

A sermon delivered by The Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, Sr. Minister, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, April 29, 2007, dedicated to the three women of faith: in memory of Dorinda White, faithful minister of this church and in celebration for Dorothy Cromartie as her life of 95+ years hangs in the balance and my wife, Susan Sitler on her 50th birthday and always to the glory of God!

“Break Through”

Psalm 23, Acts 9: 36-43, Luke 24:13-35

As I stand here today, I am deeply grateful for what transpired in this pulpit through the hearts, minds, and words of our three young preachers last Sunday. Kim Kutschbach, Thomas Welsh-Huggins and Cassie Reid are all to be commended for the sermons they presented during Youth Sunday. Thank you. All of our youth worship leaders and the adults who assisted them are also to be thanked for your leadership of worship.

As we left worship last Sunday, my staff and I became fully aware that our beloved colleague and friend, Dorinda White, had taken a serious turn for the worse. Within 18 hours she was gone. Thomas Welsh-Huggins called her our superhero. That is true. Sadly, even superheroes die sometimes. But, when they do, they either return in new forms with new energy and new power to wage their courageous battles against evil or they count on the regular powers of those left behind to save the day. I believe this is our moment to do great things for God.

As we turn to God’s word today and the sermon ahead, I pray for strength and hope in the face of Dorinda’s death and Dorothy Cromartie’s impending death. We are an Easter people - a resurrection people - we stand on God’s promises of life everlasting - growing out of death.

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen.

Lost in despair, two followers of Jesus started on a journey. Three days before their leader had died. He was a good man - an innocent man, a man who had died much too young. Who knows, as they headed out on their journey, they may have been angry at God for taking him away. They may have been angry at those who had overseen his state run execution. We could have understood of these emotions, but, certainly they were sad and heartbroken.

They didn't know where to turn, so they turned away, down the road. They left the capital city and headed away from pain, not knowing what to do with all they were feeling. Their steps took them away from their fellowship of believers with whom they had found strength and hope in the recent past. They withdrew from everything and everyone as they sunk deeper into their dashed hopes and frustrated anger. They were alone in their pain.

As they walked into their grief, they were joined by a stranger on the road. It was Jesus - himself. Although they had been his followers, through their tears and lost faith, they did not recognize him as he joined them. Even though they wanted Jesus with them, they couldn't see he was right there. They wanted him nearby in case questions needed answering and wounds needed healing. They wanted him nearby so they could lean on him and follow his lead. They wanted him nearby so they could bask in the brightness of his presence. When he was strong, they felt strong. And yet, even though they wanted him to be there in the worst way, they couldn't even see he was walking and talking beside them.

This "stranger" on the road, asked them why they were crying. They filled him in about the crucifixion of Jesus. When he "played the fool," and asked what they were talking about, they responded, *"What hole have you been living in, man?... You mean to tell us that you don't know what happened? You don't know about the crucifixion of Jesus of Nazareth? He was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all people. The leaders of our people had him condemned and crucified. We had hoped he would save Israel. Today, some women went to the tomb and found it empty. Truthfully, we don't know what's going on now!"*

But, Jesus turned the tables. He pointed out their foolishness. As they walked, he talked. He revealed the truth of the scriptures to them. Starting with Moses, he taught them all about the fulfillment of scriptures - all the things that pointed to Jesus - to himself!

He must have talked about Psalm 22, 69, and 110. He must have spoken his cry from the cross in Psalm 22: *“My God, My God why have you forsaken me?”* He must have the pain of Psalm 69: *“Save me O God, for the waters have come up to my neck . . . I am weary with my crying, my throat is parched. My eyes grow dim with waiting for you, O God.”* He must have shared from Psalm 110: *“The Lord will execute justice among the nations.”*

The words of the prophets were written in his heart. He must have said from Isaiah 53: *“He was despised and rejected by others, a man of suffering and acquainted with infirmity . . . He was wounded for our transgressions and crushed for our iniquities . . .”* Jeremiah 31 must have come out in that four-mile walk to Emmaus - *“The Lord says, ‘I will make a new covenant and place it on their heart.’”*

And he must have spoken about Micah and Malachi 3 - about these messenger of God who had revealed his coming in their day. In all the prophecies, Jesus had to have shown them that their Messiah was at hand. He was present. He had come to save all God’s children. He must have told them all of this and more.

When he finished with the story, somewhere deep in their hearts, they must have known this now “familiar stranger” was their Lord. They insisted that this he join them for dinner and fellowship. *“Stay with us!”* they prodded. Clearly they didn’t know it was Jesus. Jesus would not stay put. Whenever disciples through the ages cry, *“Stay!”* Jesus responds *“Follow!”* Then, as now, Jesus agreed to go with them - but not to stay. In fact, it was Jesus who led them into town. He led them to the house, which was their destination. He went in front and they followed.

Once at table, during the sacramental meal of breaking bread, they finally recognized him! They knew him in remembrance. “Take this bread and remember me,” he said. They saw that he was with them all the time. Through the fourfold action of Taking, Blessing, Breaking, and Giving himself and the Bread - he proved to them who he was. They were blown away! And at that very moment, he disappeared from the midst of them.

With good news in their feet, they ran those seven miles back to the city. They ran back to community, back to faith, back to tell the others: “*He is risen! He is Alive. “God With Us,” Immanuel is indeed “With Us!”*”

Today, we cling to most of this story as our story. Lost in our grief over Dorinda White’s death and our sadness with Dorothy Cromartie’s impending death, we are on a journey today. Some of us have tried to run away from our pain. Some of us are angry at God for the death of Dorinda White. All of us are sad and brokenhearted. We want to get away from the dashed hopes and frustrated anger. We want the pain of loss - the loss of our beloved leader, mentor, colleague, friend, teacher, wife, and mother - to go away. All of us long to see, to hear, and to hold Dorinda. Like her name - Dorinda - she was one of a kind. She was unique in all the world.

All of us know she died too young. She was supposed to come back to us after her bone marrow transplant surgery and recovery. Eight weeks ago when I stood at the Table of Grace by her side and Took, Blessed, Broke and Shared the elements of Holy Communion, that was not supposed to be our last supper. It wasn’t supposed to happen this way.

On that Sunday, March 4th, as we sat beside each other in the chancel and listened to the choir singing the Nunc Dimittis, I asked Dorinda if she was okay giving the Benediction. She said in a calm and peaceful voice, “I am okay...I feel fine.” She was okay. And she was fine. She stood before us and offered us consolation and hope as she closed our service and sent us out to serve our God. It wasn’t supposed to be

our last service together after more than seven years of regular worship in this Cathedral of Grace and for her after 25 years of worshipping here week in and week out.

But, as I stood by her bedside late last Sunday evening, I knew in my heart that my goodbyes and my farewell kiss were spoken and given for all of us. I knew my prayer was a closing prayer, a final benediction on her life well-lived, well-loved, and deeply filled with teaching and service in Jesus' name. I knew when I said, "*well done good and faithful servant,*" that her service on earth was complete and the angels in glory were holding a place for her in the eternal arms of Jesus. She is at rest in God's mercy and grace.

Today, I also know that Jesus, whom she loved and served and whose lessons she taught to us and to our children, Jesus - the "familiar stranger" who revealed himself to unknowing disciples so long ago, Jesus, our Lord and Savior, was with us that night and Jesus is with us today. We have his promises to sustain us. We have his presence to enlighten our path. He is our bread for the journey.

In our grief, we may not feel him or see him, but he is here. I know "God With Us," our "God with skin on" is in this room. How do I know - because I see him in your eyes of love. In your tears, I feel his tears. I feel his genuine spirit as you share your hearts. I see his fire for justice in your eyes. I feel his compassion in your touch. Jesus is with us. We not see him - but he is here right now.

Since we are the body of Christ in this world, we are called to be Christ's revelation, storytellers and justice makers now and well into the future. Like the fourfold action of Holy Communion - Jesus is Taking Us, Blessing Us, Breaking Us, and Giving Us as his life to the world. He takes us to places that we may not like and would rather not go. But, he takes us there because he loves us and he loves the world he is giving us to. He Blesses us with abundant life and hope and sends us out to do his work and reflect his will in this world. He Breaks us just as he was broken so long ago to be bread for the world. Through pain and suffering

- pain and suffering he himself experienced - we are broken and finally Given to the world.

Today, our First Church BREAD team has baked little loaves of Bread for all of us. You have been given BREAD to carry out into the world. As you go, we ask that you take this bread, bless it, break it and give it to others. We also ask all of you to come and join us on Monday, May 7th, at BREAD's annual Nehemiah Action Assembly. I hope and pray that everyone here comes to Temple Israel that evening.

In addition this week, I need you to join me here on Thursday, May 3rd for We Believe Ohio's day of prayer in action. If my heart was in it right now, I would tell you that We Believe is calling for civility in government and state budget which reflects the moral imperative to care for the poor and forsaken. We need health care coverage for single mothers who have none; safe housing for those who have none; and fair and equitable education for all Ohioans. Since my heart is heavy, I only ask that you join May 3rd and May 7th to work together in the struggle for justice.

As she lay in OSU Ross Heart Hospital two weeks ago, Dorothy Cromartie said to me she was sorry she would miss a BREAD rally two days later. At 95 years- young, Dorothy was still focused on justice! There she was with kidney failure, heart failure, and weakening by the hour, still concerned about getting to the BREAD meeting, still compassionate for the poor who needed her voice speaking out for justice in this world.

Similarly, the last conversation I had with Dorinda was on Maundy Thursday - four days after our Palm/Passion Sunday services. Dorinda lit up to hear how well the Silent Auction had gone - on her birthday - no less. She smiled and said how proud she was of the youth and lay leaders who had taken over in her absence. There she was fighting for her life and overcome with joy at the faithfulness of you! Your success was her joy.

Dorinda has gone before us to God . Dorothy lingers near death at the hospice at Kobacker House this morning. Dorinda and Dorothy were women who lived their lives in love with God, focused on God's mission, focused on all God's children, focused on justice for all - especially for the least of these among us!

So, my brothers and sisters in faith, wipe away your tears. Look and see. God is calling you to go and tell others that Jesus is alive and well in this community of faith. Go and tell others that his work for justice is not yet finished. Carry his message for justice forward. Go and tell others that God has revealed himself in Bread taken, blessed, broken and given for the life of the world AND that God has called you to be Christ's body now and in the days to come!

Go and tell others that you will carry on, Dorinda and Dorothy's mission, our mission, Christ's mission. Go and tell others that you will be the hands and feet of Jesus. Go share his heart and love in this world crying out for justice and peace. Don't try to Make Jesus Stay Here in this sanctuary. He isn't one for staying put! Rather, "Follow" him to places and people where he needs your healing touch, your voice, your little light to shine in the darkness!

My brothers and sisters in Christ, Break Through this moment. Remember, he is no longer a "familiar stranger." He is our friend on the journey, our Risen Hope and he is calling us to get up, go out and go share our little lights and his bright Light of Love with others!

And if along the way, you can't remember what he looks like, remember the faces of Dorinda and Dorothy. In their faces his light is shining. Amen.