

Easter 5, yr a
Readings:

Joan M. Testin @ St. Mary Anne's Episcopal Church 20 April, 2008
Acts 1:6-14 Psalm 68:1-10, 33-36 1 Peter 4:12-14; 5:6-11 John 17:1-11

Life is a journey.

It's a cliché, I know, but there you are.

We begin something, we walk with it for awhile,

and then, we say goodbye,

and move onto the next phase of the journey.

We all know this - we have all had times of saying hello and goodbye.

And yet, we are never quite prepared.

Somehow, no matter how much time we think we have,

goodbye sneaks up on us

and we're struck again by how much we hate to do it.

Dr. Margaret Krych retired from my seminary this week.

She has been there almost 40 years.

Wednesday was her last day with us.

She taught Christian education, and ran the doctoral program.

Hundreds - if not thousands – of Lutheran pastors

have taken her class and learned her views about Sunday school.

She taught her students to respect children,

and to take their learning seriously.

She claimed that most Sunday school classes

consist of children making "... those wretched little cotton ball sheep."

I don't think it was the sheep she objected to,

but rather, that there was so much time wasted making them.

Children needed to know that they were precious in God's sight;

and that if we loved them, we would make sure that lesson was learned well.

She had many memorable teachings.

Some of them were quite powerful, and others ... not so much.

For example, if we were ever ordained
 (and she always emphasized the "if" as though she had her doubts)
 if we were ever ordained, our clerical shirts were to be black only.
We were called to be pastors and not fashion models.
 Women pastors should always wear skirts and suit jackets.
 We should never, never, **ever** teach children
 under the age of twelve about Noah's ark.
We re-told her stories, imitated her mannerisms,
 and giggled about her over dinner.
But now, she was leaving us, and all of her idiosyncrasies became precious.
 So when she came into the building on her last day,
 she was greeted with a wall plastered with cotton ball sheep.
We heard that she laughed when she saw them –
and there were rumors that she was teary.
 What we do know is that she left us a note –
 "To all my wretched little sheep;
 never forget that you are precious to God, and to me."
She has been a vital part of the seminary, and we will miss her.

I can't help but think about her - about all leave-takings –
 when I read the story of Jesus' ascension to God.
 I imagine how it must have been for the disciples that day.
Only 43 days ago, they had watched Jesus die a violent death;
 and had buried him in a borrowed tomb.
Then, he rose from the dead and was back with them ...
 eating with them, talking with them,
 showing up in the oddest of places to cook fish,
 or walk on a lonely road.

They probably still had nightmares;
 and were just starting to realize that his resurrection was a reality,
 and not a fantasy or a dream.

And now, he was leaving again.

Imagine what that must have felt like.

Surely some of them must have begged him to stay,
to give them one more day, one more hour.

Yet he leads them to a mount called Olivet,
tells them to wait for the Holy Spirit,
and moves beyond their sight.

The disciples are left standing on a mountain looking up at the sky
and knowing that Jesus is gone ... again.

The church celebrates this moment in The Feast of the Ascension.

That feast actually happened this past Thursday.

But it's not a feast that is very popular ...
after all who wants to celebrate a feast
that is all about being left behind?¹

Hard as it was for the disciples to understand,
Jesus had to leave them.

Because those "wretched little sheep" standing and watching the sky
needed to become shepherds themselves.

They never would have done so if Jesus had remained with them.

But they didn't know that yet –
all they knew was that he was gone,
and they would have to be without him again.

¹ Barbara Brown Taylor Gospel Medicine, pg 82

It was almost as if he had not ascended, but exploded, so that all the holiness that was once concentrated in him alone flew everywhere, flew far and wide, so that the seeds of heaven were sown in all the fields of the earth³

Those seeds of holiness which flew out of the Risen Christ,
have been sown in our fields here,

in this pretty little church in North East, MD.
All of us, really, are just wretched little cotton-ball sheep ...
except that we too know that Jesus lives within us.
We gather together each week, and in our worship,
we look up to the risen Christ.

We need to do that;
we need to come together with our fellow disciples
and worship the God who is beyond all understanding.
And then, we look around at each other.
We can do that, because Christ broke into our world, into our very bodies
and is now a part of each one of us.
We teach, we heal, we love, we say hello to some, and goodbye to others.
And by our lives, we witness to the saving power of God.
As I look around at this transitional moment in our lives together,
I would like to thank you for all we have shared.
You have opened your doors and your hearts to me.
I am more confident in my own abilities,
and my own call to serve God in parish ministry.
You have taught me so much and I will always hold you in my heart.
In my prayers this week, I used the words from today's Gospel.
As I said them, I thought about this community;

³ Ibid, 85

about the work we have shared this year;
and about this strange day that is both a goodbye and a hello.
As I end my field education work, I would like to leave you with this prayer.
Know that while it comes from the pen of John the Evangelist,
and from the words of Jesus,
today they are spoken from the heart of your seminarian.

"Holy God, I have tried to make your name known to those whom you gave me. They were yours, and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word. May they know that everything you have given me is from you; for the words that you gave to me I have given to them. I pray that they have received them."

May the Risen Christ continue to work in and through us
here in this very special place. Amen.