
A Ridiculous Faith and Hope

A sermon by the Rev. Julia Mitchener
Trinity Sunday – Year C

I will always remember my first summer with two children. I was very ambitious about all that we would do. We would visit museums, learn to count to ten in French, and listen to Mozart's entire symphonic repertoire. We would spend tons of time outside—in the pool, at the beach, on the playground, in the woods. We would observe the life cycles of butterflies, plant our own tomatoes, and collect tadpoles from the creek. We did well with this routine for a few days. But then it started to rain. It rained and it rained and it rained. So I developed a Plan B. We would become crafty. I went to Michael's and bought out all of Aisle 7: construction paper, poster board, popsicle sticks, pipe cleaners, sequins, watercolors, pastels, those funny little googly eyes, those horrid slime making kits that must have been invented by someone who really hates parents. You name it, I got it. As is often the case, though, all this backfired. Spectacularly. The toddler developed a fondness for sniffing Sharpies, and the six-month-old used the Baby Einstein DVDs to play a highchair version of Ultimate Frisbee. One afternoon I returned to the kitchen after what seemed like just a few seconds and found a dozen pots of paint overturned on our new hardwood floors. The baby had poured glue into her hair and was beginning to add glitter. Our countertops were slick with a substance I couldn't quite identify but that possessed an alarmingly non-FDA approved smell. Just like that, our makeshift art studio lost its luster. I got down on my hands and knees and started to clean up. I probably cried a little, too. Meanwhile, our son looked up from doing decoupage on my great grandmother's silver service and asked simply, "Now what?"

Today is Trinity Sunday, the beginning of what I often think of as "Now What?" season for Christians. We have just come off the excitement of Easter and Pentecost, when miracles abound and hopes are high. A crucified man has been resurrected and has made all sorts of spectacular appearances to his friends. Breakfast has been served on the beach, Thomas has seen and believed, an Ethiopian eunuch has been converted. People from different backgrounds and cultures have been swept up in an experience where suddenly everyone feels understood and included—an experience so spectacular that it literally sets people on fire, yet no one gets hurt. You and I, of course, live in a time and place far away from these events. Still, plenty of us have felt a quickening in our hearts these past months as we have listened to the age old promises of new life: *Why do you seek the living among the dead? He is not here; but he has risen, just as he said. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.* We have heard the Easter story told once more in all its glory. We have celebrated baptisms and promised that we, too, will allow ourselves to be caught up in this story, that we will sit down to break bread with Jesus, that we will let ourselves feel his healing touch, that we will seek his justice for the oppressed.

But now we come to what many Christian churches refer to simply as "Ordinary Time." This morning, there are no baptisms; no red streamers waving high to lift our spirits; no dramatic tales involving Jesus walking right through a locked door or people's heads being set ablaze. Today we have only a theological concept that, truthfully, no one can fully explain—today, we have only that and yet another rather vague reading from the Gospel of John. After all the drama of Pentecost and the vivid, action filled stories of Easter, this morning may feel a bit like an ambitious art project gone awry. For despite all the hoopla about rebirth and fresh starts, here we are still dealing with our same messy old lives: still negotiating a rocky marriage, still worried about a loved one's diagnosis, still nursing a grudge against a former colleague; still recoiling in horror over news of innocent children being placed in detention centers and even internment camps; still wondering what could possibly help heal the deep divisions in our nation. For many of us, this Father's Day is an occasion of joy, of

celebration; for others, though, it is a time of grief over a relationship lost or gone sour. These are the realities of Ordinary Time. What are we to do with them? How do we make our way in a post-Easter world? How do we hold fast to our faith when the luster of it may have faded just a bit, when our hopes and dreams have gotten spilled, rusted, or even broken?

You and I are hardly the first people to wrestle with such questions. This morning's reading from Paul's Letter to the Romans addresses a community in which, despite a promising beginning, things have started to go south. Widespread persecution of Christians does not yet exist, but the powers that be are feeling threatened and the atmosphere is growing darker and more tense. So it is that Paul gives the Roman Christians a pep talk about suffering, noting that ". . . suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us . . ."

I don't know about you, but these words make me a little nervous. Beautiful as they are, there is a piece of them that feels a bit outrageous, even dangerous. For surely all of us have seen suffering—whether up close or from afar—that, rather than producing endurance or character or hope, has all but defeated someone—in some cases, an entire community.

Here's the thing, though: I suspect the apostle Paul knew exactly how outrageous he was being when he wrote about a hope that does not disappoint. In fact, I tend to think this was his very point—that there is, in following Jesus, something inherently absurd and ill-advised.

I recently read about a rehab center that had one patient who kept returning for treatment again and again. Like most such facilities, this center's goal was to help people overcome their addictions once and for all. They did not like to see patients come back. Perhaps because patients knew this, they tended not to return, opting to seek any future treatment elsewhere. This was not the case with this one woman, however, who shamelessly checked herself back in several times a year. One day in staff meeting, a clinician wondered aloud, *Why does she keep coming back to do the same things over and over? Isn't that the definition of insanity? Doing the same thing again and again and expecting a different result? Why does she keep coming back?* To which a colleague replied, "I think she comes back because she experiences this as a place of 'ridiculous faith and hope.'"

A place of ridiculous faith and hope. What if this is what Paul is calling the Romans to become in their hour of struggle and despair? What if this is our calling as Christians at this Ordinary Time of year? To become a people of ridiculous faith and hope. A people who bear relentless and exuberant witness to the reality of resurrection, even in the off season. To become a community where people—all kinds of people—can return, again and again, at their lowest, most desperate moments—those moments when their fondest hopes have been dashed, their worst nightmares realized, their most persistent doubts confirmed—a community where people can return, again and again, at their lowest moments and be lifted up and embraced? A place where others can hope for us what we are no longer able to hope for ourselves.

I saw this kind of place once—it popped up at the unlikeliest of times, at a funeral that I officiated. The situation could not have been much more tragic. The young woman who had died was in her 30s and had been a middle school English teacher—the kind to whom all the kids flocked when they had a problem they couldn't talk about with anyone else. The church was filled with sobbing teenagers and their parents, whose faces bore the desperate expressions of those who realize they are in way over their heads. Throughout the liturgy, people wept audibly. This reached an apex at the end of Communion. As the altar was cleared, my heart sank with the feeling that somehow Jesus really was leaving the building. It was then that the congregation began singing a hymn, one that I had never heard before. I can't recall a single word of it now, or its tune. What I do remember is that, during this hymn's refrain, people suddenly began standing up. Not because anyone told them to, but because, quite clearly, their hearts and minds were moved in spite of their terrible grief. And so they stood, one by one. In the midst of death and despair, they stood up for resurrection and for the hope that does not disappoint. They stood up. The people of God found their feet.

You and I can do this, too. We can do it in just a moment when we get up to say the Nicene Creed. We may think of this as a rote exercise—something we could do in our sleep—but it's actually a daring, audacious thing. To declare that, all appearances to the contrary, death is not the final word about human existence; life is! To proclaim, once and for all, that the emperor is not our Lord; Jesus Christ is! We can do this when we stand up to say the Nicene Creed. We can do it, too, when we stand up to defend the dignity of poor people and the rights of asylum seekers. When we stand up to a friend who keeps bullying the new kid, the small kid, the different kid. When we stand in line to see if our bone marrow might be a match for a sick neighbor. When we stand in for an absent father at baseball games and on Scout trips by becoming a Big

Brother to a young child. When we do these things—when we stand up in this way—we bear witness to a ridiculous faith and hope, one that will never disappoint. A faith and hope that, no matter what the season, is anything but ordinary. Amen.

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