

Third Sunday of Easter
St. Ann's Church, Old Lyme
April 6th, 2008
Acts 2:14a, 36-41
Psalm 116:1-3, 10-17
1 Peter 1:17-23
Luke 24:13-35

SERMON

I'm still suffering from PESS—not pest, a description of my personality, nor some strange tropical disease—PESS: the syndrome that attacks clergy and laity alike after Lent, Holy Week, and Easter: Post Easter Stress Syndrome. When you've had a magnificent observation and celebration of Lent, Holy Week, and Easter such as we have had this year, [thank you Violetta and the choir for the music, thank you Peter for the organization and carrying out of the liturgies, and Iain, thank you for your baptism—it was an Easter gift for all of us], after a season like this one just past, it takes some time to get our mundane wheels back under us.

Remember how we used to switch from road tires to snow tires before technology made it possible to keep the same tires on the car all year long? That's the way it is with PESS. You get your head wrapped around Lent, Holy Week, and Easter (you get your holy wheels rolling), and it becomes difficult to switch back to ordinary time. I'm just not ready, yet, I want to keep hold of the sacred.

It's a sad thing that we can't keep our head in the Holy Seasons all year long—we don't, maybe we can't, maybe that's life. Still and all, I'm not ready to wade back into the world. I want to hold onto the Holy Season, and so the preaching this morning reflects this unwillingness to step back into the harsh reality of the world beyond this sacred space. The sermon won't satisfy the prophet or the mission driven do-gooder that's locked up inside you. This morning we'll tell a story that ties into the Gospel reading, and allow the story to offer its own moral and not force a conclusion on you.

Johnny Wray is a dear friend and one of the really good ministers in this age of ours. He was my mentor when I was learning this trade of ministry with the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in Tennessee. He pastored churches in Oak Ridge and Paris, Tennessee, and now he is the executive of the Disciples relief fund, The Week of Compassion. That organization is similar to our Episcopal Relief and Development Fund, used to be The Presiding Bishop's Fund for World Relief. Johnny's parish now is Darfur, Bosnia, and all those corners of the world where horror has replaced holy, and evil is the landlord.

Johnny tells a story about a day when he was the minister in Oak Ridge, Tennessee. The local Ministerial Association was holding its monthly meeting at the Methodist Church. The ministers of the various local congregations had their

formal meeting in the church's conference room, and when they had finished their business they were invited to go down to the dining room in the church basement (Methodists have church basements—we Episcopalians have undercrofts—a little touch of class) and take advantage of the free lunch that the outreach committee was serving to the homeless and hungry in the community.

The local ministers went through the soup line, and some opted to take their trays back upstairs to the conference room, others opted to join the other guests at the tables in the dining room. Johnny took a seat at one of the tables and introduced himself to the others.

Just as the soup line was about to close down, a latecomer, a local character named Old Jake stumbled in. Jake was always just in time. He was never on time. Most certainly he was never early, for any occasion. The regulars who filled the soup bowls and passed out the bread chided him again, as they did everyday, for waiting until the last minute to arrive.

Even though it was a warm spring day, Jake had on an overcoat and ski hat, and as he passed down the soup line he mumbled to himself—a litany that only he could comprehend.

Just as Jake settled into his chair, the door to the church basement opened again, and one of the city policemen ushered in a mother and her two children, two daughters. Their car had broken down on the four-lane just outside of town, and they were broke and hungry.

The family was migrant workers headed for New Jersey's vegetable fields. The father had been given a ride to the garage that was working on his their car, and the police had brought the others to the Methodist Church for something to eat.

The policeman asked if there was anything left for the family—one of the girls was seven or eight and the other about four or five. Big eyed and shy, they were clearly worried about what might happen to them and whether they'd receive a warm welcome or a cold shoulder.

One of the women who fixed the meals tipped the big soup pot part-way on its side and allowed as how there ought to be enough soup for everyone if they scraped the pot—if they were short of soup, they'd make up the difference with extra bread. The town bakery had, fortunately, had an oversupply that day.

The mother and the older daughter did just fine, but the little girl, four or five years old, couldn't handle the balancing act required to keep soup and bread on the tray and follow behind her older sister and her mother. The tray tipped, the bowl skidded, soup and bread ended up in a puddle on the floor.

Some of the kitchen crew headed for mops and sponges, the police officer looked, horror stricken, at the mess the soup had made out the shine on his shoes and the bottom three inches of his uniform pants, the mother looked like a deer in the headlights—she was sure they'd take their food back and kick them out of the

church, and the little girl stood in the middle of the mess, tears welling up in her eyes, with that look that guarantees that in just one split second, from her mouth is going to come a yowl that will shatter glassware and nerves.

Before she had a chance to let loose with the banshee yodel, Old Jake, the latecomer, slipped from his chair, took the decimated little girl gently by the hand. He led her over to his place at the table and with great care, gently lifted her into his chair and put his soup spoon in her hand. With infinite concern he arranged his bowl and bread neatly in front of her, then he reached out a hand and touched her head in blessing. Arranging his ski hat, he mumbled his litany on the way out the double doors.

Johnny Wray says it was a Gospel moment, an Emmaus moment. “When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened and they recognized him...”

“Where were you when we fed you? Where were you when we gave a drink of water?” “When you did it for the least of these, you did it for me.”

In this story it is the least doing it for the most least. “He made himself know to his disciples in the breaking of the bread—open the eyes of our faith that we may behold him.”

Old Jake didn’t have a thing, but he knew when another needed what little he did have more than he needed it. Jake doesn’t live in our zero sum world where the worry is that if you get something, maybe I won’t. Jake lives in that Easter world where abundance and God’s grace is the standard economic model.

In the basement of a Methodist Church in Oak Ridge, Tennessee, in that moment Jesus was present just as surely as he was present in the house in Emmaus, in that upper room in Jerusalem, and here in the chancel at St. Ann’s when we share the bread and the wine, his body and blood, with one another.

That same Good news of his presence is proclaimed to the world when we go forth from this place looking for opportunities to seek and to be Jesus’ presence in the presence of others. Don’t let it stop here.

“You have fed us with spiritual food in the Sacrament of his Body and Blood. Send us now into the world in peace, and grant us strength and courage to love and serve you with gladness and singleness of heart; through Christ our Lord. Amen.”

Jerusalem, Emmaus, Oak Ridge, Old Lyme

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