



Sunset at Paine's Creek, oil on canvas,
9" x 12", Judith Davis, 2011

Christ Church Episcopal in Harwich Port, MA
Sermon for Easter 2A, April 27, 2014

Judith Davis, Rector

Acts 2:22ff; 1 Peter 1:3-9; John 20: 19-31

Come Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of your faithful with the fire of your love. Send forth your Spirit and we shall be created and you shall renew the face of the earth. Amen.

I have so much I wish I could say to you today about Easter, about being an incredible community of faith, about the sabbatical, about renewal, about being apart from you, about how much I love you, about how much the sabbatical team and fellowship team have worked for today, and how everyone worked so

much for the funerals we've had and Holy Week and Easter, and so much more, but condensing all that is just overwhelming, so I'll paint a few scenes for you, beginning with today's scripture. The Evangelist John has Jesus say to Thomas, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe." Peter said in the lesson from the Acts of the Apostles, from which we read in Eastertide instead of from the Hebrew Bible, "This Jesus God raised up, and of that all of us are witnesses." Peter is writing after Pentecost. The first letter of Peter says, "Although you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and rejoice with an indescribable and glorious joy, for you are receiving the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls."

This Sunday is about seeing Jesus and believing and about not seeing Jesus and yet believing that God loved the world so much that God sent Jesus the son to show us how to love God and our neighbor, to change the world and to show us the power of the Resurrection to eternal life.

Let me go back to Peter's sermon in Acts. He gives this powerful message at Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit came to the followers of Jesus. The passage sets Jesus' death and resurrection in the context of God's larger plan and activity in the people and story of Israel. What happened to Jesus was not a new story but the continuation -- and

climax -- of an old story. Jesus' death and resurrection came as surprises to his first followers and to Israel, but the story was powerful. Peter makes the point that the story of Jesus is the center of the story of human history. Also, the whole reason Peter brings up the story of Jesus here is to explain the experience of the Spirit at Pentecost as being connected to the story of Jesus.¹

Looking at all of these readings for today, I'm struck with the conviction and belief of Peter, the disciple and of John, the evangelist about the power of Jesus' resurrection. And not forgetting Thomas, who was overwhelmed to see that Jesus was not dead, but alive, and that Jesus would prepare a place for Thomas in the eternal life with God.

One of the passages we often read at funerals is the section of John 14 about Jesus' preparing a dwelling place for the disciples. In that passage, Thomas, the one who needed proof that Jesus was alive, said to Jesus, in response to Jesus' saying, 'And you know the way to the place where I am going,' 'Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?' Then Jesus tells Thomas, "I am the way."

We don't think we know the way sometimes either. Sometimes, I think we need to be reminded at funerals and Easter of the way, to remind us what we believe, to remind us that even though we do not see Jesus, we believe in the power of the resurrection. I think one of our tasks in Eastertide is to look for the presence of God in our lives, and for those of us in the Christian tradition, to look for the presence of Jesus around us. So you have this painting of the Church at Pentecost, believing in the power of the Spirit and the Resurrection of Jesus Christ and the promise of eternal life for us.

Now I want to paint a different picture, one of the sabbatical and of renewal. Sabbath rest is an important part of our lives. We read in the Gospel stories how Jesus went apart to rest often from all his teaching and healing, and we, too, are called to go apart sometimes to be renewed. First of all, I can't imagine being away from you for four months. I can't imagine not preaching for four months. I can't imagine just not being here for four months, but I'm working on imagining a Sabbath rest and a time of renewal.

The last time I had four months off was in 1987 when I had a semester of sabbatical from my university professorship. That was the kind of sabbatical when you were mostly at home working on writing and publishing or perishing. It was a different kind

¹ This paragraph's ideas are from the blog, "Working Preacher."

of rest, just rest from the teaching and administrative work at the university, where I was a department head and professor. But the kind of sabbatical the Lilly Foundation imagines is modeled on Sabbath, Shabbat, a time of rest and renewal, a time to be still and know God, a time to breathe deeply, a time of not being on call, not being responsible, not being in charge, a time of a break from the demands of parish ministry, which are incredible sometimes. The Lilly Foundation wants clergy to rest, to have adventures with their family that they could not afford, to be renewed in new places, and to chill out without expectation of publishing or working. I can't imagine that today, but I hope I can, tomorrow.

So here's what the painting is that I see: sleeping, relaxing, reading, praying the Psalms, being immersed in what John Muir called "nature's warm heart," taking photographs of nature in national parks, sketching and painting nature, hiking and kayaking, watching birds and whales on Vancouver Island and in Alaska and Maine, studying puffins in Maine, studying natural history and watching birds on Star Island, seeing all kinds of God's creatures, chanting the psalms in convent retreat, sketching nature on a small island in Maine, spending four months with my family. Did I mention birds? My son has no idea what it would be like for Mama to be off work for a month, let alone four months. I'm going to work on the Psalms with Joan Chittister at the Benedictine Sisters of Erie for two weeks. I'm serving as the chaplain for the Natural History Week at Star Island, helping us see God in the nature around us. My family and I are going on an incredible cruise-tour to Alaska and Vancouver Island where we will be immersed in nature's warm heart for three weeks and then come back East to Acadia and relax in nature's warm heart in Maine. Jamie and I are going to the National Audubon camp at Hog Island in May where we will see puffins and other birds and creatures of God's creation. Did I mention birds? This whole experience is the adventure of a lifetime and will make our hearts sing the praises of the God who created us and all creation out of incredible love.

You will also have a time of renewal and change and share time in community telling stories and learning together and writing and eating, I believe. Your sabbatical team has worked hard to give you a great four months as well.

Another scene I would paint for you happened in Holy Week. After the wonderful memorial service for Peggy Herring when the Eastern Phoebe flew into the parish hall on Palm Sunday and Jamie and I were thrilled with our First-of-the-year Eastern

Phoebe, I thought of Peggy and her birding adventures and our birding connection and how much I loved Peggy. Then on Monday in Holy Week our beloved John Sembrowich died while the songbirds in his yard sang praises as God welcomed him home. I wrote about my experience with the Red-winged blackbird on Easter Sunday on your yellow sheet "This week at Christ Church." The choir sang "Morning has broken like the first morning, black bird has spoken like the first bird," at John's bedside on Palm Sunday afternoon, and we sang it again at his funeral and then just the few of us sang it again while the birds sang at Island Pond this past Monday as we interred the rest of John's ashes. And while this is not in chronological order for Holy week, when I washed your hands as the Maundy ritual on Thursday of Holy Week, I realized yet again how much I love this parish family and how blessed I have been to be your rector for almost six years. When I washed Chris's (our acolyte's) hands especially, I was overcome with love and couldn't imagine being away from Chris for four months, and I realized how deeply connected we all are.

So what I want you to remember today, if you remember none of what I've said, is this: I am so thankful for each of you and this journey we have shared and I love you so much. I'm thankful that about this time six years ago, Vince and Gail and Deborah visited me in Washington, DC as a potential final candidate to be your rector. When Anne and Jamie and I visited you in late May, 2008, we fell in love with this parish family (and it wasn't about the beach) and I felt so called to share this journey with you. I believe in the power of the Holy Spirit in our lives and in our call to share life together. And God isn't finished with us yet.

Our sabbatical committee began working two years ago that we might possibly be awarded one of only 87 grants from the National Clergy Renewal Program of the Lilly Foundation in a very tough competition. The committee has worked tirelessly and is working still, as you and I will see today. They put up with me and my waffling back and forth on what our theme and travels would be, and led by the Spirit, we came up with the wonderful idea of studying the images of nature in some of the Psalms of the Hebrew Bible as seen in a few national parks.

So, that leads me to my conclusion as I paint this final scene from a hymn. During Lent, 2012, I kept what I call at "Field Guide to Lent." Every day of Lent in 2012, except for the occasional snowstorm, Jamie and I, and sometimes Anne, went out to see nature and birds on Cape Cod, and I would sketch and photograph the images,

especially birds, and relate them to the psalms. And after Lent, this daily wee bit of time had become a habit and so we kept at it through Eastertide. How much I had longed to have more time for that. Our sabbatical team began to study psalms and hymns and read some of John Muir's works, thanks to Diana, who worked for the Sierra Club. One of my favorite hymns came to mind, the one we will sing at the offertory presentation.

In the early days of the Church, the only singing was of the psalms following the idea of worship in the synagogues and temples. This continued through the centuries and the first book published in America was, in fact, the *Bay Psalm Book* of the Massachusetts Bay Colony in 1640 in Cambridge. The early residents of the colony had brought several books of psalms with them and they sang from them in their worship. These psalms were arranged in meter for singing. That brings us to our hymn for today, "My shepherd will supply my need," and to Isaac Watts, the hymn writer. Watts, an English hymn writer, published *The Whole Book of Psalms* in 1562. I have a latter version. His paraphrase of Psalm 23 is the hymn, "My Shepherd will supply my need." Our sabbatical team chose the concluding phrase of verse one for our theme "Beside the Living stream:" *"My Shepherd will supply my need, Jehovah is his Name. In pastures fresh he makes me feed beside the living stream."*

Our theme became "Beside the Living Stream: A Field Guide to the Psalms of Nature." And it worked for us and for the Lilly foundation for clergy renewal. I plan to be immersed in nature's warm heart beside the living stream as I image nature in painting and photography. Jamie and Anne will be joining me and Anne will be doing some reading and research on a project as well. We are so thankful for this opportunity and for this experience of God's creation. We will be beside the living stream for four months, and then we will return, renewed and refreshed for the work God has given us to do in this place. You will have your own living stream and refreshment as well. Then in late August we will celebrate our adventures and share some stories and re-up as a pastor and people once more. *Our shepherd will supply our need. Jehovah is God's name. In pastures fresh God makes us feed beside the living stream.*

May God bless you and hold you close and may God hold us all in the palm of God's hand. Take care of each other and remember I love you. Amen.