

Living what he taught!

Acts 10: 34-43; Matthew 28: 1-10

“But death was not the last word.
God raised Jesus from death
turning sorrow into joy,
despair into hope.
We sing of Jesus raised from the dead.
We sing Hallelujah”.¹

We've gathered today as witnesses of the good news of Jesus Christ, that he has risen. Death was not the last word. These words that I read at the very beginning come from the United Church of Canada statement of faith called A Song of Faith. This is truly a poetic expression of what faithful followers of this time and place proclaim together. This is what we say to one another. This is God's promise to us on Easter morning. It continues:

“By becoming flesh in Jesus,
God makes all things new.
In Jesus' life teaching and self offering
God empowers us to live in love.
In Jesus crucifixion
God bears the sin grief and suffering of the world.
In Jesus resurrection
God overcomes death.
Nothing separates us from the love of God.”²

When the women rose and went to the grave to honor Jesus in death, they feared nothing. They walked straight into the darkness and the unknown. They walked in the face of death. Would his body still be there or were the rumors true? That is when the earth quaked, and an angel of the Lord rolled the stone of the tomb away.

Dr. Cameron Murchinson a theologian suggests that the gospel writer Matthew asserts the following: “God is irrupting into the world in a new and decisive manner.” The resurrection is

¹ *A Song of Faith*, The United Church of Canada Statement of Faith, 2006.

²

not about human capacity and determination. “It is wholly about God's capacities and determination.”³ For nothing is impossible! As one of my colleagues wrote this morning on Facebook “Easter is all about refusing to accept the limitations of the obvious.” I'm refusing to let the limitations of technology stop me from telling you my great message this day.

On this Easter Sunday we are not able to gather as we used to. When we are limited by our own need to keep each other safe we lament that we will not see the beautiful colors of the flowers in the sanctuary or hear the full choirs sing with brass in the background. People swaying and dancing and lifting their voices and a resounding Hallelujah, and the organ pumping out the notes of our most beloved Easter hymn, the faces of all the other faithful followers our spiritual friends, the curious joyful anticipation of the children, ready to see what is in the tomb. Instead we like the disciples who did not know what was to come, lament that we have lost our Lord, our mentor and connect to the divine. And yet we gathered today in this new way and our action proclaims that we trust in God. We trust that we too, like Jesus, will emerge from the tomb, from this time of isolation with new hope and as Her Majesty the Queen said last night, with a fresh purpose. What is being offered to us this Easter is different and yet the same. We are being offered Shalom.

Lisa Sharon Harper in her book, *The Very Good Gospel: How Everything Wrong Can Be Made Right*, believes that religious institutions have for too long thinned out the good news of the gospel. One example of this is that all too often the focus of the gospel has been on personal salvation where sin is seen as our shortcomings.⁴ But what is being offered in this time is much more and maybe for the first time we will experience it deep within ourselves within our spirits. Walter Brueggeman writes, “*The vision of wholeness which is the supreme will of the biblical God is the outgrowth of a covenant of Shalom in which persons are bound not only to God but to one another in caring, sharing, rejoicing community, with none to make them afraid.*”⁵ We are bound to God and to one another in a caring, sharing, rejoicing community. And for the first time in my life the community stretches and encompasses people around this entire world. In the scriptures shalom means well being, wholeness, the perfection of God's creation, abundance and peace. This pandemic and need for isolation have felt like we were waiting in a tomb. The perspective of the painting that Laura David Foster did for Easter this year which is the bulleting cover picture captures it perfectly. She wrote to me the following, ‘I could see myself standing there ready to step out of isolation into hope and it brought me to tears. And I thought of how the tomb is liminal space, temporary, awaiting an isolation time.’ The Angel said to the women at the tomb do not be afraid this is the assurance we seek today. These are the words that give us strength and help us to hold on to hope, helps us to hold on to the belief that we do not face this alone, that nothing we encounter is stronger than God's love.

³ D. Cameron Murchison, *Feasting on the Word; Year A, Volume 2*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), p. 348.

⁴ Lisa Sharon Harper, *The Very Good Gospel: How Everything Wrong Can Be Made Right*, (Colorado: WaterBrook Press, 2016), Kindle Edition, p. 13.

⁵ _____, p. 13.

We are being offered peace. “The peace of self is dependent upon the peace of the other. God created the world in a web of relationship that overflowed with forceful goodness,”⁶ according to Lisa Harper. During this time of separation, I've experienced a deepening of relationship. I've heard more about your faith than I have in the past 10 years. Since Ash Wednesday we have walked this road together. I have heard the joy in your voice when we have talked on the phone. I've seen the tears and the frustration that you have shared in your emojis while we've been livestreaming. I've sensed a deep longing for peace, I've witnessed the moment and we have come to realize what we most value as a faith community. Our willingness to learn to welcome one another, to sing together, to comfort each other and to share our lives with one another and to live as Jesus taught us to live. We have found peace in our faith practices many of you have said that you never been to church this much before. What is so lovely is how worship service, prayerful practices, pictures of people reaching out and sharing thanksgiving together in community through apartment balconies has flooded our social media.

I heard this wonderful story yesterday about the spirit of Robertson Wesley at work in our community. We usually have our community dinner on the second Saturday of the month which would have been last night and we get donations of day old buns and bread from Cobbs and so our faithful volunteer pick them up as normal and wondered what to do with them. It was decided that they would be taken to apartment building where many seniors live and one of our other faithful volunteers went down and greeted this person with their walker and their walker was overflowing with buns and treats. At first, they weren't sure what to do. They went back to their apartment and started phoning their friends saying hey would you like some cinnamon buns and hot cross buns and then she went and delivered them leaving them on the doorknobs of doors. What was so amazing is how then the people that have received those six buns shared with other people they knew in the building until soon they were all breaking bread together as Jesus would want us to do. She described herself as the Easter Bunny and we were told that the Easter Bunny is an essential service and so I'm so grateful that that was lived out in such a beautiful way yesterday.

Friends we are called by Christ to be a community, a community of Shalom. One that values both tradition and new creations. As disciples of Christ we have been discovering what spiritual friendship means. Now more than ever we walked the journey of Lent hearing the stories of people whose lives transformed by their encounter with Jesus, and we emerge on Easter morning uncertain and afraid of what life will be like, but we know that we are not alone. We trust that our help comes from God and like the women at the tomb and the women at the well we need not be afraid the angel knew their purpose was and said to them do not be afraid I know you're looking for Jesus who was crucified and he's not here for he has been raised as he said so come and see and then go and tell the disciples that he is gone ahead of you to Galilee and there you will see him. And the women left quickly no longer afraid and ready to share the good news. Similarly the woman at the well who had avoided others in the community for fear of judgment

⁶ _____, p. 11.

met Jesus who shook her world, saw right through her, knew everything about her and loved her and after spending time with Jesus she was no longer afraid and ran straight up to the people that she had been avoiding to tell him the good news to share what Jesus had told her. So friends what will we witness now that the stone has been rolled away? What will we witness as we move out of isolation?

In this time of physically being apart I have felt more connected than ever. As each day has gone by what has come into view is what is most essential. The abundance of goodwill for others, the fact that we are living out the commandment that Jesus asked that we love one another as we would be loved. We are witnessing the healing of creation as we slow down our consumption. We are witnessing the focus on the well being of others, the wholeness that comes from everyone in the world working together towards a common goal; shalom. We are being offered shalom this Easter. We are here to share the good news that Jesus Christ has risen and in the words from 'A Song of Faith', it says:

The risen Christ lives today,
present to us and the source of our hope.
In response to who Jesus was
and all that he did and taught,
to his life, death and resurrection,
And to his continuing presence with us through the Spirit,
we celebrate him
as the Word made flesh
the one in whom God and humanity are perfectly joined,
the transformation of our lives, the Christ.”⁷

“In life, in death, in life beyond death, God is with us. We are not alone. Thanks be to God.”⁸

⁷ *A Song of Faith*, The United Church of Canada Statement of Faith, 2006.

⁸ *A New Creed*, The United Church of Canada Statement of Faith, 1968.