

Happy, difficult work: “Follow me”

Sermon for Easter 3, St. Stephen’s Episcopal Church

My husband and my niece share a birthday in April; a few decades separate them but like the best celebrations, we keep finding reasons to eat cake. It’s the endless birthday. Children, especially, have what I need: that spirit that does not tire, that daily joy as if to say, “Another morning has come! How do we celebrate this one?” Well, the church summons some of that spirit on Sundays, especially in its 50 day feast of Easter, a 50-day celebration where we read stories of the resurrected Jesus—the ways he’s unrecognized even by those who love him most, then recognized, in moments of ecstatic clarity, a light from heaven flashing, Saul falling to the ground, another crying, “It is the Lord!” and Peter jumping into the sea in a moment of exclamation and awe. So we enter further into the joy of the Resurrection and the mystery of what it all might mean: Jesus has died and is risen.

What’s peculiar for me about Easter is that I’m not *exactly* sure how I feel, or how I explain that I don’t feel *pure* joy, or *only* joy. I don’t: the trauma of the narrative, the gruesome reality and grief at Christ’s death are not undone or forgotten or at all erased. We were just there, shouting *Crucify him!* And I’m still reeling in my heart. Holy Week services move me like nothing else does.

Morning *has* come and Easter *is* a joyful time, in part because, as Psalm 30 says, weeping spent the night. So, it seems to me, even joy carries with it some difficult work, requires some endurance. That has certainly been a personal lesson of motherhood: that even joy is hard. Raising a baby is the happiest, hardest thing I have ever done. My husband and I still talk about the day we left the hospital with our newborn son, looking at the nurse, feeling at once overjoyed but also frightened and somehow utterly betrayed — like, you’re just going to send us home with this baby? All by ourselves? We have no idea what we’re doing! We need you! That nurse just smiled and said, *you’ll be fine, it’s only the beginning. You’re supposed to be a little terrified. It’s a whole new life.*

Maybe the disciples—certainly *I*— feel something of this weight: Jesus is risen, alleluia. But now what? What does that mean for us? What do we do now that everything has changed? Help! We need you!

My non church-going friend said to me recently, I don’t get why people go to church *every* week. It’s, like, the same thing each time. And I said, yeah, that’s the best part! There’s no new instructions! Just a reminder over and over about what they were in the first place! Luckily, I tell her, Sunday keeps coming; every week I get to hear again the most joyful and most difficult instruction of all: “follow me.”

Jesus says it by different words or teaches it in different ways and maybe for some, it is an easier task—decisive and clear. You got it the first time, unquestionably. But for me, I need all the help I can get. I need it every week. I can be so forgetful, so impatient, short-sighted, selfish, ambivalent, and I get it all so wrong so often. I need you. I need this place.

How many nights have I lain awake regretting. How many nights worrying about what I cannot undo or change, obsessing over my failures. How many hours of my life have I spent arguing with myself about myself, trapped in some psychological cul-de-sac, round and round. And how many times have I almost forgotten what I vowed I would never forget to do, which was to listen to that voice saying: Follow me.

It's a bit of a paradox, really: Jesus comes back to remind us he's leaving and to teach us how to live without him. Like every good parent, maybe, we don't like to imagine leaving our children but we know, that if the natural order of things is right and just, they should outlive us, and all we can hope for is that we raise them in such a way that they are able to continue without us, without our bodily presence, and with some faith that they are not alone, some assurance that they have what they need, that God is near, and that even death cannot outdo what love has made. You don't have to be a parent to know something of that desire—that those you care for the most will never doubt that they are indeed loved.

If I could give my son one single gift, it would be that assurance, that the God who formed me formed him, and that wherever he is, I am there, God is there and he will never be left alone. If only I could wrap faith as a present and give it to him to last his life, I'd do it in a second. If he learns nothing else from school, from church, from me, if one day he turns his back on all of it, the single thing I want him to know is that my loving him through and through was evidence enough for me that God *is*. When I hear Jesus say follow me, feed my sheep, I hear also Jesus say love like your whole life depends on it.

Today our high school seniors [were, will be] recognized as [will, were] several girls from our Virginia Girls Choir. It is a special moment, a way of honoring those among us who have been doing all kinds of happy, hard work. (Especially soon-to-be high school graduates who have been stressed out since the 4th grade.) (And our choristers who inspire me.) I speak for all of us, I know, when I say that we do honor you, we pray for your joy and I hope for each of you what I hope for my own child—that you are filled with the knowledge that you are made of God, loved through and through, that you are a vessel of peace and worthy of a happiness and hope in every direction.

Those who are most worried about you all, or about the future—the hyper-connectedness of young people, and virtual reality and your devices, those are often the ones who don't know many young people. (We *all* need to get off our phones!) When I was daily engaged with middle and high school students like you, as a teacher and coach, I had never felt more hopeful about the world. I was often exhausted but inspired, astonished by your compassion and your talents, your initiative, your kindness and humor, and I was—and am—when around you, overwhelmed by a feeling of abundance. The stakes are as high for our young people as they are for all of us: our true calling is a joyful one, but a difficult one, a holy one. When Jesus says “follow me”—I think he means, also, follow you, your own heart. *You* are inseparable from God, made in the divine image. And nothing you do—not your worst mistake, not your most shameful offense, not your doubt, not your absence, not even your apathy, or disdain, can separate you from God. In your darkest hour, I pray you remember our honoring you not just for your specific achievements, but—believe it—honoring you for being.

Today's story is not only the story of Peter and the disciples recognizing Christ, this is a story about US recognizing Christ *now*. The Gospel is *being*. It's not only the disciples who do not recognize Christ among them, we are guilty too, and the Lord did not once rise long ago for them; no, he IS risen indeed, today, for us. The Easter story is the story of IS, of *our* recognition, here and now. And when Jesus says "follow me," he's not just inviting them, that morning, he's inviting all of us, everyday, every minute. Follow me always, I imagine him saying to me, you belong to me in every hour, in your darkest and in your brightest, in your failure and your triumph. You belong to me in your cruelty and your kindness, and even when you disappoint, even when you deny me, doubt me, crucify me, even when you get it wrong, even when you deny that you belong to me, Thanks be to God, you do belong to me. It is the work of joy—I think—the happiest, hardest work of a life of faith.

Learning about Jesus resurrected means learning about Jesus crucified, just as learning about mercy means learning first about pain and learning forgiveness means learning first about fault. For me it's one of the deepest implications of the Resurrection: we are loved anyway. This isn't just Peter's story, or Saul's; it's ours. When doubt holds us back, love calls us forward. When we feel overcome by failure, Jesus invites us to cast our nets on the other side and try again. And when we are anxiously looking around wondering what to do now, we have no idea, Jesus says follow me. Like the nurse handing me my baby: it's a whole new life.

Yes, it's the same message every week. But every week I need to hear it if not preach it myself: this news is too good. Christ is risen. *Is* feeding us, forgiving us, loving us, even when we do not recognize him, even when we cannot see to see. Believing that may be the happiest, hardest work we have to do.

Allison Seay