

Sermon by The Rev. Betsy Johns Roadman, 4/15/07
St. Augustine's Church, Croton-on-Hudson, New York
Text: John 20:19-31

Many years ago, my cousin, Billy, was killed in a hunting accident. Billy's parents and siblings were devastated. The extended family and large circle of friends were numb with grief. I wondered how my Aunt Dora, Billy's mother, would ever get over it.

Aunt Dora never got over missing Billy, but she conveyed a strength and a sense of peace in the months and years following his death that were striking. I had known her to be a somewhat high-strung and anxious person, and I would have expected that this tragedy would have made her even more so. But that wasn't the case. She became more centered, calmer, possibly more joyful.

Several years after Billy's death, when I was a mother myself, I finally had the nerve to ask her about it. "It's my worst nightmare," I said. "I can't imagine being able to face another day after your child dies. How did you do it? How have you been able to live, and live fully, all these years?"

She didn't ponder my question for a moment. She answered immediately. "The day Billy died," she said, "Jesus came. He sat on the edge of my bed and stayed with me through the night."

Of all the possible responses, that was one I hadn't expected. I knew Aunt Dora to be a devout Christian, but a no-nonsense one, probably more comfortable with cleaning up after coffee hour than experiencing Jesus in her bedroom. I was fascinated and intrigued with her story, and I asked more questions. "How did you know it was Jesus? Was he physically there? Could you feel his weight as he sat on the edge of the bed? Or do you think it was a vision or a dream? How did he leave? Did he walk out the door, or did he just vanish?"

She waved her hand impatiently to stop me. "I knew it was Jesus," she said firmly. "I don't know how I knew, but I did. All the other details are irrelevant. Jesus was right there, and because he was, I knew two things to be true. I knew that Billy would be with Jesus, and I knew that somehow, we'd get through the pain."

For us, hearing the post-Easter stories – like the one in today's reading from John's Gospel and others that appear in the lectionary during the season of Easter – might be like my experience listening to Aunt Dora. Something completely unexpected happens in the story, and we're drawn to the particulars around that surprising occurrence that weren't even on the radar for the teller of the story. What's important is what the stories meant for those who told them.

Today's story finds Jesus' disciples huddled together in a locked room a couple of days after Jesus was executed by the Roman authorities. The disciples are terrified. They were followers of Jesus, whom they had come to know as God's anointed One. They had

known Jesus' passion to be the establishment of the kingdom of God on earth – a way of being in the world that challenged much of how the existing kingdom operated. That kingdom maintained systems of dominating power that benefited the privileged and that oppressed the poor and the marginalized. Jesus had spoken and acted against the unjust religious, political, and economic systems, and those who held the power and who wanted to protect their own positions of privilege needed Jesus stopped. They arrested him, charged him with rebellion against the empire, and crucified him. Accounts of an empty tomb didn't assuage the disciples' fear that they might meet the same fate.

Into that locked room of frightened disciples comes Jesus. Listening to the story, we're surprised and curious. What did he look like? Was his a completely physical body, or some other kind of body? How did he get through the locked door? Did he have to eat and drink? What are the historical facts of this story?

Marcus Borg, my newest favorite theologian, suggests that what's more important is the meaning that the story had for the early church and the meaning that it holds for us today. In the faith community from which John wrote, this particular story was told, retold, and finally, sixty years later, written. Why this story? Because, says, Borg:

*This story explicitly makes the two primary claims about Easter found in Paul, the gospels, and the New Testament as a whole. The disciples exclaim, "We have seen the Lord!" Jesus lives; he is not a figure of the past, but of the present. And Thomas exclaims, "My Lord and my God!" It is the classic post-Easter confession of faith: Jesus is Lord. "**

The spirit of God that had pulsed in, around, and through the life of Jesus as he taught, healed, fed, and forgave continued to be recognized and experienced by his followers after his death. Jesus' ongoing presence and love breathed new life into his terrified disciples, transforming their individual lives and the life of their community.

But that transformation wasn't for the purpose of their own spiritual well-being. The presence and power of the living Jesus transformed them and their community so that they could fully enter into that about which Jesus was passionate. Filled with the spirit of God, they became channels of God's love, presence, healing, and forgiveness, equipped and enabled to continue to bring about Jesus' alternative vision – the kingdom of God on earth. Their proclamation that "Jesus is Lord" boldly declared that the lords of this world are not; that there is another way.

What meaning does this post-Easter story as told by John have for us here and now? For us, as for the earliest disciples, Jesus is not a figure of the past, but of the present. Jesus lives. The systems of dominating power and privilege that tried to silence him did not have the last word. Jesus lives, and because he does, his presence and power are with us, his followers. Filled with the spirit of God, we are equipped and called to establish the kingdom of God on earth. As channels of God's love, presence, healing, and forgiveness, we're empowered to focus less on ourselves, and more on becoming informed about and actively engaged in changing those systems that benefit only the

privileged. We're enabled to both advocate and care for the victims of unjust political, religious, and economic systems. We're filled with gratitude and compelled to share that with which we have been richly blessed, so that all have enough. We're moved to treat all people, especially those who are different from us, with dignity and respect.

Jesus lives! Jesus is Lord! May we enthusiastically and intentionally join the living Lord Jesus in the building of God's kingdom. It's the most important work that we will ever do. Amen.