

The Resurrection of Community

Luke 24: 36-48.

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While they were talking about this, Jesus himself stood among them and said to them, "Peace be with you." They were startled and terrified, and thought that they were seeing a ghost. He said to them, "Why are you frightened, and why do doubts arise in your hearts? Look at my hands and my feet; see that it is I myself. Touch me and see; for a ghost does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have." And when he had said this, he showed them his hands and his feet. While in their joy they were disbelieving and still wondering, he said to them, "Have you anything here to eat?" They gave him a piece of broiled fish, and he took it and ate in their presence.

Then he said to them, "These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you – that everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled." Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, and he said to them, "Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things."

I'm wondering how many of you here today have heard the story of Virgilio's first visit back to Saqa Ja' after being a refugee in our country for almost fifteen years. It's a wonderful story that in many ways mirrors this morning's gospel lesson.

At the risk of being repetitive, we need some quick background for those of you who might be worshipping with us for the first time today. Virgilio Vicente, his wife Isabel, and their three children, in the 1980's, escaped from war-torn Guatemala. As refugees, this family made their way to Chicago where they entered the Sanctuary Movement and were given refuge by University Church. This was at a time when our government wanted to send all war refugees back to Guatemala to face certain struggle and possible death. Virgilio, Isabel, and their children eventually settled here in Woodlawn. An apartment was found,

employment was established, and the children learned English and flourished in school.

To make a very long story short, In December of 1998 Virgilio, his brother Juan who had survived the war in Guatemala City, and Juan's young son decided to hike up into the Guatemalan mountains to see if anything was left of the village of Saqa Ja', Virgilio and Juan's home village. They were accompanied by a University Church member Dan Dale and by Garry Sparks, who at the time was a Global Ministries missionary working in Guatemala for an organization called Guatemalan Christian Action which later was renamed Guatemalan Cultural Action or ACG. Virgilio knew that his community had been devastated by the Guatemalan army. Over half the villagers had been executed and their homes and fields had been burned to the ground. Virgilio was aware that until 1996 when the Guatemalan Peace Accords were signed, the survivors of the Guatemalan massacre of Saqa Ja' had been secreting living in the jungle, evading the army in any way that they possibly could. He was anxious to find who of his extended family had survived and was particularly looking for his brother, Guadalupe.

The weather was overcast but decent on the day Virgilio, Juan, Juan's son, Dan, and Garry decided to try to find the lost village of Saqa Ja'. The way up the mountains and into Saqa Ja' meant hiking for hours and hours and hours with their sleeping bags and a change of clothes on their backs. The path was rugged and at times very, very steep. Unfortunately, soon after our determined,

adventurous group started hiking it began to rain. In the pouring rain the path was slippery, muddy, and dangerous.

Some of Virgilio's questions were finally answered when the group, after many hours of miserable hiking, finally arrived at a rudimentary house, which turned out to belong to Virgilio and Juan's cousin Monaco.

Imagine the surprise of Monaco's family when they saw this filthy, scraggly band of unknown people emerging from the mist and the rain of the jungle forest. The hikers were soaked to the bone and covered with mud. Like the disciples, I wouldn't be a bit surprised if Monaco's wife, who was the first to spot the group, thought she was seeing ghosts! We can imagine the dialogue: "Hello, who are you?" Monaco's wife might have called out in the language of K'iche'. Virgilio probably answered, "I am Virgilio Vicente and this is my brother Juan. We are looking for our brother, Guadalupe." Monaco's wife then would say, "Virgilio! Juan! Welcome! I am the wife of your cousin Monaco." Like the disciples encountering Jesus on the road she might have said, "Let me touch you. I can't believe you are really here. You have returned! We all thought you were dead and that we were never going to see you again. Come in. Come in. Let's get you warmed up and dried off. Then my husband Monaco will take you to your brother Guadalupe who lives but a short distance from here."

Now, one of the most amazing parts of the story happens at this point. The family, who had no firewood, actually cut away part of their house in order to make a fire to warm and dry their soaked and shivering visitors. Talk about an

extravagant welcome! And over the past ten years, more than fifty delegates from University Church have experienced this generous hospitality and spiritual warmth over and over again when we have visited Saqa Ja'. What more proof do we need that Christ has been resurrected and the spirit of God lives in us and among us!

I need to tell you a little about myself. I am personally committed to social justice. My preaching voice was seeded by, and is now deeply rooted in, the theology of the United Church of Christ and Disciples of Christ, where obsession with social justice is heard and seen in songs, preaching, dancing, and mission work. I am ardent about my belief that we are here on earth, as human beings, for two reasons. First, as this morning's scripture tells us, as disciples of Christ we are witnesses to the Good News of God's glory and the risen Christ's promise of everlasting life. And secondly we are here as God's partners. Our mission as God's partners is to make our earthly world a place of justice, equality, and dignity for all people, mirroring the Kingdom of God that is still to come. And we can be proud that at University Church we are people who are listening to God's call and responding. In our more recent history, we have had sister churches in Nicaragua and the Philippines. We currently have church and community partners as well as missionaries in both Angola and, as we celebrate today, Guatemala. We have church members who have recently returned from trips to Palestine and Israel and are deeply committed to enlightening all of us about the plight of persecuted people in these war-torn countries. Currently our church sister Danna Gobel lives in Cairo, Egypt dedicating her work and her life to refugee relief. I want to emphasize that through our membership, attendance, and

prayers each and every one of us at University Church has a commitment to overseas outreach and ministry. And, as we support those who are listening to God's call and following in Christ's footsteps by working overseas for the basic rights of food, clothing, shelter, dignity, and justice for all of God's people we are all impacted. So let's look at how mission work changes all of us, even if we have never stepped one foot out of the state of Illinois.

When University Church sends forth missionaries, our representatives deeply engage the "other". The "other" are people who have different presuppositions about life and different cultural understandings than we have. For instance, when our group goes to Guatemala the group lives for four or five days with the people of Saqa Ja'. We discover we can live on a very simple diet of beans and rice and tortillas. We worship in the Mayan style, meeting God and feeling God's warmth and love in the winds, and the sun, and the moon and the fire. We experience Christ's love in the faces of smiling children and shy women who welcome us into their outdoor kitchen and teach us how to make tortillas from water, ground corn, and limestone. We learn to respect everyone's opinions. We sit through endless meetings in a language, K'iche', that we can't understand. We watch the community defer to the opinions of the elders. We observe all members of the community respectfully listening to the input of everyone without fidgeting or getting impatient or cutting people off or looking at their watches. We embarrassingly divert our eyes from nursing mothers and half-clothed toddlers. Most importantly, we have the opportunity to be more fully human by genuinely engaging the people of Saqa Ja' by living with them and accepting their generous hospitality.

We become more fully human because we discover there exists in this world more than one correct way to be a human being. We receive attitudes and values not necessarily present in Hyde Park or Chicago or Illinois. We receive a sense of community that is so very different from the isolated, individualistic lives that we live. We find a sense of celebration and human joy in being with one another beyond mere entertainment that can be mass produced and marketed. We are awakened to the truth of our own reality – reality that in our limited view is often focused on autonomy and individual rights and an attitude of “what’s in it for me.” When we see the world through eyes that are dissimilar from our own, we see an entirely different world. We then are becoming transformed individuals.

As Christ was transformed through his crucifixion and resurrection, our missionaries come back to University Church as transformed people. They have found another way of being human together and have journeyed past the boundaries of culture, language, ego, and constant busyness. Transformed individuals lead to a spirit of transformation at University Church. From our missionaries we have learned that human beings become more fully human by being authentic together.

As modeled through our mission experiences, in a church like ours and a community like Hyde Park with all our diversity, we enter into different social structures in respectful ways. As a transformed church we respect each church member as we rejoice in our differences. We welcome newcomers of all kinds and celebrate the diversity they bring. We know that diverse ways of being

human enriches both our personal lives and the life of our church. These unique ways of being human are the first steps in transforming relationships of all kinds from associations of tension and animosity to relationships of respect and cooperation. Like Barak Obama extending the hand of friendship to Hugo Chavez of Venezuela, our missionaries bring back with them a commitment to work to change the ways our relationships, both in this church and out into the world, are socially structured.

Missionary work helps define our faith. People are helped to make their own faith real by seeing the faith of others. In this country, there are frequent times when our faith is threatened by secularization with its doubts and challenges. We study God the same way we study economics or computers or how to run a business. Sometimes the “other” with their simple unquestioning faith in the mystery of God, our Supreme Being, are able to restore the challenged, tormented faith of those of us who think and question too much. Through our mission partners, we find that instead of carrying them, the needy of the world, they are carrying us - offering light, strength, and encouragement as they, sometimes unknowingly, emulate Jesus’ love for all people. We are reminded over and over again that the birth of solidarity is not only in the giving but in the receiving.

As some of us struggle today with grief or illness, as we struggle with loneliness and isolation, as we wonder how we are going to pay our bills and how we are going to take care of our families, we know in our hearts we can believe what Jesus said to his disciples in the Gospel of Luke, “Peace be with you. I am sending

upon you what our God has promised.” We know we can turn our worries, our losses, and our pain over to God. We know that by being part of the University Church family we have accepted our responsibility to partner with God in the process of creating God’s Kingdom. And we know that as we take care of others, God will take care of us, both in this world and the next.

Most importantly, we at University Church continue to be willing to take the next steps together. A more complete and real picture of Christianity emerges as people of different cultures share their expressions and experiences of the “good news.” And surprisingly, like the disciples in this morning’s scripture, as we encounter the “other” in all their humanness, we may be astonished at who we meet.

May God bless these words and continue to bless this congregation.

Amen.