

Sermon for Easter Sunday, April 17, 2022

Alleluia! Christ is Risen! (The Lord is risen indeed, Alleluia!)

I believe in the resurrection. I believe that after Jesus died, God reached into the tomb by the power of the Holy Spirit and raised him from the dead. He didn't just revive him or resuscitate him. Jesus was different after the Resurrection. He could still eat bread and fish and honeycomb, but he could also walk through walls. He was no longer subject to all the laws of nature. He was no longer subject to death. But he was full of new life, divine life.

The disciples knew nothing of this while it was happening. They have had a very difficult few days. All their hopes and dreams about Jesus were dashed to the ground when he was arrested in the Garden of Gethsemane, tried in the morning and crucified and dead by afternoon. They have had a difficult time. First there's the confusion in the garden that night, and then they run for their lives and hide. They furtively peer out of their hiding places and see Jesus carrying the cross and dying. They sneak back together to the upper room, exhausted, terrified, bewildered and so sad, beyond sad. They have no idea what to do. This wasn't what they expected and they are lost.

On the third day, Mary Magdalene and her friends go sorrowfully after dawn to the garden to perform their last service for Jesus, to prepare his body properly for burial. They find the stone rolled away and the body gone. They see a vision of angels, telling them that he is risen, as he had said, and they remembered him saying it, but it still made no sense. They ran back and got Peter and another disciple, who went and had a look, but they couldn't make any sense of it either, and went away scratching their heads.

This was all too much for Mary. She sat down by the tomb and started crying again. She is worn out with grief and now even more confusion, and she doesn't know what to do. Jesus walks towards her but of course, it doesn't even occur to her it's Jesus. Jesus is dead. She thinks maybe he's a gardener and asks him if he knows where Jesus' body has been moved to. He calls her by name, "Mary." So tenderly. And suddenly she realises who it is. I always imagine her throwing herself into his arms and hanging on to him, and he finally says, quite gently, I think, "Mary, you have to let go of me now."

You know, Mary didn't believe he was risen till she saw him for herself. She ran to tell the disciples and they thought it an idle tale. They didn't believe it either. Till they saw him for themselves. We often have trouble believing in the new life God gives us. We have trouble even recognising it. Because it's not the way things normally happen. We tend to think of people and things dying and staying dead. And yet, we believe in the resurrection. It's a pretty daring claim.

But God is a God of life and with him nothing good stays dead. The Bible, Old and New Testaments, are full of promises (and examples) of God breathing new life into things that seem dead. The dry bones of Israel. The city of Jerusalem. The people of Israel. The dead and dry wilderness. Jesus. All Jesus' followers. The whole new heaven and earth.

So we don't just believe that Jesus was raised from the dead, wild and daring claim that that is. We also believe that we will be raised from the dead and have eternal life with God. We believe that death is not the end for us, because God's life is stronger than death. This resurrected life won't be quite the same as the life we enjoy now, our ordinary life. It's not resuscitation. We know that much. We don't know much more, except that we will be with God eternally.

But when we say we are a resurrection people, we mean a lot more than that. We don't just mean that we think there is eternal life after death. We do believe that. But much more than that. We believe that we have access to this eternal life here and now. That God does not just reach into our tombs after we are dead and give us new life, but he also reaches into our ordinary lives and gives us new life here and now. New life that we can start to live even while we are still living our old life. Eternal life starts with God, the Lord of life. It doesn't start with our death.

We believe that in the midst of our lives, God's Spirit is actively bringing us to life. Where there is any kind of death, God is working through that to bring us new life. Everywhere we look in our lives, there are green shoots growing, if we know where to look and how to see them. God never leaves us alone to stagnate. God is always stirring us to more life, to deeper life, to more abundant life, to resurrection life.

This means that God is always breathing new life into what seems dead, even now. Shining light into the darkness. Bringing healing to old wounds. Because that's just what God does. Jesus said he came that we might have life and have it abundantly. That's what God offers us, all the time. New life. Fresh life. Abundant, eternal life.

This is such good news for us. Because at the moment, many of us feel pretty deadish. We are tired. Many of us are depressed and anxious. We don't know if Covid is over or not. Probably not. We don't know if the restrictions are over or not, or if they should be or not. We don't know what the future holds. We're tired from being jerked around by a silly virus. Anxious about rising prices. Afraid because our nations are involved in a war that could easily escalate, to say nothing of all the other wars we're only sort of involved in and rarely hear about. Worried about the future of the planet. Things look pretty dark and dreary at times.

Kind of like my garden looked a month ago. But now I have crocuses and snowdrops and winter aconite and pansies and heather in bloom. And lots of things budding. There is promise of spring and new growth. It's no accident that we celebrate Easter in springtime. Because Easter also promises us new birth, new growth, new life, new abundance.

I believe in the resurrection. I believe that even now, God is working in each one of us to bring us new life. God is working in our church to bring us life. God is working in society, even amongst those who don't profess the faith, to bring new hope, new life, new growth. Just this week, Halifax Regional Council passed the funding for HalifACT, which will make Halifax one of the green city leaders in Canada. Lots of signs of hope.

It's about hope, isn't it? It's hope that keeps us going. Hope that prevents us from giving up and sitting down and waiting to die. Whether that's as individuals or as a church.

Look, we're in a difficult time, a time of uncertainty and fatigue. We've been through two years of anxiety and lock downs, separation and loneliness, grief and sickness. And yet, we've been doing pretty well, as a whole. We've been doing pretty well because this community is centred around the risen Jesus Christ. In him, we have what every human being needs and wants: we have love, God's love that we share among us. We belong to Jesus and because of his Spirit working in us, this community is alive and strong. This church is a beacon of new life and hope, whether we think of ourselves that way or not.

This week we've re-enacted walking with Jesus through the last days of his life. And we noticed some things there, things that we bear with us into the resurrection life. On Thursday, we noticed the importance of sharing those intimate times of love with Jesus and with one another, in our worship. We were reminded by the cross of the boundless love of God for us, that God was even willing to die for us. And we remembered that Jesus has been through suffering and death and is able to lead us even through that. We might not have understood or remembered these things so well without going through this week, again.

And now as we enter the Easter season, we see again the immense power of God, the loving, gentle power of God, who works in every dark place to bring healing, forgiveness, transformation, and new, joyful life. We tell again the stories of Jesus' resurrection and how the disciples were changed, too, from quivering, terrified, bewildered fugitives into powerful preachers and teachers, sharing the good news of eternal life in God.

Like them, we are a resurrection people. We are the Body of Christ, the risen Body of Christ, filled with the Spirit's new life. We not only believe in the Resurrection, but we also live in the Resurrection life. Thanks be to God, whose power working in us can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine!