

Ordinary People - Beautiful Things

Pitt Street Uniting Church, 13 May 2018

A Contemporary Reflection by Rev Dr Margaret Mayman

Easter 7B

Acts 1:15-17, 21-26; Contemporary Reading: “*Ordinary Poets*” by Carol Allis (in *Poems for Ordinary People*); John 17: 6-19

This reflection can be viewed on You Tube at <http://www.pittstreetuniting.org.au/> under “Sunday Gatherings” tab

Last Thursday was Ascension Day, the day of the story of the risen Christ leaving the disciples to carry on his work on earth, as he joined Abba God in heaven. The day that that story was told. Ascension is always mid-week, ten days before the celebration of Pentecost – which will happen next Sunday.

In terms of lectionary readings, the Ascension texts are an alternative for the readings that we have heard this morning. The readings for today begin the next stage of the story, the formation of the early Christ communities as people of the Way. Today, in the reading from Acts, we hear of Peter and the other disciples sorting themselves out organisationally for the task of mission. The reading from John’s gospel brings to an end what are called Jesus’ farewell discourses.

When planning the readings for this quarter, I didn’t even consider using the Ascension readings. The idea of the resurrected Jesus ascending bodily into heaven seems so outside our frame of reference that the mythical can become comical. There is some pretty awful art depicting the Ascension and I have a mental image of Jesus with a Jetsons-style jet propulsion pack strapped to his back, heading for the clouds - which just doesn’t lend itself to serious theological reflection.

So I found myself much more attracted to the story in Acts which is assigned for the seventh Sunday of Easter. But, on the other hand, context is everything, and what happens in our reading today, from Acts chapter one starting at verse 15, is intrinsically linked with the story that precedes it: the account of Jesus ascension, forty days after the resurrection.

The book of Acts is the sequel to Luke’s gospel, written by the same author, continuing the story of Jesus’ people after they no longer encountered the risen Christ among them on earth. Our reading from Acts bridges Jesus’ departure and the coming of the Holy Spirit that Jesus had promised his community.

In the verses before our reading today, the disciples watch Jesus disappear, and then just like the women at the empty tomb, they encounter two figures in white robes. On Easter morning, the women were asked, “*Why do you look for the living among the dead?*” On Ascension Day the disciples are asked “*Why do you stand looking up toward heaven?*”

Well, if you’ve seen those tacky painting of Jesus up in the clouds, with only his feet sticking out, it seems a strange question. Something very peculiar is happening “up in heaven.” Of course, you’re going to look up.

My friend, and former professor of homiletics at Union Seminary, Barbara Lundblad, has written about other, less kitsch, artistic representations of the Ascension.

In the paintings she refers to, you can see on the ground, Jesus' footprints on the earth. Perhaps the artists are imagining things that are outside the text. Or, perhaps, as Barbara suggests, they keep pressing us with the question asked so long ago: "*Why do you stand looking up toward heaven?*"

In Luke and in Acts, Jesus' footprints are visible everywhere. In Luke, clearly so in the stories of Jesus life and work. In Acts, Jesus' footprints are visible in the presence and the power of the Holy Spirit.

Taken literally, the Ascension story is anti-scientific nonsense. Metaphorically though, this story is all about the disciples and all about us. It is the event that changes the locus, the place, of Christ's work and ministry - from Jesus himself to those who follow him; from Jesus the Christ, to Christa/Community. Jesus is no longer here to preach good news, heal the sick, and feed the hungry. Jesus tells his disciples immediately before lift-off (to use the Jetson's image) that they will take the ministry global ("*to the ends of the earth,*" v. 8). No wonder they stood gazing up toward heaven.

But their Ascension story ends with a voice that brings the followers of Jesus down to earth again, to focus on the footprints as they make their way forward.

Before we get to hear the story of the Spirit coming, at Pentecost, next week, something else is happening that is also part of the context, part of the scene setting; this strange little story about what to do now that Judas, after his epic stuff-up, is dead and the number of disciples is reduced to eleven.

By the way, the lectionary skips over verses 18 to 20 which tell of Judas's grim death in a version that is totally different from the version in John's Gospel account, in which Judas hangs himself. In the missing verses in Acts, we are told that Judas had bought a field with the thirty pieces of silver, and that he collapsed there, his body burst open and his guts poured out. I can't imagine why the compilers of the lectionary didn't want you to hear that on Sunday morning!

Peter had a couple of things on his mind in the story. First the replacement had to be someone who knew Jesus personally through his ministry. And second, a need to be mindful of their ancestral roots - going back to the twelve tribes of Israel, the twelve sons of Jacob.

According to the text there were certain women who were present among the gathered 120, including Mary the mother of Jesus. The text is silent concerning whether or not women could be included in the apostolic leadership of the church, but in other parts of the New Testament and in the history of the early church there is evidence that women were numbered among the broader company of apostles.

But, for now, two men were nominated: one confusingly known by three different names - "Joseph", "Barsabbas", and "Justus" - and the other being Matthias.

While the text tells us that the eleven disciples prayed about who would be chosen, what happens next in the discernment process is bizarre. They cast lots to decide who will be the replacement disciple. Like tossing a coin, the winner was chosen by the luck of the draw.

We learn that Matthias was the follower who was selected to be the twelfth apostle. There is no evidence in Scripture to suggest that the choice was not a good one. However, at this point Matthias disappears from the story. There is no other mention of him in the Bible.

You would think that after recounting this important moment in the ministry of the apostles we would hear about Matthias again. He was called to be a witness with the other apostles to the resurrection of Jesus. And yet this uniquely called disciple fades into obscurity.

Even more interesting, though, is the fact that we know the name of the runner-up. Joseph, called Barsabbas and also known as Justus, is one of those amazing characters in the narrative whose place in history is fixed, not merely because of what he did or did not do, but because of the fact that he is named. Like Matthias we know nothing about him except that he was part of the extended group of Jesus' followers during his earthly ministry.

Can we imagine how Joseph/ Barsabbas/ Justus must have felt when his lot was not drawn? Two of the commentators that I read returned to the dramas of their childhood, remembering a time when kids were picked to be on sports teams; a time when two kids were left and only one place on the team.

One is chosen, and the other is relegated to the sidelines to watch the game - working really hard to make it look like they didn't care, meanwhile nursing a bruised and fragile ego.

But, is the analogy with the child who didn't get selected for the sports team how we imagine Barsabbas? Or can we imagine that he was called in another way to bear witness to the resurrection of Jesus? It is interesting to remember that we know as much about the one who was not selected as we do about the one who was.

To continue the analogy, Matthias didn't get any runs on the board either. Both of them, Matthias and Barsabbas, one an apostle, and one just another follower of the way, were ordinary people; not superstar apostles, not early Christian celebrities like Peter, Andrew and James, or Paul who would, in another stream of the tradition, claim that he was the super apostle.

Sometimes I worry about the messages that our children receive about celebrity and fame and what makes a human being worthy, and a human life worthwhile. And even for those of us who are older, reflecting on our working lives, there are powerful cultural messages that only those who became leaders, chief executives, professors, only those who became famous or renowned for their work, have actually succeeded in life.

The story of Matthias's selection and Barsabbas' relegation to the sidelines has wisdom for us in a success-driven, achievement-focused culture.

There is no indication that Barsabbas lost his faith in Jesus when he lost the ballot. So rather than being concerned that we don't know very much about either of these two followers of Jesus, we could instead respond with a degree of gratitude, and a new way of seeing that attributes value to their part in the broader company of disciples beyond the original, famous twelve. A way of seeing that would enable us to acknowledge and delight in the ordinary people who have influenced our lives, and the ordinary people who have made up the company of Pitt Street Uniting Church since the Congregationalist settlers first assembled in 1833.

We know the names of our famous forbears at Pitt Street – David Jones and John Fairfax, but they were not the ones that stuck around and worked to hand the stories of Jesus, in whom the Divine Presence is made known, from generation to generation.

Who was Barsabbas/Justus in your faith journey? Take a moment to name to yourself, someone who has shared the power of resurrection, the possibility of transformation, even in ordinary lives, to you....

The revelation of God is present in our church, not because of its high society history, but because of the presence of ordinary, faithful people, because of you. Because of your faithful practices of compassion and justice, because of your spiritual practices of prayer and song, of visiting the sick; your practices of inclusion and hospitality and advocating for people on the margins.

In our life together, we meet Justus and Justa, every Sunday.

We do not gather because we are related as a family; neither do not meet together because we need a club to belong to. We are here because somebody ordinary told us about Jesus.

And what makes us different is the mysterious presence of Jesus among us as we pay attention to the footprints that guide us in His Way. We are his body.

Ordinary people are capable of being Jesus – healing, forgiving and bringing the dead back to life. The ordinary world is capable of hosting the Holy.

Where will those footprints lead you this week?

In a world of complex politics, economics, and technologies; in a world of injustices and inequalities, some may ask what difference our ordinary lives can make. As part of the Jesus story, Barsabbas/Justus and Matthias remind us to live as if we believe that the reign of God for which Jesus lived and died will come.

We are not alone. We live in God's world.

And God makes beautiful things - out of us.