

*In Jesus' Name*

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Acts 3/Luke 24

Sunshine Cathedral, April 26th, 2009

My paternal grandmother was a teacher, as was two of her siblings. Her son, my father, was a public school band director for a few years, but left teaching to work at a factory. My grandmother raised my father as a single parent on a teacher's salary. She was also a life-long Republican. Much to her chagrin, my father became a Democrat and was a chief steward of his union.

My maternal grandmother was a home-maker. She was the youngest of 10 children growing up in rural Arkansas during the Depression and her family experienced great economic hardship. Mamie, Atlas, Viola, Era, Lorena, Maureen, Gladys, Robert, Vivian, and Audrey were the children, and of the ten, only Robert was allowed to finish high school. The girls, it was decided, didn't need education as they would just marry and raise families anyway.

My mother, was an honors student in High School and was offered two music scholarships to college (she was an all-state alto clarinet player), but she chose to go to work instead of to college, and when my dad finished college, they married and started their family.

I am the oldest of three, all boys, and I am the only one to have gone to college. My two brothers went to Trade School. And though my academic pursuits got off to a rocky start, I actually excelled in graduate school earning two Master's degree and most recently a doctorate.

I mention this bit of family background to show how mixed my family was. My family consisted of Catholics, Baptists, and Methodists. Teachers and union factory workers. Democrats and Republicans. College graduates and people who never had the opportunity to go to high school.

The one thing we did share was that no one was prepared to deal with a musical theatre loving, sports hating, cookie baking little boy who somehow loved religion but who also was someone with whom religion wouldn't always be very comfortable. How was I to figure out who I was, and what I wanted to do?

I turned to the world of fiction. Books, television, film, and later I discovered the joys of live theatre. And in this world of fiction, there were characters who became role models for me.

One of the heroes from those early years was Bea Arthur. As horrible as Lucille Ball was in the film version of *Mame*, I still watched it a hundred times to see Bea as Vera Charles.

I watched *Maude* every week, and it helped shape my worldview and values.

"Lady Godiva was a freedom rider, she didn't care if the whole world looked. Joan of Arc with the Lord to guide her, she was a sister who really cooked. Isadora was the first bra burner, ain't ya glad she showed up. And when the country was falling apart, Betsy Ross got it all sewed up. And then there's *Maude*..." The great old hymns are still the best.

I watched a short-lived sitcom called *Amanda's* starring Bea Arthur...it lasted only 10 episodes. I saw them all.

I watched the *Golden Girls* faithfully in college...I watch the *Golden Girls* faithfully to this day. Robert and I even saw *Bea's one woman show* live in 2002, and it was practically a religious experience.

I own the 2005 Comedy Central Roast of Pamela Anderson because it includes the uncut version where Bea Arthur roasts Pamela simply by reading from Pam's own book. Just reading Pamela's own words in her baritone voice and cold stare made the audience howl with delight.

Bea Arthur was part of an electronic universe that made room for me when I was trying to find my way in the world. Who was I really? What was important to me? What could I do in life? Where might I find people like me in the world? Was there a place, a group that would offer me affirmation, inclusion, or empowerment?

The world of popular entertainment answered me with a very optimistic, YES. It was a life-line for me and Bea Arthur was an important part of that world. Bea Arthur died yesterday morning, and I will miss her.

I thank God for those television shows, books, plays, and movies that encouraged me until I could find a live community to be part of. They gave me a vision of possibilities, and they helped me to experience renewal. I made a vow to share hope, and empowerment with people like me, people who needed it, people who hadn't yet found it where they lived.

And here I am, doing all I can to tell people that there is hope. There is community for them. There is a place for them. They have the power to thrive, and a place of welcome to discover and exercise that life-giving power.

In the reading from the book of Acts today, we see a message that would be comforting to people who were paralyzed with fear. We see a story about a person who is healed in the name of Jesus.

Now, let's be mature about this...when we say "in the name of Jesus" that isn't meant to be our incantation, the magic words that make the mojo work. To operate in the name of someone, is to do things as that person would, or in accordance with what that person would want. Jesus was known as a healer and a teacher, and so those inspired by him would naturally try to carry on the ministry of healing and teaching...they would be doing so because of Jesus' influence on them. In other words, they would be teaching and healing in the name of Jesus.

In the story today, we see a person who had been immobilized get his vitality back. The ministry offered in Jesus' name revitalized him. What a powerful allegory for anyone who feels immobilized...the story suggests that in the community of Christ, one is welcomed with such love and with such affirmation that revitalization is possible.

We see something very similar in the gospel reading today. In the 24th chapter of Luke's gospel, some women come to Jesus' burial place but when they arrive they find the grave empty. They quickly spread the word.

Later that same day, two unnamed disciples are walking from Jerusalem to a village called Emmaus and naturally enough are discussing recent events. Jesus has been arrested, tried, executed and now his grave is empty.

Along the way, a stranger joins them. The disciples tell the stranger the story about Jesus' death and the strange disappearance of his body. As they reach their destination, the disciples extend hospitality to the stranger and invite him to share a meal with them. When they were seated at table, the stranger took bread, blessed it, broke it and gave it to them. Luke says it was at that moment they suddenly realized that the stranger was the ever-living Christ.

The disciples then run back to Jerusalem to share their experience with the others. And while they are sharing their story, Jesus shows up again. He wishes them peace, and he tells them that they will be clothed with divine power. That's where we joined the story today as the Gospel was read.

In the Acts reading, someone is healed in the name of Jesus...and what is the name, that is, the way of Jesus? It's the way of compassion, hope, inclusion, kindness, empowerment. When touched by such divine qualities, we are bound to experience some kind of renewal.

In the Gospel reading, people who are grieving, afraid and desperate are also reminded that compassion, hope, inclusion, kindness, empowerment...the qualities of the blessed community, the qualities of the way of Christ can bring renewal.

Disciples, walking together, share their memories; and even in the midst of their confusion and pain, they offer hospitality to a stranger. In the breaking of bread and sharing kindness with another person, they experience Christ again. The living Christ is made manifest in offering hope, positive speech and actions, sacred community! The living Christ is made manifest in generous sharing! The disciples on the road to Emmaus act in the name of Jesus, in the loving way of Jesus, and as a result they experience the ever-living Christ right where they are!

Don't ever tell me that the sky is falling. Don't ever tell me there is no reason to hope. I know things are difficult. Poverty, illness, loneliness, betrayal, violence, loss...I know these things happen. But those experiences can't keep laughter forever away. None of those experiences can keep the next good idea from coming. None of those experiences could keep Bea Arthur from materializing in my living room to say, "There's a place for you. Don't give up until you find it." And I found it...here I am you. You are the answer to Bea's prophecy. You are what it means to offer hope and community in Jesus' name. You are how the Resurrection of Christ is continually experienced in our world...as you speak hope instead of gloom, as you offer welcome instead of exclusion, as you ponder possibilities instead of failure, as you affirm goodness instead of disaster, as you offer the word of life in Jesus' name miracles are happening! Someone comes home! Someone learns to believe in herself. Someone dares to consider that he has sacred value. Someone learns that life can be rich no matter what one's income is, life can be joyous no matter what circumstances suggest, and life can be vibrant no matter how long it lasts.

Resurrection Power comes alive as hope is shared. When we keep our speech positive, when we affirm hope, healing, and happiness, the person who most needs that word shows up to hear it, and as we extend our welcome to that person, the divine experience that we call Christ is made manifest again. We do what we do in Jesus' name, in the progressive positive, practical way of Jesus, and that still brings renewal to people who need it most. This is the good news. Amen.

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*In Jesus' name, I am renewed.  
In Jesus' name, I affirm hope.  
In Jesus' name, I affirm joy.  
In Jesus' name, I affirm blessings.  
In Jesus' name, I share my optimism.  
In Jesus' name, I speak the word of life.  
Amen.*

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