

Easter Sermon, April 9, 2023

Alleluia! Christ is risen!

Today we rejoice and celebrate because our Lord, who was dead and buried, is alive. God has raised him from the dead and in that moment, has changed everything.

We have been travelling with Jesus this week. He entered Jerusalem a week ago, hailed as the true King of Israel, the Son of David, the Messiah. Then, he overturned the tables of the moneychangers, disrupted commerce, always a major sin, in the Temple, and then started teaching how the leaders had strayed from the true paths of God and were lost indeed. He challenged them. And, predictably, they turned on him with the power of their police and military might. The crowds who had hailed him turned on him. His own best friends deserted him. And he was killed. Even then he forgave us all from the cross. And he died and was buried and that was that little problem dealt with. I can just see the chief priests brushing off their hands and going home to eat the Passover meal in relief.

Those chief priests were a little premature. Jesus' death was not the end of the story. The next part of the story was that God reached into that tomb and raised Jesus from the dead. You have all heard me say at funerals that death does not have the last word in our lives. It is God who has the last word and God's word to us is life and love. And so it was. God's word was for life and love and light. And he raised Jesus from the dead into new resurrection life.

That resurrection life was a bit different from ordinary life. Apparently Jesus could go through walls and move very quickly from one place to another. But he still enjoyed eating fish and bread and honeycomb. His disciples could still touch him. He could still build a beach fire and have a breakfast picnic with them. We'll be reading these stories in the coming weeks.

And that resurrection life has a power that ordinary life doesn't have. Humanity offered Jesus hatred and he accepted that and gave us back love. We offered Jesus pain and torture and he accepted that and gave us back healing and forgiveness. We reacted to Jesus in fear and he accepted that and gave us peace, peace that passes understanding. We gave Jesus death and he gives us life. New life. Resurrection life.

God's Holy Spirit took all the pain and suffering and grief and darkness and despair and death that we heaped on Jesus, and transformed it into light and love and peace and joy. And life! This is a life that is stronger than death, stronger than fear, stronger than hatred. Because it has been through all of those and transformed them.

Have you also noticed that our church has been going through its own paschal mystery? Our own suffering and grief and pain this week? Many of our members are home sick. Several of our church leaders have serious illnesses. Many of our families are suffering from grief and loss. And I have been watching you, as you came to the Holy Week services, bringing your own sorrow and losses and struggles to the cross and inviting Jesus into them. I have watched you supporting each other, some of you very tired, many of you very sad, but still there for each other, holding each other in love. And that is a true sign of the resurrection.

And it is that very love and life and peace of the Resurrection that is at work in our church today and leads us to help each other and care for each other in the midst of grief and pain and loss and even in the face of death. It is the resurrection life and resurrection love that we have received from Jesus that is working in us to make an oasis of peace and love and acceptance and forgiveness and joy and life in this church. What we have received from God, we share with each other.

Let me tell you a story. I have a friend on Facebook. I've never met him, but we've been corresponding via Facebook for many years now. We'll call him Jack. He's a bit shy of publicity and is currently living as a hermit. Some 16 years ago he was working in Colombia, in the steamy jungle, as he put it, in an emerald mining area. The area was controlled mostly by paramilitaries. The government police and army were pretty weak and didn't bother the paramilitaries because they were afraid of them. Those groups could, and did, knock off anyone who got in their way, without fear of punishment. People were disappeared. It was a dangerous scene.

And in the midst of that there was a really strong division between Roman Catholics and Evangelical Protestants. They didn't associate with each other. Occasionally houses had been burned down. It was a bit like Ireland during the Troubles. I know some of you have told me that in your youth it was similar here, without the killing part. Catholics and Protestants didn't go to each others' churches, didn't get married to each other, didn't associate. Kind of sad, really. This was like that, only worse.

My friend Jack was a lay preacher and musician in the local evangelical church. His pastor called him a prophet of God. He was an up and coming leader, everyone's golden boy. But then he committed an unforgiveable sin: he made friends with the local Roman Catholic priest, Fr. George. In fact, horror of horrors, he had attended mass one day, at Fr. George's invitation, before going on to play his guitar and lead music at the Evangelical church.

His pastor was horrified and asked him not to return. He told Jack that he had become a stumbling block to the church and was no longer welcome. Not nearly as welcome as known notorious murderers, extortionists, abusers and so on. He had "crossed the line" and was kicked out. Excommunicated for life from that church.

This was shortly before Easter. Fr. George found Jack and asked him to participate in the Good Friday mass, which included 7 sermons on the 7 last words of Jesus. He asked Jack to preach on one of them. Now this took guts. Both Jack and Fr. George were well aware that they were breaking some of the unwritten rules and that there were a lot of people who would be upset and many of them were armed. They were seriously risking their lives. But still, Fr. George offered and Jack accepted. He preached on Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani? My God, my God, why have you abandoned me? Ironic as Jack had been abandoned by his church. Fr. George stuck close to him while he preached, showing his approval, or maybe to prevent people firing at him.

It went well. No one was shot or disappeared! But what happened next was amazing. Over the next few weeks and months there was a change in that community. Roman Catholics and Protestants started talking to each other. They started having coffee together. They started making friends. This continued. These two brave men had made a difference. They had chosen to live into the resurrection life, the love and acceptance and forgiveness that Jesus offers us, they had set a very public example of that, and it had changed their community. That love and acceptance started to spread.

Resurrection life has the power to transform our society. Jesus was right. Jesus went to the cross because he believed in the Kingdom of God. He preached a new way of being. He preached good news for the poor, release for the captives, recovery of sight for the blind, freedom for the oppressed. He told people to love their enemies, pray for those who persecute them, share their extra cloaks with people who had none. He welcomed the outcasts and ate and drank with sinners. He lived as he preached and he taught his disciples to do the same. And when the powers that be killed him, God raised him from the dead. God put his stamp of approval on what Jesus had said and done by raising him from the dead.

And after his resurrection, just as before, Jesus sent his disciples out to carry on his mission to spread the good news to all people, the good news that a different way of living is possible. That's our mission. It has always been the church's mission. And sometimes we fail dismally, like that poor pastor who booted Jack out for doing what Jesus would have done, if only he could have seen that. And sometimes we succeed wonderfully like Fr. George and Jack. And you, when you love one another and help bear each other's burdens, whether that's by running a food bank and clothing bank or just helping each other by washing dishes when someone's sick or bringing them food. Or just being with them.

My dear friends, Jesus is risen! Jesus is risen and that has transformed all our darkness and death into light and life. It has changed everything for us. It has brought us hope in the midst of despair, peace of mind in the midst of turmoil, love that is stronger than death. I pray that we may all be filled to overflowing with Resurrection life. May we walk unafraid in the light of Christ. May we be filled with love and peace and joy. And may the Risen Christ walk with us all the days of our lives. Amen.