

Sermon by The Rev. Betsy Johns Roadman, 4/16/06
St. Augustine's Church, Croton-on-Hudson, New York
Easter Day; Text: Mark 16:1-8

A few years ago, a friend of mine suffered a recurrence of ovarian cancer. Following her second surgical procedure, she was so sick that I hardly recognized her when I visited her in the hospital. When she was finally well enough to be discharged, she was so weak that this fiercely independent woman had to allow her adult son to take her beloved dog to live with him on Long Island, and she needed to have round-the-clock home health aides manage all aspects of her daily living.

One morning, over tea that the aide had brought us, Sandra began to talk about the possibility that she might be facing her death sooner rather than later. I asked her what she would do if she could be assured that she'd have one day of robust health and if finances and geography weren't obstacles. I was sure that she'd say that she'd go to England and spend the day at her favorite museums and concert halls. As a young woman, she'd married an American, and after her divorce, she'd remained in New York. But she was a Brit through and through, and I knew her heart yearned for the home of her birth and its extraordinary history and culture.

"What would I do if I could be completely healthy for one full day?" she repeated. She considered the question for quite a long time. Finally, she said, "I'd go to the Food Emporium."

I couldn't believe that I'd heard her correctly. But she went on to explain that she yearned for the ordinary moments of her life that her illness had taken away from her. She wanted to be able to linger over choices of tea, pick out her own fresh fruits and vegetables, and make spontaneous choices about things to buy that weren't on her list but had caught her eye as she saw them on display. "My life is mostly about the ordinary things," she said. "And those are the things that I really miss."

In this morning's story from the Gospel of Mark, three women go to the tomb of Jesus after the Sabbath is over. They've brought spices to anoint the body, as was the custom. When they arrive at the tomb, they discover that the stone covering its entrance has been rolled away. A man inside the tomb informs them that Jesus, who was executed as a criminal, has been raised from the dead. "He's not here," the man tells the women. "He's going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him."

Jesus has been raised from the dead, and has gone to ... Galilee? That's like Sandra having one day of health and choosing to spend those precious hours at the grocery store instead of at the Albert and Victoria Museum or at Westminster Abbey. Galilee is so ordinary! Wouldn't it have been much more strategic for Jesus to have gone back to the center of Jerusalem, confronting those in authority who'd lobbied for his death? Wouldn't the impact of his resurrection have been vastly intensified if he'd hung around the center of religious and political power, stunning the multitudes of people there, who had journeyed to the city for the Passover celebration?

Galilee was just a place of ordinary, everyday life. It was a place where people worked hard to make a living and provide for their families. It was a place where ethnic and racial diversity and political turmoil had resulted in a constant, underlying tension that people had learned to carefully navigate. It was the place where the followers of Jesus had first encountered him, where he had taught them, where they came to believe that he was the long-awaited anointed One of God. Galilee was home for Jesus' disciples, and it was to Galilee that they returned, following the unspeakable horror of Jesus' last days in Jerusalem. It was the place of ordinary, everyday life.

The radical transformation of the world that Jesus was about as he announced the coming of the reign of God wasn't intended to take place through the overthrow of a government or the establishment of Jesus and his disciples in the seats of political power. If it was, Mark surely would have been able to tell a story of the risen Christ having stayed in Jerusalem and having made his mark there. Instead, Christ went ahead to meet his followers in Galilee – a place of ordinary, everyday life.

That's where the reign of God takes place – in our ordinary lives. And that, actually, is quite terrifying. Isn't it easier and more comfortable for us to believe that the reign of God is centered somewhere "out there" – maybe in a coming political confrontation in the Middle East, or in formalized religious settings or institutions, or in the world to come? That keeps the challenging presence of God and the radical work of God at a safe distance from where we, personally, operate day to day. It allows us to maintain at least the illusion of a semblance of our own control over our lives.

But if the reign of God actually takes place in the midst of the ordinary, then everything's up for grabs. The risen Christ, who can't be contained in a tomb or anywhere else, breaks into our everyday lives unexpectedly, surprising us with new possibilities and options not even imagined. No part of our existence can escape the wildly creative, unable-to-be-contained power of God. The presence of the risen Christ in our ordinary lives means that God may intend a very different world than the one that you and I try hard to construct and control, and that God won't be bound by the rules that we make and try to maintain. That is terrifying.

Christ went ahead of the disciples and met them in Galilee, and their lives were completely changed. On this Easter morning, we're invited not just to acknowledge and celebrate the risen Christ as a theological doctrine, but to enter fully into the reality of the presence and the power of Christ among us in our ordinary lives. The presence and the power of the risen Christ among us means that resurrection and transformation take place in and through us, right here and right now.

May we look for the evidence that this is true, and when we see it – because we will – may we join Christ in the work of truth-telling, of compassion, of abundant generosity, of healing, and of reconciliation that's possible right where we are every single day. May we look for and expect to find the evidence of Christ's presence and power in the face of those around us, and respond accordingly.

The risen Christ has gone ahead to meet us where we live, in our normal, everyday lives. And because this is true, even the most ordinary aspects of our lives have become anything but. Amen.