One of my jobs, before doing this every week, was as a teacher. I’ve taught in several schools, and taught many subjects, but I think my favorite experience, hands down, was when I was teaching part-time in graduate school. By morning and evening, one could find me translating Latin and reading books written by the saints in Boston’s theological library. But in the middle of the day, between 11:45 AM and 3:30 PM, I was teaching English studies at Torah Academy, an Orthodox Jewish girls’ school in Chestnut Hill.

For an entire year, I worked with 15 6th grade girls. I helped them improve their state test scores, and they helped me lighten up. You see, a lot of what you learn in seminary is how broken the world is; you spend classes arguing about God and the sacraments – who gets them and who doesn’t. I took seminars on all the ways the church has failed its parishioners, and the way people have failed each other. I became academically fluent in 5 different languages, as long as the topics are on sin, death, or despair. But every day, in the middle of my day, marked a different kind of theological reflection. I was able to walk half a mile to Torah Academy, meet the girls at lunch, and join their laughter at my broken Hebrew prayers. We’d talk about courage and tenacity, whether patience was a gift from God or something you could learn, and what the elements of a really good birthday party (handmade confetti was the trick). I was always surprised by what we had in common – as I learned to say their names, Na’ama Basya, Bracha Fraida, Tehilla – they learned to say mine. Chesirae is not a name you hear terribly often anyway, but to them it was a revelation to learn that I was also named after women in my family, just like them.

 I have a lot of fond memories from teaching there, but what treasure most, still, is the moment I had my theological legs knocked out from under me. I had set up a special presentation for them during our Ancient Rome history unit. Their rabbi was going to teach them about the Destruction of the 2nd Temple – an area of history I knew I was going to be far outclassed on. But Rabbi Ochs said something startling– early on in his presentation, he mentioned a small but growing cult of Judaism that was restless during the destruction of the temple, the followers of the failed messiah Jesus. Immediately, every girl in the room turned to look at me, as if wondering if I was going to fight Rabbi Ochs.

Instead, I had the unsettling experience of being different; being other. The presentation continued, but I had insight, finally, into how my Jewish husband must feel when his school’s staff meetings regularly refer to “Good Friday”, but never to Passover. I could see, immediately, the problem my friend Bilsana faces when her corporation’s lunches never follow halal standards. A memory of my friend Meghan with a cold salad – no dressing – floated through my mind. We were eating out for a celebration, but it was in the middle of March. Orthodox Christians fast from sugar, wheat and oil during Lent.

The Episcopal Church is about to enter an extremely busy time. Holy Week begins in a few days, starting with Palm Sunday and ending with Easter. We will run the full gamut of emotions this week – joy, anger, fear, grief and surprise, only to end with the joy of Easter once again. But as we enter this week, I want to remind you that Passover begins next Thursday; that Ramadan has already begun. Like Holy Week, both Passover and Ramadan celebrate God’s love and compassion toward humanity. Passover is the commemoration of the Jews liberation from Egyptian slavery; Ramadan is the annual observance of Mohammed’s first revelation from the Angel Gabriel. You see, there are as many ways of celebrating God’s grace in this world as there are creatures with mouths. Some of us will shout praises in churches, some will chant it over unleavened meals, others through silent fasting while sunlight shines. But the point is – the moment my religion isolates my another – makes me forget that my first jobs are to love my neighbor, welcome the stranger, and care for the orphan and widow – is the moment that I’ve stopped listening to God, and started listening to my own self righteousness.

 There is so much I learned from the community of Torah Academy, not only about their faith, but also about mine. It’s not true to say that every religion of the world is the same as every other; my Sabbath will never look like Na’ama Basya’s Shabbas. But it is true to say that divinity is found in diversity. I don’t think it’s a mistake that when Jesus was resurrected, he was mistaken for a gardener and a common traveler to Emmaus. He reflected back to others the diversity of the human condition, always coming as a stranger, teaching us that – if we want to encounter God in this world, we need to look beyond what we expect.

 So as we move forward into Easter, I encourage you to look for God in unexpected places, not only outside the opened tomb, but also in the Seder plate and empty chair, or the bright lights of Ramadan. Greet your neighbors, my friends, celebrate with them, and have a Happy Easter.