

St. Paul's Congregational Church,  
April 15, 2018  
Luke 24:36-48  
"Christ Among Us"  
Rev. Cynthia F. Reynolds

Let us pray: may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

Why do we come together in worship at this church or any church? I believe there's only one reason: to help each of us have an experience of God, to know Christ is among us – whether we have that experience via prayer, scripture, music, sermon, or even the offering – it's an opportunity to be in this sacred space and then go out, energized, refreshed, assured of God's presence with us and a new commitment to share that good news where we spend our days. We talk about the content of worship as liturgy – literally the work of the people – and as we plan the worship experience, James and I strive to bring it all together. It's our hope that something in the service will give each of us an experience of God, a firm knowledge of Christ's presence with us.

So, here we are just two short weeks after Easter – and I've been thinking a lot about worship experiences I've had. I went back in my memory to an extraordinary time when I felt the presence of God more deeply than usual and I'd like to share that experience.

In Glen Ridge we were our partners in ministry at the Bethel Church of Love and Praise in Bloomfield – it began with providing Christmas gifts for this church through MEND, and our partnership deepened as we volunteered at their Soup Kitchen, provided food for their pantry, and worked with their food distribution.

Well, one year I had the honor and privilege of preaching at the opening night of their first-ever mission conference. The director of their Food Ministry, LeWanda Pleasant, asked if I'd be willing to come – she said that they didn't think they did enough mission work and they wanted to do more. Could I tell the story of how we here in Glen Ridge had made such a strong commitment, including a mission trip to South Africa and later trips to Haiti.

Now, think about that – one of the beneficiaries of our mission outreach was telling us they don't do enough – and were willing to gather in a series of 4 meetings during the evening, all day on Saturday, ending on Sunday during worship to hear preachers tell their stories – the theme of the

conference: Sound the Alarm! The harvest is ripe but the laborers are few. They wanted to do more in providing services to their neighborhood.

From the very beginning of this conversation, I had a feeling it would be an extraordinary experience. It was a pleasure to reflect on all the mission projects I've been involved with over the years and to try to figure out where this passion in my life came from. LeWanda encouraged me to invite others to come as well – I asked one of our youth to come and speak about his YSOP experiences – a hunger ministry on the streets of New York based in the Quaker center there - he immediately said yes!

I have never experienced such radical hospitality, such an extravagant welcome – when Cole and I arrived at the church, two men were waiting for us on the sidewalk, orange cones on the street reserving a parking place right by the entrance. When we went in we were surrounded by smiling faces – many of them people I'd met on food deliveries or at the soup kitchen. They escorted us up to the sanctuary – the service wouldn't start for another few minutes – they seated us in the front row and as people gathered we became aware of a hum of voices – some soft, some getting louder and then quieting again. Some of the words were unintelligible as we realized there were a number of people, mostly women, in prayer. What we could understand was a constant, thank you Jesus – thank you Lord – to you all praise and glory.

People continued to arrive – there were lots of little children and we watched as worship preparations began – the congregation was about 85 people. There's a large stage area where the worship leaders sit, a big pulpit, and a sound board – no organ here – the instruments were a keyboard and a set of drums. About 6 women came up, took to the microphones – their sound system was incredible – and sang. Joyful, loud praise music – what a call to worship that was!

During their music, the congregation joined in too – and we could hear them! Cole and I were brought up to a side room – did we want anything to eat, to drink – anything we needed at all. When I asked for some water, I didn't get the usual bottle of water – they brought it to me in a goblet and said there would be more at the pulpit.

Then they led us onto the stage, seated us, and the worship continued – it was impossible to sit still during the music – there was a Bible reading, the children's choir sang – they were from about 4 years old to high school age – prayer, more music, a praise dance – more prayer – and an offering. That was just the first hour!

I've never heard more alleluias, more thank you Jesus! I've never seen such energy in worship, such joy, more participation by the congregation. And when it was quiet, not a peep out of the children.

Finally LeWanda got up to introduce me – and extended greetings to the church – to all of you who bring food for the shopping cart – to those who have made those cookies for the soup kitchen dinners – for those who have helped prepare, serve, and cleanup for the dinners at the Soup Kitchen, for you who have carried filled grocery bags for the Food Bank on a Saturday morning – for anyone who ever bought Star Tree gifts, her words: you are a blessing! Your help to us here means more than we can express. When you first started with us in ministry, we thought this was just a nice holiday project – but it wasn't. You've stayed with it – every week – every month – every day you are a blessing! And as to emphasize LeWanda's gracious words, the congregation erupted in applause, standing, and more alleluias.

Now it's finally time for the sermon – don't worry – you won't get the 45 minute version – I'm glad we don't do that every week! But it was a remarkable experience to preach to this congregation – it was more preaching with as there were verbal responses – oh yes, praise God, alleluia, amen – the energy flowing back and forth from that pulpit was amazing – when I finished I was exhausted yet energized. Cole spoke wonderfully well – so articulate – about what his time of service had meant to him as he along with our other high schoolers fed the hungry of New York City – in the food banks, soup kitchens, even on the street. His comment as we got into the car to come home – that was amazing. And it certainly was.

The service concluded with – are you ready for this? Another offering! And everyone participated – they come forward to place their money in large baskets again while the women sang yet again – our God is an awesome God! And we all joined in. There was a closing prayer – most of it was praise to God for the people and ministry of the Glen Ridge church – prayers that we continue our mission and ministry that more people be blessed by it – and then more than 2 hours after the worship started, it was over. But we were a long time leaving as people came forward to greet us, to thank us for coming, to speak with us – it was hard to leave. And, I should add, while I was speaking to some folks, one of the men went with Cole to empty my trunk full of food collected at Glen Ridge.

As I reflected on this experience, I know part of what made it so remarkable is how different the liturgy was from what I'm used to – after all, I've been a New England Congregationalist most of my life – reserved in my faith, used to a white, clear windows meetinghouse built in 1792 in a church formed in 1652. No candles there – and I still sometimes forget to light the candles on the communion table in the summer or for a wedding – I love the stained glass windows but still miss the sunbeams in the sanctuary – and

before I came to Glen Ridge I didn't know what a Sanctus or a Nunc Dimittis or a Sursum Corda was - I'm learning....I'm adapting...and I've come to understand that we all find God in different ways – and that liturgy, worship design, is an aid in that search, a pathway on our journey. Familiar liturgy brings great comfort, doesn't it – but think back to the last couple of weeks here in our worship – Easter worship was breathtaking with the music, with the pews filled, the atmosphere of celebration. And last week the sense of worship was different from what it was on Easter, from what it is today.

But worship is always about God, isn't it – it's not about us. And I've been thinking that the very different style of worship that night at Bethel startled me into a new way of thinking, of feeling my faith – of feeding my faith - of seeing what God has done in my life, in our life together with clearer eyes and then being led to offer humble thanks for all the blessings I have so freely been given – and then the responsibility to pass them on. Being startled is a good thing sometimes. Because it can lead to transformation.

It was on the way to Emmaus when two of the disciples encountered the Risen Christ but did not know him until they were at the table together and he broke bread and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened and they recognized him and he vanished from their sight. They then made the long walk back to Jerusalem, met the rest of the disciples. As they talked about these appearances, Jesus himself stood among them – saying “Peace be with you.” Luke tells us they were startled and terrified, thinking they were seeing a ghost. And Jesus makes it clear to them that it is really him – he showed the wounds, he asked for something to eat. And then he charges the disciples – you are witnesses of these things.

Later on in the story Luke tells us they worshipped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy and they were continually in the temple blessing God.

Every year we celebrate the great Christmas and Easter festivals – it's the Easter celebration of the resurrection that defines our faith, isn't it. We gather in larger numbers in worship that day – why is that? I loved it when one year one of our confirmands burst out and asked, why is it that the church is filled on Christmas Eve and Easter Sunday? How come people don't come all the time – it isn't right! We're supposed to come to church more often than that....I didn't have an answer for him except to agree with the question – it was an interesting conversation among the class.

I can only imagine the letdown those disciples were experiencing those first days after the crucifixion – and for those who had not yet seen the

resurrected Jesus, I can only imagine what they were thinking, feeling – what next! Was this all for naught? These past 3 years we gave up our everyday lives – and for what? Jesus was killed. We're alone. We have to go back to our lives.

But then Jesus comes to them, shows his humanity – he really is risen! And he charges them: you are witnesses of these things. Easter made a difference in their lives – what difference does it make in our lives?

Every year I'm struck by the fact that there are no alleluias in Lent – it's a time of sober reflection, isn't it. There are lots of alleluias on Easter morning and I think we take them for granted when we hear them in an anthem by the choir – we sure don't say it very often. That night at Bethel there were constant alleluias! They erupted all during the service – during the prayers, during the music, even during the sermon. For me it was an affirmation that Easter does make a difference – that every year we witness this extraordinary event – that every year we're called to celebrate, to see again – and then to go forth with great joy. And I heard nothing but unbridled joy from that congregation on Thursday night. It didn't feel like just words – their faces told the same story. There was genuine feeling in those words – their praise of God came forth just as naturally as breathing and it was beautiful to witness and be a part of. I couldn't help but feel the same way – I needed to be startled into a new way, even for such a brief time, onto a new pathway to God. And God met me there. I'm not sure I'll ever see worship in the same way again. It was not a spectator sport – it was a full participation activity. And could they sing! It was wonderful.

God meets all of us on whatever path we take in our liturgy – one pathway is not better than another – one worship style is not better than another – for true worship always points to God. But like those disciples, we too feel a letdown after the great celebration of the resurrection – we can hardly believe the good news we receive. But we are witnesses of these things – let's never forget that. Jesus is among us! And let's always live that. We have good news to tell and share and live out here–

Alleluia! Christ is Risen! Christ is Risen indeed! Jesus is among us and we are witnesses of these things. Alleluia and Amen!