

"FINDING YOUR WHY"

June 23, 2019

Matthew 28:1-7;16-20

We look back to the empty tomb, finding Jesus in our hearts and heads even as he no longer walks upon this earth. Are we as a church to be one big support group, or are we to be a movement in his name, discerning our collective "Why," defining our "What" and our "How", and then offering our invitation to others who have yet to know us? Hear what the Spirit is saying to us in Matthew's Gospel the 28th Chapter, beginning with the first verse:

After the Sabbath, as the first light of the new week dawned, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary came to keep vigil at the tomb. Suddenly the earth reeled and rocked under their feet as God's angel came down from heaven, came right up to where they were standing. He rolled back the stone and then sat on it. Shafts of lightning blazed from him. His garments shimmered snow-white. The guards at the tomb were scared to death. They were so frightened, they couldn't move.

The angel spoke to the women: "There is nothing to fear here. I know you're looking for Jesus, the One they nailed to the cross. He is not here. He was raised, just as he said. Come and look at the place where he was placed.

"Now, get on your way quickly and tell his disciples, 'He is risen from the dead. He is going on ahead of you to Galilee. You will see him there.' That's the message."

Meanwhile, the eleven disciples were on their way to Galilee, headed for the mountain Jesus had set for their reunion. The moment they saw him they worshiped him. Some, though, held back, not sure about *worship*, about risking themselves totally.

Jesus, undeterred, went right ahead and gave his charge: "God authorized and commanded me to commission you: Go out and train

everyone you meet, far and near, in this way of life, marking them by baptism in the threefold name: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Then instruct them in the practice of all I have commanded you. I'll be with you as you do this, day after day after day, right up to the end of the age."

Here ends the Gospel. May God bless these words as we seek to apply them to our lives.

I don't remember much about my grandfather on my mother's side. He was a tall, lanky fellow with heavy jowls and neatly-manicured hair. It's funny what you remember about people, isn't it? He always wore a suit and, like our other grandfather, carried his kerchief neatly folded in his breast pocket. He died when I was just about to turn 6 years old.

He was what you would call, "old school." He was sales manager at Rickenbaugh Cadillac here in Denver, a vocation that fit him for he had a shi-shi Cadillac style to him. Smooth, quiet, and respected just for his brand, that was Harold Johnson. My grandmother was a first-generation American from a Norwegian family. She never learned to drive and until Pa's death, she never needed to take care of herself, for he provided everything for her.

I remember sitting on Pa's lap along with my first cousin, Leslie, and him asking us, "What do you want to be when you grow up?" I honestly don't remember what Leslie said, but she grew up to be a

fiercely independent, rugged outdoorswoman, living in Alaska and working in the Anchorage Police Department as its principal dispatcher. She married the Chief of Police and they moved to Florida, hungry for a new experience and a bit of sunshine.

I was born to be a lawyer. I knew it from a very early age, but it was confirmed in me the day after JFK was shot when I saw on TV Lee Harvey Oswald murdered by Jack Ruby. We had the only television in the neighborhood, and I vividly remember being told that day by a voice in my head, "The law will be your work."

I told my grandfather that I wanted to be a lawyer. He guffawed, patted me on the head, and said something to the effect of, "You mean you want to *work* for a lawyer. Girls can't be lawyers, you know that." It was one of those, "Honey, that's the way things are, accept it and move on" speeches that we talked about last week.

The message was clear. And the messages were repeated to the girls of my generation in a variety of settings. They were subtle at times, and at other times, not so much.

I think of movement and change, and I think about our beloved Ellie and Shirley A. Born in 1929, their career options were limited, way more so than mine. I think now of our youngest church infant, Ellery Hedemann, born 90 years after Shirley and Ellie, and I am amazed to think of all the options open to her. We have come a long way. Yet, the work is not done. There are still career doors closed to

us women; I can hardly believe that in 2019 I am saying that. Such a journey we have been on. I wonder how Ellery will change the world; I know she will.

Ruth Bader Ginsburg started Harvard Law School the same year I was born, 1956. In the first week of school, she and the other eight women in the first class at Harvard with females were invited to the Dean's home to dinner. Asked to introduce themselves around the table, they were to answer his question: "Tell us why you are occupying a seat at Harvard Law that could have gone to a man."

Twenty-eight years later, I was one of nine women at Southern Methodist University Law School, SMU in Dallas, Texas, a hotbed of women's liberation, don't you know? Actually, not. In much the same way as Ruth Ginsburg was given the ques of disapproval, I and the other women in my torts class were addressed as "Honey," and encouraged to be silent. Our exams were blind, meaning our names were not on them, but our handwriting gave us away as females early on. We all learned to write in block letters so as to mask to our professors our gender. The male students largely did not include us in social events at their country clubs, and we were hazed in other ways I will not mention in polite company.

In my first job as an intern, I was sexually harassed by one of the lawyers in the firm, cornered and offered job security only if I complied with his advances. I made a stink instead, and to the credit

of my boss, he was fired rather than me. The women working in the firm in support positions shunned me after that for speaking up. This just wasn't done by women in polite Dallas society. We were supposed to grin and bear in silence these indignities. Upon my graduation, I was given two presents by the owner of the firm: a beautiful leather briefcase and an extra-large athletic supporter. I will leave it to you to guess the symbolism of that one!

Our film today is about a young and inspired, brilliant jurist, Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg, a woman who fought for gender equality in her own life and career and for the greater society. She became known for her appellate court work in this area, her first and most well-known case arising out of a situation here in Denver. In that case she appealed an IRS decision to disallow a tax deduction to a male, unmarried primary caregiver for a nurse he had hired to help care for his aging mother. The deduction was denied because it was only allowed under the Tax Code for married women caring for persons in their home.

Ruth Bader Ginsburg, "Kiki" to her friends and devoted husband, discovered her "Why" and heeded the Spirit's urgent call to follow it. This is what Jesus was saying to his disciples.

I have invited us once again back to the story of the empty tomb, because the message is timely and timeless for us. In the passage, Matthew's Jesus tells his followers, "This race is not over, folks. Your

work has just begun. It is time for you to discover your life's work, your 'Why.' What you do and How you do it is for you and God's Holy Spirit to work out. What you need to know is that I will be with you—in your head, in your heart, in your soul, always, always, until the end of time."

I suspect the disciples thought their ministry work was over when Jesus died. "Time to go back to the fishing boats," says Peter, James, and John. "Back to tax collecting," sighs Matthew. "Back to hustling for my survival," thinks Mary Magdalene; "Back to my family home to be cared for," laments the grieving mother, Mary.

I suspect their ears and eyes had closed off to the voice of the Spirit. Until now, their reason for living, their "Why," has been supplied to them by their Master. What a daunting task laid out before them to figure out their value to the cause Jesus died for! As Julie sings in the song from the movie, "Oh it's hard, I know it's hard, to be the lightning in the dark."

I think most of us inherently want to leave a mark upon this world. Not many folks will ever argue a case before the Supreme court, much less sit as a Justice on our highest court. Few will discover a cure for disease, run for political office, receive an Oscar or Grammy or Tony award, or be invited to the White House for a special recognition.

Some of you may think your lives don't count for very much. Women still think and say this all the time. "I'm just a housewife." "I'm just a grocery store clerk." "I'm just a teacher." Men often belittle themselves saying, "I'm just a laborer." "I just work a farm." "I just keep the books for the company." But Jesus says to you, as he said to his simple folk—his fishermen, his tax collector, his drifter, his mother—"I have work for you to do in God's name, and it's important work."

The Good News, that God loves all people unconditionally, is your news to spread. Reflecting that Good News in all that you do and say, in everyone you meet, that, says Jesus, is your mission. Recognizing that the Holy Spirit's power awakens in you the certainty that your life has meaning and value, that is your spiritual work now. For if you believe in yourself, if you believe God loves you without condition, out of grace and not because of anything you do, if you believe in what we have done together as ministers to the people, if you believe that the Holy Spirit is upon you with fire and urgency, you will know your "Why," your unique value that only you bring to the world.

The text paints us a vivid picture of the voice inside the head of the disciples, the voice of Jesus, spurring them on to greatness in the name of the Trinity. In their moment of greatest doubt and fear, in their grief and sorrow, in their complacency, they hear these words:

"God authorized and commanded me to *commission* you: Go out and train everyone you meet, far and near, in this way of life, marking them by baptism in the threefold name: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Then instruct them in the practice of all I have commanded you. *I'll be with you as you do this, day after day after day, right up to the end of the age.*"

"I'll be with you," he says. "I will never leave you," he promises. He's talking about movement, a movement of Spirit. When Ruth Ginsburg is lamenting to her teenage daughter, Jane, about the hard work of changing a system of laws, a culture of gender oppression, Jane says to her mother, "It's not a movement if everyone is just sitting around doing nothing. That's a support group." Jane's "Why" is obvious to her even as a teenager. She is an activist; her purpose and value to society is to challenge the status quo, to get folks out of the support group mentality into the world, moving and shaking up the systems that tend to keep certain groups marginalized and excluded. Today she trains other lawyers as a Professor of Law at Columbia University.

Risen Jesus comes back to his disciples as they sit around listlessly in their support group. They are sitting around disorganized, hopeless, feeling the air sucked right out of them. If you have ever been divorced; if you have been widowed; if you have had a child die; if you have been fired from a job, if you have been diagnosed with tragic illness, you know what these disciples were going through. It is human to hurt; it is natural to want to give up; it is *grace* that brings that

voice to us urging us on in love to find our reason to go on, not as before, but with new value and purpose, as a *movement*.

Support groups are well and good; I have mine and you have yours. But that is not all that Jesus wants of his followers; he wants us to find our "Why" and then get out there in the world and live into it. The What and the How is up to us, but we will not be alone in our discernment and resulting journey. Jesus promises to be our guide and traveling partner until the end of the age, and that's a long, long time.

Here ends the Gospel. What is the Spirit saying to our church?

May it Be So.