

The Rev. Joanne Sanders
Stanford Memorial Church
April 22, 2012

TO WHAT DO WE ASPIRE?

Then he opened their minds to understand...
Luke 24:45

In his book, *The Search for Common Ground*, Howard Thurman, an extraordinary author, theologian, and civil rights leader, Dean of the Chapel at Howard and Boston Universities for more than two decades – reminds us “the contradictions of life are not final or ultimate.” That God is the giver of forgiveness and mercy, ever ready to offer shalom: peace, the possibility and promise that order, well-being, hope, compassion, and love might yet prevail.

All of this despite the fact that we live today in a world of war, poverty, hunger, disease, isolation, fear, prejudice and neglect – toward one another and on this Earth Day toward the planet itself. Some would suggest that God or any manifestation of such seems powerless and absent in the face of ongoing suffering and pain and that despite the efforts of well intentioned, generous, committed and sensitive persons, the world remains oppressive and inhospitable for many. Everything is arranged and fixed and settled and closed, all the assets are frozen and things will remain the way they are. No lines can be crossed and many are hard at work to keep the boundaries secure.

That sounds depressing.

This morning, I want to remind us that against this kind of perspective, those of us who consider ourselves Christian or post-Christian, even “non-affiliated,” that growing category of spiritual and religious practitioners, we have long thought otherwise. And lest we not forget, we also hear the same through the songbook of our Jewish sisters and brothers – the Psalms as they do today and so often remind us to step back from the despair of life, the skepticism about God’s presence or existence, and remind ourselves that the God of Scripture is an inscrutable, mysterious, even odd power and presence for life in the world. It is a power and presence that breaks down our settlements of rich and poor, dead and alive, insiders and outsiders, and circumvents our categories of security and explanation. As one preacher describes it, it is a “kind of dangerous restlessness that lets nothing stay fixed or frozen, because God is on the move in more ways than we can understand.”

We are still, according to the liturgical calendar, in Easter Season on this 3rd Sunday of Easter and we’ve several more to go. Easter is not just an ancient oddity. “It is,” writes theologian Walter Bruggemann, “an unsettling way in the world that continues to have socioeconomic, political and human implications. Easter is not a spiritual event but a surging of power that touches all of life. The Easter question for us is not whether you can get your mind around the resurrection because you

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cannot. Rather the question is whether you can permit in your horizon new healing power, new surging possibility, new gestures to the lame, new ways of power in an armed, fearful world, new risk, new life, leaping, dancing, singing, praising the power beyond all our controlled powers.”

And this is why I do love this Easter season. A power for life and living is unloosed; there seems a generous offer of an alternative – being on the side of newness, something imaginative, creative at work. And on these warm, sunny spring days, we are reminded of new growth and emerging life by what’s happening to our roses and camellias and all the little signs that are blooming in our gardens, on campus and in our neighborhoods. Such a contradiction unfolding before us.

To be sure, I was acutely struck by Howard Thurman’s reminder that “the contradictions of life are not final or ultimate” for this and many other reasons. Just as the gospel illustrates this morning, the disciples and those gathered in Jerusalem were immersed in chaos, confusion – fear, guilt, grief, doubt, distrust, restlessness were all part of their world and life at the time. Their leader was dead and they were left to sort out fact from fiction: What happened? Who can be believed? What testimony is credible? What’s next?

Regardless, I am not here this morning to distill and disprove or prove whether this appearance of Jesus to his early followers actually happened. An appearance after a cry of abandonment, giving up one’s spirit and being laid in a tomb is anything but normal, natural or expected. Most of us here know by now that this is not the point. Rather, like many things, when we think the story is over, God has something else to say. There are no explanations in this text about the mechanics of resurrection, but instead it illustrates that the narrative of Jesus whole life, death and rising were more about what God is doing and continues to do in this world. From the Law of Moses to the prophets to the psalms, it has always been about God’s aims and objectives for the wholeness of creation and for us. The work begins and continues because the ongoing rising life of Christ longs to live out its purposes in us and through us. The challenge and the opportunity is whether or not we are willing to be credible, reliable, ready witnesses to that even in the midst of the contradictions of life.

For the past several weeks, there have been all too clear and abundant examples of life’s contradictions for me. From responding to the sheer anguish and tragedy of a gifted Stanford student-athlete’s suicidal death to traveling with students in El Salvador whose people are still confronted daily with historical injustice and the fight for human dignity to a diagnosis of breast cancer in one of our closest friends in this world – there it is, those are the facts and yes, the contradictions. I’m not looking for sympathy, but only to help us see that we don’t need to look that far any one of us to know this much is true. You have your own in mind I’m sure that you

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can easily name this morning. And I'm not even including what continues to be on the pages of our newspapers or mind numbing newscasts.

So let me return to where we started: the contradictions of life are not final or ultimate. God is still the giver of forgiveness and mercy and ready to offer shalom: peace, the possibility and promise that order, well-being, hope, compassion, and love might yet prevail. And, wherever there is inconsolable grief, anger, exploitation, inhumanity, hopelessness, fear, anxiety, Christ somehow shows up still to offer comfort and assurance, all the while inviting us to be witnesses to that which has always been God's intention to bring peace, unity, harmony, love, compassion, grace, justice and mercy to a world and to people who are broken. Somehow, we too must be assured in this Easter Season that God is alive, still rising and working on behalf of wholeness and community. Author David G. Buttrick's *The Mystery and The Passion* reminds us that life is designed for mutuality – we live by exchanges and that we are interdependent sisters and brothers and accountable to each other. And so these texts today challenge us to consider: What in our communities needs the continual rising presence of God? What kinds of experiences, contradictions, and understandings do we need to be credible witnesses to God's aims in the world? How do we participate in God's work and shalom on earth? Will we show up?

After seven days of travel immersion in El Salvador we met on our last morning with Sister Peggy in the community of Suchitoto just outside the capital city of San Salvador. She came to El Salvador in 1986, during the horrific civil war there, and has remained ever since, caring for Salvadorans and aiding them in their constant work to transform their small, struggling country and communities. She asked us to reflect on this question: *to what do you aspire?* Sister Peggy said she wanted to be remembered as one who died on the last day of her life and reminded us that the aspect of aspiring is ongoing. The wonder, the struggle, the growth is ongoing until life ends. All of our knowledge is like a little island in the sea of mystery that is always extending the shores. Once we know, you can't not know. We are occupiers of creativity and imagination.

I do consider the contradictions of life, not final or ultimate, as an extraordinary gift that calls each of us to not only redeem creation but others and ourselves as well. To declare the presence and power of God in the midst of tragedy, despair and death is ultimately our greatest task and most profound challenge– to hold hands and think differently.

To what I aspire is echoed in the words of one of my favorite poets, Adrienne Rich and posted on my office door as a reminder every day:

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**“My heart is moved by all I cannot save:
so much has been destroyed**

**I have to cast my lot with those
who age after age, perversely,
with no extraordinary power,
reconstitute the world.”**

With whom do you cast your lot? From where do you draw your strength? To what do you aspire?

Notes:

Reconstituting the World: The Poetry and Vision of Adrienne Rich; Judith McDaniel, 1978.