

**Sermon for Sunday, May 5, 2019**  
**A Jazz Mass at Church of Reconciliation**  
**The Rev. Judith L. Rhodes**

***Riffing on Death: God's Improvisation, Resurrection Life***

I love the Gospel of Luke... and yes, it's true also, that I love the Gospels, all four as distinct texts and narratives as they are, and as incredibly diverse in their story-telling. I love all the differences and even what seem to be "contradictions" ... as these are not to be proof texts one over and against the others but narratives written by human beings attempting to describe the indescribable, attempting to teach that which defies limited human understanding, attempting to bear witness to that which will always be more than what any one witness thought it to be.

So, my friends, how wonderful it is that we have such stories as the one from Luke's Gospel before us today. Luke is a master storyteller. And in this 24<sup>th</sup> chapter, right before the text we have today, Jesus walked along the Emmaus Road and encountered two other distraught, overwhelmed, grieving disciples, one named Cleopas, and his unnamed companion. There are really **five movements** to this story: the **encounter** with Jesus (although initially Jesus is not recognized), there is an **explanation** about why Jesus, the Son of God was crucified, died, and rose again, there is the **eating**, the sharing of a meal, followed by the **enlightenment** of those disciples as they come to recognize him, and then just as abruptly as Jesus shows up, he **exits**.

Encounter, explanation, eating, enlightenment, and exit... Five movements in the Emmaus story and I believe, in the story we hear proclaimed for us today.

We are told that Jesus appears in the upper room to the eleven who were startled and terrified, grieved and in hiding. And just as abruptly as Jesus appeared on the Emmaus Road, he appears in the midst of the eleven disciples remaining following his horrific death.

**"Peace be with you."** He proclaims. Peace. Yes, that peace that passes all understanding he gives to them in the midst of their terror, in the midst of their overwhelming grief, in the midst of their total loss of hope, meaning, direction, and identity. After all, what had these three years of healing, teaching, preaching, feeding, reconciling come to mean? To them in that moment, it must have felt like absolute unredeemable failure and loss. Death had done its worst. Jesus had died a horrific death and every one of their dreams had died with him.

**"Peace be with you."** And then the questions, "Why are you frightened, and why do doubts arise in your hearts?" Are you kidding me, Jesus? Why, you ask? How can you dare ask such a question? Yet Jesus, not missing one iota of a beat here, says to them, "Look at my hands and my feet; see that it is I myself. Touch me and see; for a ghost does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have."

Imagine with me, the gentle, compassionate, loving tone with which Jesus invites his disciples to touch him and see for themselves. Jesus knows what these terrified and startled disciples need most. They need to touch him and see for themselves.

And just as they do, he asks to eat with them. And he begins to teach them, to remind them with compassion and love in his voice, that all that God has done in the past, all that they experienced with Jesus in these last three years of public ministry, were all leading to their own commissioning as witnesses to the miracle of God's own riff on death; God's miraculous improvisation on death that utterly vanquishes death, forever.

Jesus reminds his disciples that even with the wounds still marking his body, he is risen. Just as we suffer with the wounds of small and big deaths in our own lives, Jesus promises that we too, rise with him. No death, however small or however big in our own lives, has the last word. In every death experience of ours, Jesus speaks into our hearts, "Peace be with you." I am here with you. I bear your pain. I calm your spirit. I redeem all death. You are never alone. Indeed, you live, die and rise daily with me. This is my promise for all time. And this is what you must give witness to in the world. **Love wins.** Love will always have the last word even when we are startled and terrified like those first disciples.

My friends, we are living right now in a season of transition and change; a season of unknown futures. To those of us who are frightened, Jesus says, "**Peace be with you.**" To those of us who are lost, Jesus says, "**I am with you always.**" To those of us who are grieving, Jesus says, "**I am resurrection and I am life.**"

**8am:** So, my friends, take heart over and over again in the words of Jesus, "Peace be with you." Don't be afraid to close your eyes and be present to him even in the midst of your fears, your doubts, your hopelessness. Hear him say to you, "Touch me and see..." Return again and again to this sacred table and eat as we become more and more like the One we receive. The One who will **always** be with us. The Lord of Love to whom we are witnesses. Amen.

**10:30am:** Today's Jazz Mass is the perfect context for the proclamation of this Gospel story, as God truly plays a riff on death! Death is vanquished once and for all. Who would ever had expected that?

Don Saliers, a contemporary theologian wrote: "Music is the language of the soul made audible." *And so it is.* I remember a music professor of mine once said, "Music and theology share the same task, to express the inexpressible." Thank you to our gifted musicians as they are mediators of that which is inexpressible and yet, real; that which is miraculous, yet eternally true. A riff, indeed! Amen.