Easter Sunday

Luke 24

A sermon given by Pastor Elaine Hewes

St. Brendan Episcopal Church 4-20-25

As many of you know, prior to my father's death on March 12, I spent the past year traveling back and forth to St. Charles, Illinois with some regularity, as my father, who was nearly 100 years old, was not well. I went in large part to support my sister, who lives very close to my folks, and so bore the never-ending task of caregiving…

And during those visits I would stay at my sister's house, which was a blessing in many ways, not the least of which was the frequent presence of a red cardinal, which I began to take notice of last fall…

That bright red bird that seemed to show up on the trees outside my sister's house every time I visited, singing his clarion and vibrant song even as fall turned to winter… even as snow fell… even as it seemed like my father's slow and difficult decline would go on forever…

That cardinal becoming for me a kind of sacred messenger, bringing me something I desperately needed in those days, lifting my head and my heart every time I saw him…

Upon reflection on the gift of those visitations however, I have realized that the hope (and I dare-say even joy) I felt in the seeing and hearing of my red bird came not only from the experience of the moment, but from something the experience stirred in my memory, helping me, even as my father declined, to remember Mary Oliver's

poem about a red bird, in which the bird speaks, saying he is of both the earth and the inexplicable beauty of heaven, and that he has been sent here with his song to teach this to our hearts…

- A poem which in turn helped me to remember the block print by Holly Mead that shows a bright red bird hovering just above the open hand of a child… Holly Meade capturing in her depiction of that child a marvelous sense of awe and wonder… This wood cut, vibrant with life, being titled, "pondering death"…

- Which in turn helped to remember the words of my friend Charlie just before she died of cancer when she looked at me and said, "I know it is from love that I have come and to love I will return"…

- Which in turn helped to remember the painting Rebekah Raye did years ago of a small bird of some sort sitting on the dry, dead stem of an empty milkweed pod, the bird's head lifted and his mouth open, as if singing a song of exaltation…

- Which in turn helped me to remember the line in the Episcopal funeral service that says, "Yet even at the grave we make our song. Alleluia, alleluia, alleluia."

I realized upon reflection that while the red bird raised my head and opened my ears, the joy I came to know in his visitations resulted **not only from his presence in the moment, but from the things his presence stirred in me and helped me to remember…** and along with those things remembered, half-forgotten possibilities for life and hope that the red bird affirmed, confirmed, and set free to sing again, even in the midst of loss and death…

I tell you all this because as I have pondered and studied Luke's Resurrection narrative the past week or so, I've come to believe that the risen Jesus was, for those who had post-resurrection experiences of him, like my red bird… Something I would not have noticed had I not studied the whole of Luke 24, which, if we're going to be true to Luke, we ought to include in our reading, because the story in its entirety **is** Luke's resurrection narrative, as he tells the story over the course of the whole of Easter day, from dawn to dusk…

Beginning of course with the women's shocking discovery of the empty tomb and the angels' announcement that Jesus was not there, but had risen, just as he had said he would… Luke's resurrection narrative then also going on to include…

- a conversation between the risen Jesus and two travelers on the road to Emmaus, during which Jesus opened up for them the Holy Scriptures…
- a meal with those same travelers in which they not only recognized Jesus in the breaking of bread, but recognized that their hearts had been burning as Jesus was opening up the scriptures for them on the road…
- a gathering later in the day with his disciples during which Jesus showed them the wounds on his hands and feet (to prove to them he was not a ghost), ate a meal of fish, broke open the Scriptures (for the second time that day), and promised them the gift of the Holy Spirit…

Those experiences with the risen Jesus being for those who encountered him like my red bird, I think… lifting their heads and hearts

to his astonishing presence in the present moment, yes, but also helping them to **remember** the things that lived at the heart of their faith…

Half-forgotten possibilities for life and hope that were still singing and moving and rising in and around them, even as Rome still ruled the empire, and fear still stalked the land, and death still thought it had won the day… Possibilities for life and hope Jesus' followers must have considered null and void with Jesus' crucifixion, but which the risen Jesus affirmed, confirmed, and set free to sing again, even in the midst of continued uncertainty and fear…

The risen Jesus, at various moments of the day, saying to those he encountered…

- "Remember the God of creation, liberation, justice and mercy who has moved over creation since the beginning, extending her wings to include all of creation in her fierce and tender love… She is still on the move…
- "Remember the God whose extraordinary grace is carried in ordinary bread, a gift meant to be broken and shared… This bread is still being broken and shared…
- "Remember the God who refused to stay in the celestial heights where people so long to put "him," choosing instead to accompany God's people through every kind of wilderness… This God is still present in every here and now, no matter how seemingly God-forsaken…
- "Remember the God who will be known by the wounds he bears for the sake of the creation he so loves… That God is still

taking the world's wounds and brokenness into God's self and giving back only love…

- "Remember the God whose Spirit hovered over the beginning, bringing light to the darkness and life from death… That Spirit stills moves in every dark, hate-filled, death-dealing time and place to bring the fierceness of love and the light of justice…

The thing I so appreciate about Luke's resurrection narrative as it spans the whole day from dawn to dusk, is that Luke's Jesus not only comes to his followers in startling and surprising ways, lifting their heads and hearts in the experience of so shocking and joyful a sight…

But he also stirs their memories, reminding them of the stories of their creating, healing, liberating, rabble-rousing God, affirming and confirming for them that this God is still on the move, and calling them to open their eyes and their hearts not only to see signs of God's presence, but to be signs of God's presence in the world, even when Jesus is no longer with them in a "physical way."

And I appreciate this because in Jesus' invitation to his followers we too are invited, in Jesus' physical absence, to do the same… Remembering the stories of that same creating, healing, liberating, rabble-rousing God, who, as Jesus' resurrection affirmed and confirmed, is still moving and rising and singing in our midst, waiting and longing for us to see and to be God's presence in our suffering world…

And inviting us all the while to keep our eyes and ears open for the red bird who shows up in unexpected times and places and stirs in us half-forgotten possibilities for life and hope even in the midst of loss and death…

Perhaps over the next fifty days of the Easter season we could find ways to share the times and places the red bird has shown up for us…

I know many of us would say that we saw the red bird in the witness of the Reverend Marian Budde as she bore witness in her sermon at the National Cathedral on January 21 of this year to Jesus' call to care for those most marginalized among us… including people in the immigrant community, the LGBTQ community, and the economically-disadvantaged community…

Those of us who were here for the Good Friday service would probably say we saw the red bird as the Reverend Tim Ensworth read a poem he wrote in response to a fiery blood- red, pulsating, electric abstract painting of the crucifixion; Tim's poem opening our eyes to see in that painting the full embodiment of God's life-blood shed for the world…

Jo Jacobs told me (in so many words) that she saw the red bird during the afterschool program on Thursday when she and the kids were out getting the school garden ready for planting… All of those children wild with the wonder of a much-longed for spring day and permission to dig in the dirt…

My friend Anneli Sundqvist told me (in so many words) that she saw the red bird in a story that had been told to her about the night Don Reiman, a much-loved resident of the island, lay dying in the arms of his wife Ginger… As the story goes, they were lying together on their bed, and Don began to make a strange kind of humming sound… So Ginger asked him what he was doing, and he said, "I'm singing a song." Those were the last words he ever spoke…

And I will tell that I saw the red bird again in the dark of early morning, before dawn on the day my father died… I wasn't at my sister's… There was no cardinal in vibrant colors singing a vibrant song… I was home in Maine, sleeping fitfully, knowing my father might not make it through the night, as my sister had called earlier that evening to tell me his pulse and breathing were negligible…

I had finally drifted off to sleep for a while, and in the depths of that sleep I had a vision… (a vision that didn't exactly align all that well with my sophisticated, well-honed-seminary-trained theology). But in that vision I was somehow suddenly in my father's body, looking through his eyes, and what I saw was so beautiful I have no words to describe it, save to say there was this feeling of a vast and expansive openness and light and pure joy… I remember not knowing what to do in my dream, because I wanted to laugh and cry all at the same time…

I'm not sure exactly what time it was when I had this vision, but probably somewhere between 2:30 and 4:00… My father died about 11:00 that morning….

And I will always believe that he was showing me what he was seeing as he transitioned from this life into the fullness of God's love. And for so great a gift, my father will always be a red bird for me…

The theme for our Lenten season this year has been, "preparing for resurrection in a time of Lament." Clearly, given the state of our nation and the world, and given the losses, the grief, and the fears many of us in this community are carrying, this morning's Easter proclamation does not mean our lamenting is over or our fears have been allayed.

But in the midst of our laments and fears, I think Luke's Easter narrative would invite us to do two things…

One, is to remember the stories of our faith, just as the risen Jesus stirred the memories of his followers on the day of his resurrection… the stories that despite all evidence to the contrary, dare to insist that life and hope are possible even in those times and places where death seems to have had the last word. Because the God of creation, liberation, justice and love is still on the move. If the story of the resurrection tells us anything, it is this…

And secondly, I think Luke's resurrection narrative calls us, in the absence of the physical Jesus, to be on the look-out for red birds… manifestations of resurrection made incarnate and real and visceral in bread and wine, in water and word, in poetry and art, in music and moonlight, in gardens and hospital rooms, in the unexpected kindness of strangers and the unexpected sound of singing just before the last breath… And in a thousand thousand other ways…

"Be on the look-out for red birds," Luke's Easter narrative tells us, "Because as those who experienced Jesus on the day of his resurrection will tell you, you never know what form he will take to try to find you and raise you from the dead… And sometimes you may not even recognize him at first glance…

But this will be a sign unto you that it is the risen Jesus… Your heart will burn, and perhaps even break open… You will sense that the inexplicable beauty of heaven is as close to you as the air you breathe… You will dare to trust that it is from love that you have come and to love you will return… You will look at your neighbor and see the face of

Christ… And even at the grave you will sing Love's song, "alleluia, alleluia, alleluia."