

A Sermon
Acts 2:14a, 36-41, 1 Peter 1:17-23, Luke 24:13-35
Blair Pogue
Delivered at St. Matthew's, St. Paul, April 6, 2008

Two and a half years ago, two weeks after I arrived here the people of St. Matthew's went into sudden shock. Parishioner Beatrice Garubanda died unexpectedly of a heart attack, and word spread quickly through the congregation. For those of you who have come to St. Matthew's since then, Beatrice was an amazing woman. She was a spiritual leader, a visionary, a person who prayed with passion, a woman who reached out to numerous children and adults and invited them into her life, family and faith community.

Godbearers like Beatrice are people who radiate and reflect God's presence and goodness. They inspire hope and vision. Their lives point to the living God. When you are with a Godbearer you feel as though you have been graced by God's presence and Spirit. Beatrice made a difference here, and her absence was felt like a huge, gaping hole. God used her to get St. Matthew's involved with the Blue House, a home and family for young women whose parents have died of AIDS in Southwestern Uganda, and the Tutoring Program which provides dinner, help with homework and mentoring to teenagers every Monday night here at church. She was an idea person who helped people see new possibilities and desire to bring them to fruition.

In the days that followed her death it was hard to imagine what life would be like without her. Parishioners grieved and battled feelings of loss, helplessness and hopelessness. When I reread the Gospel we heard a moment ago, in which two disciples travel to Emmaus after Jesus' death, I thought about the period after Beatrice died. There are many parallels. The period after Jesus' death was profoundly disorienting to his friends and followers.

At Beatrice's funeral and in the days that followed there was a distinct turn. I felt and experienced joy at her service and especially during the Eucharist. There was so much comfort in breaking bread together that day. Seeing the church overflowing with more than 400 people was inspiring – so many people that one of the funeral home employees told me we were in

violation of the fire code. God's presence was palpable and there was a clear consensus that the work God had begun through Beatrice must go on.

In the days that followed depression and shock were followed by new energy and commitment. Family members, groups of parishioners and friends of Beatrice rose up to commit themselves to the work she had begun. There was much work to do but peoples' hearts burned with the desire to commit to these ministries. Her legacy lives on in her children Esther, Lydia, Joshua and Ampa, husband James, the Tutoring Program, and the work of the Blue House boards in Uganda and in the Twin Cities. It lives on in the children fed, mentored and loved in our Parish Hall and in the Blue House. The fact that the Blue House board is now raising money to build a campus and dormitory to house 40-44 girls and boys without parents is truly phenomenal. The reality of Jesus' resurrection is revealed through ambitious dreams like this one, dreams that offer life and hope where there was formerly only death and grief.

And yet when Beatrice died life felt so empty. It was the same way for the disciples on the road to Emmaus and for us when something or someone important to us dies – a person, an opportunity, a dream. We are understandably so consumed with our grief, our losses, that we are unable to see Jesus in our midst, let alone recognize him. It is only when our hearts begin to “burn” again with new hope and energy, or in moments like the breaking of bread that we once again realize that God is present with us, and the bigger picture, the truer realities of life.

In a wonderful little essay called “Happy Easter?” Frederica Matthewes-Green asks why American Christians tend to emphasize Christmas more than Easter. Reflecting on how she viewed both holidays as a child, Matthewes-Green notes, “compared to Christmas, Easter was boring. Chocolate bunnies: good. Scratchy new crinolines: bad. Long blah-blah-blah at church. A lot of wordy grown-up buildup leading to, it seemed, no payoff. You could always count on Christmas to change a lot of stuff, especially in the toy box. Easter didn't change anything.”

But when Matthewes-Green grew up, she changed her mind. She realized that as a child Easter was harder for her to understand because it addresses things she didn't know and didn't yet have to know, "the weariness of life, the pain, the profound loneliness and hovering fear of meaninglessness. Yet in the midst of this desolation we find Jesus, triumphant over death and still shockingly alive, present to us in ways we cannot understand, much less explain." In Jesus, she continues, "we find vibrancy of life, and a firm compassion that does not deny our suffering but transforms and illuminates it. He is life itself. As life incarnate, he could not be held back by death."

What does it mean for us to live our lives in light of the resurrection? Well, to begin with, we joyfully tell and retell the story of God's love for us and how it intersects with our story. We tell this story daily, and weekly when we gather for worship, letting our hearts be lifted up and our souls nourished by the reminder that Jesus is risen – and we are called to rise too – to rise above self-centeredness, pettiness, division and fear – and live the resurrection daily.

We commit ourselves to the challenging and exciting work of telling our faith stories in new ways that speak not only to our community but to young people, immigrants, to people from different backgrounds and cultures. We commit ourselves to listening to others' stories, to seeing God in the minute details of their lives as well as in their challenges and triumphs.

As we tell the story of God and God's people together, we break bread. Something mysterious happens when we break bread together. We remember that we are one bread, one body, and that there is one Lord of all. We are fed spiritually before going out into the world as Godbearers to participate in God's work of bringing healing and hope to those who are vulnerable, sad, wounded and hopeless, of naming healing and hope when and wherever we find it.

Living in light of the resurrection, we are called to continue the hospitality for which St. Matthew's is famous, hospitality which offers friendship, a listening ear, food and art for the soul. We are called to serve the vulnerable ones in our city, nation and world -- the invisible, the poor, the overlooked, God's beloved. We are called to continue Beatrice's work of providing a home, future and hope

to young women and men who've lost theirs. We are called to be generous toward those in need, knowing that in them God comes to us. Finally, we are called to embrace all God's children, young and old, male and female, black and white, rich and poor, and to learn to live in reconciled relationships, rooted in Christ. We are called to live in light of the resurrection.