

GO PROJECT SUNDAY

The Rev. Martha Korienek
Grace Church in New York

Luke 24:36b-48

April 15, 2018

One of the great blessings of my life is that I have a father whose main goal in life was to raise a daughter who loved to read. And so, I have many memories of time spent reading with my dad while I was growing up. My first such memory was when he taught to read my first word. I was young, maybe three or four, and my dad taught me how to sound out the word “THE.” We were reading a children’s book and he made sure that I could identify that word, and read it on my own. Then, as he was reading, whenever that word would come up, my dad would pause, as if he were perplexed and begin to sound the word out. “Th.. th... th...” he would stammer until I would excitedly yell out, “THE!” And he did this each and every time that word came up. Sometimes, he would add things like, “oh, I can never remember that word” and “thank you for helping me.” And so, my first memory of reading made it seem like reading was a game and a game that I was good at.

Fast forward to the fall of 2016 when I was volunteering with the GO Project, the educational enrichment program that Grace Church helped to create fifty years ago. This memory of reading with my dad hadn’t been forgotten, per se, but it also hadn’t been conjured up in decades. But I was asked to sit and read with a young boy in the second grade who was reading below the standard reading level for his age. I could tell right away that he wasn’t reading the kinds of books that his classmates were reading because while their books had some pictures, the majority of each page in their book contained words, the book I was given to read had more space dedicated to pictures than words. The teacher explained to me that this boy was very smart, but was falling behind because he didn’t have anyone at home who could read to him. I didn’t ask why that is, but I imagined one of two scenarios. Either this boy’s parents were working multiple jobs to make ends meet, which seems extremely likely given the cost of living here and what I imagine the cost of raising children here must be, or his parents’ first language was a language other than English, and so reading to this boy in English wasn’t something that they could do. Either way, they had brought their son for tutoring on a Saturday, so it was important to them that their son learn to read well, and I wanted to help.

So I took the book and led the student out into the hallway and we sat on the floor and opened up the book. The boy began to read but about half-way through the first sentence was so frustrated that he closed the book and began to get up as if he were going back to class. So I offered to read the book to him. It was a book about monsters, and my dad’s wisdom came back to me, so the first time we came across the word “monster” I paused and said that I needed to sound this one out. He sounded it out with me, and we concluded that it was, in fact, the word “monster.” Then the next time the word came up, I paused again and began to sound it out. The boy helped me again, and was a bit faster this time. We read the whole book this way, pausing each time we came to the word “monster” and me occasionally adding a “oh, I can never remember that word,” or a “thank you for helping me,” and by the end of that first reading, he confidently could read the word “monster.” Pointing out to him that monster was the hardest word in that book, and so, if he could read the word “monster” he could definitely read the rest of the book, he agreed to try and read it, and read it

he did. He ended up reading it over and over again for a full hour, growing in confidence and joy right before my eyes.

And his joy was contagious, because I felt it, too. I was so happy for him. And also, I was reminded of how much I had been given in my life—the many blessings—and how good it felt to give back.

This joy in giving back to others was how the GO Project began. I had a chance to speak with our beloved parishioner Cree Harland this past week on this very subject. Cree, as you may know, has been a part of the GO Project since its very beginning. Cree reminded me that the idea of the GO Project came because of a small group of people who were dedicated to the joy of education, and making this joy of learning as accessible to as many children as possible. Along with one of the priests of Grace Church at the time, Tim Cogan, the head of Grace Church School at the time, Al Grant, and the head of the Parents' Association at the time, Eleanor Ratner, 50 years ago, Cree and this great group of people decided that Grace Church School was too much of a blessing to sit empty for the whole summer while there were students in under-resourced schools who could benefit from this school's abundance. They imagined the kind of community that they wanted to live in, where as many children as possible had access to the resources and support they needed to fully flourish as a student; to grow and learn, and be filled with joy. When the GO Project launched fifty years ago, it was entirely done by volunteers from the school and our parish, and their first class was made up of fifteen students.

Fast forward fifty years, and there are now more than 750 students who benefit from the GO Project through teaching and tutoring for educational growth, help from social workers for emotional growth, and whose whole families benefit from the work that the GO Project does to support the parents of the students. The GO Project works in partnership with the students' schools and Monday-to-Friday teachers, so the students understand themselves as being the recipients of the care from their whole community.

Fifty years since its beginning, the GO Project has, as I said, over 750 students, who are taught by fifty teachers across six sites, all schools which donate their classroom space, and between the summer full-time program and the Saturday program, there are over 800 volunteers who help to make the program such a success. Which is to say, there are thousands of people who benefit from the Go Project, because whether one is a student, a parent, a teacher, or a volunteer, there is great joy to be found working together.

I am highlighting the Go Project so much today in part because it's "GO Project Sunday," the day we've set aside to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the GO Project, and remember the role that Grace Church had in creating it and has had in making it such a success. Not because we want to pat ourselves on the back, but to remember the difference we can make in the world when we, the Body of Christ, go out to be God's people in the world. And I'm also highlighting the GO Project today because it's a perfect example of the joy that exists in a community, even when members of that community are in the midst of genuine struggle and challenge. And this idea of joy in community, regardless of the circumstances, this is at the heart of the Gospel reading today.

The Gospel reading today comes from the Gospel of Luke's account of Jesus' resurrection. It takes place the evening of the resurrection, which is to say, three days after the disciples, and everyone else, saw Jesus be crucified and die. They were terrified and heartbroken. The man on whom they

had pinned all of their hope for a better world and meaning in their lives seemed to be gone forever. In the proceeding days their fear and sorrow could only have escalated; how were they going to get out of this city where everyone had seen them so brazenly walking around with Jesus? What if they were arrested, too? What if their lives were in danger? But how could they go home again? As public as Jesus had been in Jerusalem, he had been infinitely more visible back home in Galilee. While their lives wouldn't have been in danger, they certainly would have been ridiculed for wasting their time on this alleged Messiah. And then, in the midst of their sorrow and fear, Jesus appeared. Death could not hold him down, nor any power of this world. The Bible tells us that the disciples, in the midst of their joy, were still disbelieving and wondering. Which is a completely human response: to maintain both joy and disbelieving. How often do we maintain joy while still disbelieving? How often do we think something might just be too good to be true? Certainly the disciples were thinking that Jesus' resurrection was too good to be true. And yet, with this combination of joy and uncertainty, Jesus commissioned the disciples to be his witnesses to the world.

The joy that the disciples felt came from knowing that Jesus was truly with them. This joy was so powerful, so transformative, that it strengthened them to overcome their uncertainty enough to do what Jesus asked: to be his witness to the world. And as a community of people filled with the joy of the resurrection, they did just that. Their lives did not become instantly easy, in fact, their lives were not easy at all, but even in the midst of whatever life through at them, they knew the assurance that comes from believing that somehow, even if they couldn't understand how, Jesus was truly with them. And deep down, no matter what uncertainties the world through at them, there was an abiding peace and a lasting joy.

We, too, live in a world that makes us uncertain. Like the GO Project, we can all agree that every child deserves the best possible education and the chance to grow into their full potential, yet, we live in a world where that is not our reality. How do we fix this? How do we engage fruitfully with the many, many complicated layers that go into our educational system? I'm not sure, there is a lot to be uncertain about. And yet, there is joy. Along with the many, many people who come together to make the GO Project thrive, I found joy in watching a young student conquer his book about monsters. He shared his joy with me, and it empowered me to share my story with you.

Christ's joy is just like that: the joy we find in the resurrection transforms us into the people who can go out into the world, with all its uncertainties, and yet be people of joy. Not because life is easy, we all know it often isn't easy at all, but because we know that in the midst of whatever may come, Christ is truly present with us.

As a community we gather here, and as a community we go out as Christ's witness to the world, to take into the world with us the assurance that Christ is alive and here with us, always. That in his new life, we are given joy, a kind of contagious joy that can—and does—transform the world.

We here, the gathered community of God's beloved children, have been given the gift of joy to go into the world and God's people and be a part of what God is doing in the world, in the GO Project and everywhere. May that joy fill your soul and empower you to be Christ's witnesses.