

SERMON DELIVERED AT AUBURN UMC, AUBURN, MICHIGAN

4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter  
Year B

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April 26, 2015

Text: Luke 24:36b-48

Title: “A Place to Call Home: You’re Family”

Several weeks ago I asked Shelby if she would be willing to preach while I was on vacation and that on the Sunday she was to preach we would be starting a new worship series called “A Place to Call Home” if she was willing to introduce it. She said she would be willing. And in preparation for doing so I noticed when I was on Facebook one day that she put the question out there: “In what ways is church like home for you?” There were several responses, but the one that caught my attention was from someone I didn’t know. It was short and simple. If I remember correctly, this person wrote: “It isn’t”.

I thought about that honest answer and wondered about her and people like her who really don’t experience a deep sense of community in the church. Maybe that’s true of more of us than we care to believe. Is the church a place in which we really do feel a sense of belonging, a place we can call home? And what does it mean to say it is home? More than that, what does it mean to call others in our home, *family*?

I thought about this as I read the stories after Jesus’ resurrection. I love these post-resurrection experiences in the Gospels because it’s so very clear that Jesus’ resurrection is a mystery. None of the disciples had experienced anything like this before with anyone they had known before. It’s unique to Jesus to have an empty tomb. The body gone, and in some mysterious way Jesus shows up in the presence of his family, the disciples, behind locked doors. In the Gospel of Luke and the Gospel of John, there are experiences of Jesus appearing and people not recognizing who he is.

Thinking about not recognizing Jesus, an experience came to mind. One summer when I was serving at St. Luke’s in Essexville, Lynn and I led a group of people from the congregation on a hiking trip to Rocky Mountain National Park in Estes Park, CO. None of the families that went with us had hiked the mountains before, so we had an orientation ahead of time, told people how to prepare: make sure you have the proper boots, make sure you walk in them to break them in; make sure you condition yourself physically or you will not have a good experience and so on. We had people as young as 13 and as old as 63 or 64 participate and all of them had prepared themselves well.

I’ll never forget on that first day of hiking, it was about a 3.5 mile hike, starting at 8,000

feet and going up to about 9,500 feet, a relatively light day in order to help us all acclimate to the mountain climate. We hiked to a beautiful little mountain lake and had lunch there. One of the women brought her cell phone along and to our amazement she had reception, so she called her adult son and told him where she was. Now Marilyn had never done anything like this before, never been hiking anywhere before let alone the Rocky Mountains, so her son had a hard time believing this. When Marilyn described where she was and how far she'd hiked, he asked her, "Who ARE you and what have you done with my mother?" Sometimes even our closest family members can surprise us to the point that we don't recognize them.

Recognizing Jesus even with those closest to him is a special concern for the Gospels of Luke and John. In both of these gospel accounts, the marks on his hands and his feet are mentioned. The Gospels According to Mark and Matthew do not. But the Gospel According to Luke goes further than them all. In order to reveal that it really is Jesus in bodily form, Jesus eats some fish in front of them. This really is Jesus. He isn't a ghost, but he still is a mystery, a resurrection mystery.

Mystery of God that he is, Jesus shows his family the wounds he has suffered. As I thought about this, I wondered, "Is that what it means to be family?" Is family a safe place in which to be able to share our wounds with one another? Is family a place in which we can be vulnerable and feel safe in doing so?

I think I've already shared with you that one of the take-aways for me from the Clergy Clinic in Family Emotional Processes in which I've been participating in Chicago over the last year is that every family has its issues. Clergy from across the country from many denominations participate in this clinic as we learn about family emotional processes in families, including our own, and how those same processes work in the life of a congregation or any organization in which people are involved.

One of the components of the clinic, as we learn from each other, is family of origin groups. And what happens there is that each member of these small groups spends 45 minutes with a family therapist in front of the other group members. The others simply observe and listen as the therapist and the person in the speaking chair explore our own families and try to understand our own families based on the family systems theory we are learning together. I have learned so much by being a part of this experience that I intend to register for the advanced clinic.

Without crossing confidentiality lines, one of the things I've learned is that every person has struggles with family, some more than others, of course. Yet, even the most accomplished, highly successful people, have unresolved and sometimes very complex issues in family life that have a profound effect on who we are as human beings living out our own lives. I have been humbled by the stories I've heard of pastors—men and women—who I deeply respect who also still wrestle with their own family matters even as they serve others in the church family. I've been humbled by pastors who come and share their own wounds, and somehow all of us-- as we share such things with each other--as we've felt safer to be vulnerable with each other--somehow the resurrected Christ appears with his resurrection message, "Peace be with you!"

However, the message doesn't end there with Jesus offering peace in the midst of a lack of recognition and a willingness to show his wounds. Something grows out of the vulnerability. Jesus reminds those to whom he has shown his wounds that they are witnesses, witnesses to his

suffering and his resurrection, witnesses to the message of repentance and forgiveness of sins to be shared repeatedly with all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. Jesus, the wounded one, gives his family a mission: to tell the story that woundedness doesn't mean death wins. Woundedness can lead to new life because when Jesus is involved, repentance and forgiveness of sins is possible. Jesus is the supreme expression of what it means to forgive those who hurt, abandon, deny, and betray, and through Christ we are called to remember that God always allows U-turns which is what it means to repent: to turn toward God and away from abandonment, denial or betrayal of God. And in doing so forgiveness will always be granted by God because as 1 John proclaims "19 We love because he first loved us. 20 Those who say, "I love God," and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen. 21 The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also." God loves us. God loves you, me.

I think of the person who posted on Shelby's Facebook inquiry when she asked "In what ways is the church home?" with the response "It isn't." And I wonder if it's the result of the church—that is, us--failing in expressing God's love for anyone and everyone who comes here and tries to be part of the community? I wonder if we do the best we can to express the "Peace be with you!" voice of the risen Christ? I wonder if we recognize the woundedness of people like the responder and welcome people like her with an authenticity that helps her know that we recognize our own woundedness even as we seek to help her with hers? Or is it an inability on her part to accept the fact that even congregations like this one are comprised of human beings like us who are flawed sinners, who have our own life struggles, who wrestle with our own family issues and are living our own life journeys just like she is? Maybe it's some of both.

Just as we are all aware that our families are hardly perfect, so it is with the church. Woundedness is sometimes experienced. People do hurt others. People do get hurt here and it might lead some to conclude that it's nothing like family here, but the truth is it might be more like family than we care to admit. Yet, in spite of our imperfections, we keep at it. Though none of us are perfect examples of what it means to repent and forgive, we're working on it. We keep trying, right?

So if I have hurt any of you, I ask for your forgiveness. If I have been hurt by any of you, I continue to work on forgiving because that's what families do when Christ is involved. Flawed as we are, Jesus still shows up with his message for all of us, "Peace be with you". And when we can hear that and experience that kind of peace, life is good, and the family is as it should be: a safe place in which we can share our wounds and know that we are loved, cared for, because in that peace that passes all understanding, God is near. In that peace, we are called to love another and brothers and sisters in Christ.