

“Bon Courage”

Luke 24.36b–48

The Rev. Hal Chorpensing, Plymouth Cong'l UCC, 26 April 2009

Last Sunday we heard the story of Jesus' appearance to the disciples from John's perspective, centering around “doubting Thomas.” This week we hear Luke's account of the story, and our friend Thomas doesn't get a cameo role, but a state of “disbelief” has enfolded the disciples as a whole.

What kind of desolation must Jesus' followers have experienced following the crucifixion? Their gnawing pit of despair is something we can only glimpse in a *Tenebrae* service on Maundy Thursday. Their hopes – their reality – had been shattered, and it left them reeling. Just imagining what it would take to keep on going day by day as disciples whose master had been brutally executed.

The kind of strength, fortitude, and courage Jesus displayed by risking and then suffering crucifixion seems almost superhuman. And there was a reason the male disciples scattered after Jesus' arrest: they were scared that the same thing would happen to them. Before we judge them too harshly, remember that crucifixion is a torturously slow death. And remember that some of the disciples, like Peter, eventually met a similar fate. Condemned in Rome, the apocryphal Acts of Peter tell us that he was crucified upside down. Though in our tradition we don't dwell on martyrology, we should remember that a continuous line of Christians from Peter and Paul to Bonhoeffer and King have given their lives for the actions of their faith.

But, in the weeks that followed the crucifixion, what kind of courage was demanded of Jesus' disciples? After beating a hasty retreat from Jerusalem, a more “everyday” courage was demanded of them than the kind of courage needed to endure the cross.

Courage, of course, has its linguistic roots in the word for heart, and it is interesting that when the risen Christ encounters the disciples, he runs an emotional EKG and he asks, “Why are you frightened, and why do doubts arise in your *hearts*?” (Where do your doubts usually arise: in your heart or in your mind?) Jesus continues, “Look at my hands and feet; see that it is I myself. Touch me and see; for a ghost does not have flesh and bones.” And, as if to underscore the point further, he asks them to share a meal.

In French, there is a lovely expression of encouragement, “Bon Courage,” which means just what Jesus was conveying to his followers: “Hang in there...keep your chin up...don't give up...keep trying.” And it's that everyday courage the apostles will need to get the Christian movement started and to spread it beyond the Jewish homeland, which is what Jesus sends them to do.

This kind of everyday courage helps **us** meet the adversity **we** encounter. To my mind, courage is very closely related to faith. For some, faith is an intellectual assent to a given doctrine or dogma. It is what British cleric John A.T. Robinson called, “swallowing nineteen unbelievable things before breakfast.” No, faith is a sense of embracing with the heart and the mind.

Saying the magical incantation, “I accept Jesus Christ as my personal Lord and Savior” no more makes one a faithful Christian than saying “I do” makes one a faithful spouse or partner. Faith is about relationship, a relationship that requires everyday courage, commitment, and tenacity. And it is that heart-felt sense that Jesus inspires in his once-fearful followers. It is that everyday courage that helps them to move forward.

It's the kind of courage that Harry Emerson Fosdick wrote about in his famous hymn: “Grant us wisdom, grant us courage for the living of this hour.” (I thought about

using that as our final hymn, but then opted for one that is probably new to you. It was written by Norman Macleod, an eminent Victorian minister in the Church of Scotland, whose grandson, George Macleod, founded the Iona Community in the 1930s. And the tune is by Sir Arthur Sullivan of Gilbert & Sullivan fame. But, I digress!)



While this sermon was in its gestational stage, I was pondering courage and the theologian who popped into my head (or my heart) was Howard Thurman. Those of you who are my age or younger may not know Howard Thurman, but you really should get acquainted. He was a minister, a mystic, a poet, a scholar, grandson of a slave, and founder of the first intentionally interracial congregation in the United States. His writing is accessible, and bespeaks a faith that I find rich and resonant. Hear some of his words on courage:

Courage is not a blustering manifestation of strength and power. Sometimes courage is only revealed in the midst of great weakness and greater fear. It is often the ultimate rallying of all the resources of personality to face a crucial and devastating demand. [*Think of the disciples.*] And this is not all. There is a quiet courage that comes from an inward spring of confidence in the meaning and significance of life. Such courage is an underground river, flowing far beneath the shifting events of one's experience, keeping alive a thousand little springs of action.

So, that "inward spring of confidence" is faith. It is the faith that Jesus calls the disciples toward...the faith that Christ calls us to engage.

It takes courage to face a diagnosis we would rather not hear, to find that you've been laid off, to endure the demise of a relationship. Courage wrests us from a sense of powerlessness to a sense of carrying on, moving forward, doing what we *can* do. If our lives were not fraught with fear and without adversity, we could never experience courage. Time and time again, I have seen courage in the faces of this congregation. And your courage inspires me.

And collectively this congregation has displayed courage. It took courage to become Open and Affirming, to know that many Christians think that we have fallen into Satan's hands and engage in false teaching. Especially here in northern Colorado, we've been a voice in the wilderness. It has taken courage to take a stand, but that is when we are at our best.

It has taken courage (and a little craziness) to have a \$900,000 capital campaign in our current economic climate. And part of the reason we have been able to have two successful campaigns while growing our mission and outreach giving is that we're tapping into what Thurman calls our "inward spring of confidence." I sense that we are growing numerically, yes, but also I sense us growing in our faith...and our courage.

I'll leave you with one of Thurman's poems, "When the Strain Is Heaviest," which I hope will provide strength and **encouragement** for your journey:

At times when the strain is heaviest upon us,
 And our tire nerves cry out in many-tongued pain
 Because the flow of love is choked far below the deep recesses of the heart,
 We seek with cravings firm and hard
 The strength to break the dam
 That we may live again in love's warm stream.

¹ Howard Thurman, *Meditations of the Heart*. (Beacon: Boston, 1953 and 1981), p. 52.

We want more love; and more and more
Until, at last, we are restored and made anew!
Or, so it seems.

When we are closer drawn to God's great Light
And in its radiance stand revealed,
The meaning of our need informs our minds.
"More love," we cried; as if love could be weighed, measured, bundled, tied.
As if with perfect wisdom we could say—to one, a little love; to another, an added
portion;
And on and on until all debts were paid
With no one left behind.

But now we see the tragic blunder of our cry.
Not for more love our hungry cravings seek!
But more power to love.
To put behind the tender feeling, the understanding heart
The boundless reaches of the Father's Care
Makes love eternal, always kindled, always new.
This becomes the eager meaning of the aching heart
The bitter cry—the anguish call!²

Bon courage! Amen.

² *ibid.*, pp. 84-85.