Quote from Arthur Ash

1. Start where you are
2. Use what you have
3. Do what you can

And I would add

Fall to our knees and pray for such love and generosity as Mary of Bethany displayed as she saw deep into the death of Jesus who would become the Christ.

Frederick Buechner

The grace of God means something like:

Here is your life.

You might never have been, but you are,

Because the party wouldn't have been complete without you.

Here is the world.

Beautiful and terrible things will happen.

Don't be afraid.

I am with you.

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