

Melanie Rosa  
Lakewood UMC

“Always With You”

April 6, 2008  
Matthew 28:16-20

This past week I have been so vividly reminded of the fragility of this life and the ever present reality of death. Late last month we lost 3 of our dear and long term members. Lorene Mueller, Fran Naber and Don Redmon were all pillars of this church, each of them having been members here for 50 years. They will be dearly missed. But then we suffered two sudden and unexpected deaths when both Craig Ridings and Diane Meyers passed away. Both of them precious people who had worked their way into all of our hearts, and they too will be dearly missed. Then my mother's dearest friend died quite suddenly and unexpectedly. And so I have officiated at 5 funerals in 5 days, and I'm so very sad for these bereaved families. And I am sad for the loss to our church community. During 2007 we had a total of 7 deaths among our church members. Already in 2008 we have had 8 deaths, and the year is young. So please nobody else die, alright?

I want us to take a moment to pray silently for the surviving loved ones of all of those who have died within our community of faith recently. Whether you know them or not, let us lift them up to the light and love of our gracious God....

Now it's a strange thing, but very often you don't really see someone clearly until they are gone. When someone is away from you they come into better perspective, and you begin to appreciate all of the things you had previously taken for granted. I believe that our physical bodies are distractions, but when all you have is the spirit you can really understand the authentic reality of another human being. Faith in God is defined as "...the conviction of things not seen." Time and time again we are told that which is **not** seen is just as real, if not more so, than that which is seen. This has to be why our faith places such a value upon the life of the spirit and the importance of the soul, the things that are not seen.

Jesus told his disciples something like this when he said that it was to their benefit that he left them so that they could fully understand who he was. His life had to end so that his redeeming work could begin. Jesus said to them, "It is to your benefit that I go away. I will go, but I will send the Counselor, the Spirit of truth to be with you forever." That Spirit of God is with us forever, and that is the lesson we need and we claim both in the face of death and in this season of Eastertide.

Which brings me to my favorite children's book, The Runaway Bunny. Written by Margaret Wise Brown, it is a wonderful story about a

little bunny who wants to run away. So he tells his mother what he will do, and all the places he will go. He'd like to become a fish, or a flower, or a rock high upon a mountain, or a bird, or a little boy. But to every suggestion he makes, his mother says that she will find him. She tells him that whatever he does or wherever he goes, she will be there. There is no escaping her love because she will always find him. It occurs to me that in this season of Eastertide we need to be reminded that this is exactly what God is like.

How quickly we tend to forget the resurrection and all that it means for us! It means we have abundant and eternal life, and it means that we can never escape God's care. God tells us, "You might ignore me or forget me, or even reject me. You might question me and doubt me. But I will still love you. Wherever you go and whatever you do, I will be with you."

That's the story of God's relationship to God's people throughout recorded history. God says again and again--"I'll be with you." To Moses, leading the Israelites into the Promised Land--"I'll be with you." To Noah preparing for the flood--"I'll be with you." To Abraham setting off to start a new nation "I shall be there." To Joshua going into battle "I be with you." To Queen Esther leading her people, to Ruth and Naomi setting off for a strange and foreign land "I'll be with you." And to Jesus. And then Jesus himself, as we just heard in the 28<sup>th</sup> chapter of Matthew, promises the same thing--to always be with his followers. Indeed, that is the consistent message we receive: "Whatever you do and wherever you go, "I'll be with you."

We can try to run and hide, but God keeps coming after us. This was beautifully expressed by Francis Thompson in "The Hound of Heaven" Thompson wrote, "I fled Him, down the nights and down the days; I fled Him, down the arches of the years; I fled Him down the labyrinthine ways of my own mind; and in the midst of tears, I hid from Him...but He followed, followed after." God is that one who persistently follows after us.

From Genesis to Revelation we read about a God who never gives up on humanity. There is a passage in the 43<sup>rd</sup> Chapter of Isaiah where God says, "Fear not, I am always with you. You are precious in my sight and I love you. You may go through deep waters and fire and trauma and turmoil, but know that I will always be with you. I love you." And in the book of Hosea, too there is a wonderful passage in the 11<sup>th</sup> chapter, where God is in

conversation with the people of Israel. God has done so much for them, and is puzzled that they keep turning their backs on him. God says, “I delivered you from slavery in Egypt, I have taken care of you, watched over you, and yet you keep turning your backs on me.” And they have, they worshiped other Gods, they turned away from God again and again. But God says, no matter what, I cannot, I will not abandon you.

That same sort of love is demonstrated in the Parable of the Prodigal Son. God, represented by the forgiving father, cannot turn his back on his wayward son, but warmly welcomes him back home. I hope you have experienced that radical love of God. I hope more than anything else, you experience a God who will not let you go, a God who seeks you out and loves you no matter what you have done or failed to do. I hope that’s the God you experience in this church. Whether you have been a part of this church 50 years or 15 minutes, whether you love God or are angry at God, whether you are a saint or a sinner, God says, “I will never give up on you. I am always with you and I love you.” So many people do not know such a God.

Jim Moore is senior pastor of St. Lukes UMC in Houston. He tells about a woman named Hulda, who, when I first read about her reminded me of what God is like. Hulda was a nurse at a mental hospital in Germany. One day a 12 year old girl was admitted to that mental hospital as a patient. This girl was in a terrible emotional state. She had been raised by violent, abusive parents. Earlier that year she witnessed a fight between her mother and father. They were both drunk, and wrestling for a gun. Suddenly, the gun went off and right before her eyes, her father died. Well, that was the last straw. Marie’s mind just snapped. Those years of abuse and violence had finally taken their toll. She became catatonic, except for these violent bursts of rage that she periodically displayed. When she wasn’t just starting into space, Marie would scream, scratch and hit anyone who came near her. Hulda volunteered to work with her by using a risky and controversial technique. She would enter Marie’s padded cell every single day, and for a full hour Marie would curse and kick and scream and attack her like a wild animal. And then, exhausted, she would collapse into a corner. And then this saint of a nurse (who was often bruised and bleeding) would go to Marie and just hold her. She would rock her back and forth, gently stroke her hair

and say over and over again, “Marie, I love you. Marie, I love you.”

Ever so slowly, that message seemed to get through to that poor girl. Over time, a long, long time, she was able to cry, and in much more time she was able to return Hulda’s affection. She eventually experienced a measure of healing and wholeness.

I don’t think you could find a better example of what God’s love is like. God loves us in spite of ourselves. We rebel and kick and scratch and scream and still God says, “Nothing you do or fail to do will ever change the fact that I love you and I will always be with you.” In life and in death, God is with us.

Now my ministry is devoted to the promotion of this very truth, and this very God. But honestly, I don’t know what it takes for most people to understand this. Some people just get it and some never do. Death and sorrow make it clear for some, shame for a few, joy for others. But I do hope that at some point in your life’s journey, you will realize that your life unfolds in the hands of God. That is where you’ve been all along.

The Runaway Bunny learned that there was no escape from that kind of love. After running and running he finally gives up and tells his mother, “Shucks....I guess I might just as well stay right here and be your little bunny.” He had learned to let himself be loved.

May the same be true of us.....