

Easter 3C
St. Peter's Church
The Rev. Emily Richards

Shedding Our Fearfulness

This week I did something I never have in my 47+ years on this earth. I took a three mile walk or ride (which is probably a more accurate description). Thanks to the designers of the Pennypack Trail and to my motorized wheelchair I was able to get out and enjoy the beauty of springtime. How freeing it was to be able to do this all on my own. Even when I had the most mobility in my life, I could have never imagined being able to do such a thing. For much of my young adult years I tried hard to deny the reality that someday I would need a wheelchair or a scooter to help me navigate my world on a more permanent basis. I took great pride in being able to stand up and walk even if that included a slow, heavy gait. In the moments when I could no longer deny this truth, I found myself terrified. Terrified of how I would change, how the world around me would change. Terrified I would be seen and known only for the chair and not for me Emily. Terrified that these assistive devices would be symbols of diminishment, lack of ability and weakness.

In the midst of these musings while traveling along the Pennypack Trail, I remembered Mrs. Sutherland, a devoted member of Saint Stephen's Church, the parish I served before coming here. She was a Martha with a capital M, serving on the Altar Guild, education committee, attending the Rector's weekly Bible study, working in the church garden beds from April through October. She rarely missed an 8 o'clock service until she became ill. As what inevitably happens when we grow older, Mrs. Jones' body changed. Without a walker or wheelchair, she would not be able to attend church. Instead of using these devices, she simply stopped showing up. The rector and I pleaded with her to return. To our great consternation, she refused our invitations, declaring she would not be seen in a wheelchair or receive communion from a pew. She never did return to her beloved church. Her life became smaller, more insular; and by the end, she would not allow anyone from the church to visit. I was disheartened and infuriated by her decision. Pride and stubbornness, I concluded had gotten the best of her. At the end of her life, they had prevented her from being connected to the community which had given her such joy and purpose.

Enjoying the freedom that I had found out on the trail and how resistant I had once been in using such a device, I couldn't help but think that Mrs. Sutherland and I were not that different. Years removed from our relationship I was able to put aside my frustration and self-righteous judgment and admit that we both had struggled with a

tremendous sense of fear and shame about our bodies. Shame that our able-bodied society perpetuates with its distorted ideas of wholeness, health and ability. Brene Brown, author of five best-selling books, and featured in a newly released Netflix special is an expert on the topics of shame and vulnerability. She writes, "Shame corrodes the very part of us that believes we are capable of change ... the level to which we protect ourselves from being vulnerable is a measure of our fear and disconnection." She believes that vulnerability is "the act of showing up and being seen. The willingness to show up changes us and make us a little braver every time." The irony is that what I feared the most has become the very thing that has opened me to new opportunities. The wheelchair, which in our society is a sign of immobility and dependence has become the vehicle in which I am able to be independent, to experience the world in a way I never had before.

On this third Sunday of Easter we hear stories of encounters with the risen Christ, that compel his followers to shed their own fearfulness and enter into their own new ways of being in the world. Paul, a once confident and powerful man, certain of everything: his place and purpose in the world, his understanding of God and God's will, has been knocked to the ground, literally blindsided and left to question everything. One of the most enthusiastic persecutors of the early Church lies in the dust and dirt of the road, humbled by these unfamiliar feelings of vulnerability and uncertainty. And then there are the disciples, having returned to what is familiar in the aftermath of the most unsettling and life-altering experience. And what do they do? They go fishing. Yet, not one fish is caught in their net. Even in this ordinary act they are incapable of returning to what is familiar. Just as Jesus had suddenly returned to them in that locked room and on the road to Emmaus, he appears among them and tells them to fish on the other side of the boat. A miraculous catch. A miraculous reminder of what is possible for these fishermen in the light of the resurrection.

Paul, Peter and Philip's lives are completely turned upside down by the risen Christ. They have been through the worst possible circumstances: sudden illness, death of a dear friend, grief, shame, loss of the dream of a world transformed. And as Frederick Buechner puts it, they come to find, "that resurrection means that the worst thing is never the last thing." These encounters slowly open their hearts and minds to the Spirit of God leading them in a totally different direction, offering them a new understanding of what is possible; revealing more of who God is; giving them a renewed sense of purpose; and in the end, creating a more expansive vision of the beloved community of God. Brene Brown insists that "faith is a place of mystery, where we find the courage to believe in what we cannot see and the strength to let go of our fear of uncertainty."

I imagine that Jesus had to keep showing up among his friends, unlocking their fearful hearts and believing, even when they couldn't believe it, that one day they would show up, maybe still a little unsure and a little afraid, but somehow willing to trust in the power of Jesus' love and their very human ability to share it. "Do you love me, Peter?" "Yes, Lord you know that I love you." Then, go out and take care of my people. Love them as you love me. Love them as I love you."

So it is, with you, my sisters and brothers in Christ. And, so it is with me. Little by little, step by step, ride after ride, we become braver until our fear no longer holds us back. Until we can discover that it is in those places of uncertainty and vulnerability where Jesus continues to show up, loving us into new life with him and with all of God's glorious creation. Amen.