

“Jesus is in Our Midst”
Stouffville United Church
Sunday, April 11th, 2021

Acts 4:32-35, John 20:19-31

In the fourth century, a woman named Egeria made a pilgrimage from Constantinople to Jerusalem. Her diary traces her steps across the land, and takes us into the different communities she met along the way, in particular the monastic communities which offered her shelter and food. In her observations, Egeria gifted the church with eye witness accounts of the worship services she saw, in particular, the Easter Vigil service which many congregations celebrate as the ‘first light’ of Easter. If she hadn’t written these down, these liturgies would have been lost to the church.

I have been reading her diary. And where I’m reading, she is now in Jerusalem for Holy Week and Easter in the year 384. She is attending an “evening gathering to commemorate the gathering of the disciples “in the evening on the first day of the week”¹ which is our John passage we read today. Egeria is standing at the site where it was said the 12 disciples had gathered in the Upper Room which is the location of our Gospel reading today. Only where the house had once stood, now a church had been built.

Her journal tells us: “When they come there, hymns appropriate to the day and place are recited, prayer is made, and that passage from the gospel is read where on the same day in the same place where the church is now on Sion, with the doors closed, the Lord came in to the disciples, that is, when one of the disciples was not here, that is, Thomas, and when he returned and the other apostles told him that they had seen the Lord, he said ‘I do not believe unless I shall see.’ When this has been read, then prayer is made, the catechumens are blessed, then the faithful, and everyone returns to their home late, about the second hour of the night.”²

Egeria stood in the place where some three hundred years earlier, Jesus came through the doors that were locked, into the midst of the disciples gathered there, and said, ‘Peace be with you’. I wonder what she felt. I wonder if she sensed something holy in that place. This is where Jesus had come into their midst. This is where Thomas had said out loud that he doubted. This is where Jesus heard his doubting, and came a second time to this room, to Thomas. And after letting him touch the wounds in his hands and side, said to Thomas, “Do not doubt but believe.” I experience wonder when I think of Egeria, in the year 384, standing in that place. And this connection is because she and I are both thinking of today’s scripture – where Jesus stood in the midst of the disciples and said, ‘Do not doubt but believe.’ She stands near that spot that I am only reading about. She and I are one in heart and soul. And I am in wonder.

How quickly we can squash ‘wonder’. If we even manage to claim a few minutes in a day to reflect on the presence of God in our world, those precious few minutes are soon pushed aside

¹ Anne McGowan, Paul F. Bradshaw, *The Pilgrimage of Egeria* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press Academic, 2018), 181.

² Anne McGowan, Paul F. Bradshaw, *The Pilgrimage of Egeria* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press Academic, 2018), 181-182.

by the clamour of the world we live in. From work to family to responsibilities and chores, the wonder we have known to be there, dissipates. And we are the poorer spiritually for this.

Our Acts passage also speaks of the gathering of the disciples, and Luke writes, “Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul.” How far the church has moved from this initial place of ‘oneness’, in heart and soul! So much fracturing, so much weighing down and burdening on how we gather and organize and respond to God’s call in our lives. Can we say that as a church we are ‘one in heart and soul’? Or are we in a hundred different places, where we claim our ‘distinctiveness’ to the point that we no longer see how we are one?

And yet, Jesus *is* in our midst, whether we recognize it or not. There *are* moments in our gathering as church where we realize that Jesus is in our midst, and we are one in heart and soul. I think of the sharing of Holy Communion, as we eat the bread, and drink the wine, doing this in remembrance of Christ. We are then one in heart and soul. I think of the Holy Week we have just travelled together, from the cross on Good Friday, to the empty tomb and the exuberant rush of understanding that Christ is risen! In these moments of journeying together, from the cross to the tomb, we *are* one in heart and soul, when Christ *is* in our midst.

Over the course of the history of the church there have been observable trends in which the church has clearly forgotten how to ‘wonder’, how to remember what it means to be one in heart and soul. The church routinely gets muddled down in institutionalism, politics, greed, and power. And as church historian Phyllis Tickle reflects, about every five hundred years the church goes through a time of great upheaval when everything changes. Every five hundred years the church holds a rummage sale, as Tickle famously labelled it, and clears out all the things that have accumulated over time and which no longer serve any purpose or is rejected by the current culture as obsolete and meaningless. And so, in the year 2000 the church began to feel the impact of too much clutter and losing its way. And the rummage sale is still going on. Tickle experiences elation at being part of this breaking point moment in the trajectory of the church’s place and influence in community. She writes, “This is the first time, though, when we’ve known we’re in a rummage sale. What a blessing to have an understanding of our times, and to not consequently get hysterical about it. But what a responsibility to understand that we are shaping not only our times but probably another three or four centuries of western Christianity.”³

In an era when we seem to hold little in common with each other, but rather where it is distinctiveness that sets us apart, our possessions, our employment, our wealth, our education, our language, our skin colour, all these things that have been classic markers of meritocracy, and of ‘otherness, in our white privileged world, all these things take us farther and farther away from that moment when the disciples knew that they were one in heart and soul.

Egeria stood there looking at the place where Jesus had once stood in the midst of the disciples, and heard the words of scripture where Jesus said, ‘Do not doubt, but believe.’ And she was, in that moment, one in heart and soul with those early disciples. As a congregation, we know what it means to be one in heart and soul. We *can* get there. When we share in communion, or when we share the high points of our worship life, in Good Friday, Easter, and

³ From typed notes from an interview with Phyllis Tickle, taken by Rev. David Lander. For more, please see Tickle’s book, *The Great Emergence: How Christianity is Changing and Why* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2008)

Christmas. The wonder *is* there. And we are one in heart and soul. Our worldly concerns disappear, leaving only our awareness that Jesus is in our midst – in the elements of bread and wine, when we stand at the foot of the cross, or at the entrance to the empty tomb.

Holy Spirit, let the wonder within us stay alive. Let this wonder lead us to Jesus who stands in our midst. Let this wonder lead us to you.

Thanks be to God. Amen.