

## Sermon for Easter Sunday, March 31, 2024

Happy Easter! On this day, some 2000 years ago, Jesus our Lord rose from the dead and entered new life. On this day, Mary Magdalene and the other women went to the tomb and found it empty and then, weeping at this added insult to their injury, they saw Jesus standing there, talking to them, and their tears were turned to joy and they were the first to proclaim, "Hallelujah, Christ is risen!"

The Lord is risen indeed! Hallelujah! After Jesus had gone through the suffering of Holy Week, the suffering of the Cross, gone through death, God raised him from the dead and in so doing, removed the shroud of death that Isaiah said had been over humanity, removed the sting of death, and gave us eternal life.

Notice that this is different from prolonged life. Jesus resuscitated Lazarus and Jairus's daughter and the widow of Nain's son. They were dead and he raised them up, gave them back their lives, the same life they'd had before, and they continued living until, at the end of their lives, they died. They were resuscitated.

Jesus wasn't resuscitated, he was resurrected, a brand new word for a brand new phenomenon. Jesus was not restored to his same life that he'd had before. He was raised to new life, a different life, eternal life, from which he would never die. He was different from before. He could seemingly be in different places at the same time, walk through locked doors, disappear and reappear. But he could still eat, and cook fish over a beach fire, still touch and be touched. He looked more or less the same, sometimes. Sometimes people didn't recognise him. It was Jesus, but Jesus who had left his old life behind and entered a new life.

And we, the church, are a resurrection people. What we are offered is not longer life, or more life of the old kind. What we are offered is new, eternal resurrection life. Life that transforms us. Life that never ends, although our lives here will end. And honestly, we don't understand this life very well. At the moment we tend to interpret it mostly as going to heaven when we die, but that's not how the Bible mainly interprets it. The Bible mainly interprets it as meaning a whole new kind of life here and now, a life which is not killed by death, although our bodies are. A life we can receive if we want to, if we say yes to God's gift of eternal life through Christ.

We, each of us and especially the church as a whole, live in this resurrection life, even as our regular lives are going on. We are a resurrection people. We believe in the resurrection. We have reason to believe in it: if we are looking, we see it all around us all the time.

What is this like? The Kingdom of God, that is, our Resurrection life, is like a surprise party. My family, both sides, likes surprise parties. I first met Charles' extended family at a surprise 30<sup>th</sup> birthday party for his twin cousins. Muriel had invited them over for a birthday dinner. Unbeknownst to them, she had also invited all the cousins, aunts, uncles, parents and everyone else. They came expecting to have a nice, quiet time with

Muriel and Ken. Instead they had something much better: the whole family, a very different kind of party.

Most of you heard about my Mom's surprise 90<sup>th</sup> birthday party last year. Charles and I invited her out to lunch. But unbeknownst to her, we had spent the previous 6 months tracking down as many of her old friends as we could and inviting them to that lunch as well. And the grandkids came, though they had told her they couldn't be there till the weekend. She expected a nice lunch, but what she got kind of blew her away and she was thrilled. In fact, she was walking on air for months afterwards.

The best surprise party I was ever involved with was in Berwick. Cathy Laskey and I were always involved in organising all the parties and fun gatherings in the church there. Cathy had decided to go and study theology, and she is now a priest in New Brunswick. But the problem then was how to have a going away party for her without her knowing it. Because she said she didn't want one and wouldn't come. So I got her to help organise it! I told her we needed a June party before we all went off for the summer. You who are new in Canada should know that we usually shut most everything down for the summer (except our Sunday worship) and go enjoy ourselves outside while the weather is good.

So Cathy helped me organise this party and made announcements in church about it and we had a nice time planning it. But everyone else in the church knew it was a surprise party for her. We'd even invited her Mom and sister from New Brunswick. She had no suspicion at all. It wasn't till we were mostly set up and she saw her Mom walk in that the penny suddenly dropped. Her mouth dropped open, she turned to me and said, "You brat! I'll get you for this!" and we rolled out the banner we'd secretly made and had a great party.

Cathy, like those other people, was prepared for a party and worked to make it happen. She thought she knew what it would be like. But she had no idea what it was really going to be like. She thought it would be an ordinary party. But it wasn't. There were surprises. Lots of unexpected things, better than she'd ever imagined. Same as Tizzy and Helen, the twins. Same as my Mom.

Resurrection life is like that. It's not what we expect. It's way better. I think God likes surprise parties because God is always throwing them for us. And standing back and watching our astonishment when we suddenly realise what's happening.

You want an example? We read today in Acts part of the story in which Peter is summoned to Cornelius and God makes it clear that he has to go, and he has to stop calling them unclean because they are Gentiles. Peter goes and preaches to them, and the Holy Spirit falls upon them and Peter baptises them. The church back in Jerusalem is gobsmacked. Horrified. They had never envisioned anyone other than Jews being part of the church, in spite of Jesus' teaching and example, but God's Spirit worked in ways they'd never imagined to grow the church. God's Spirit is always surprising us, working outside the limits of our imaginations.

Here's another, from very close to hand. This church. Even before Covid struck, we were a little concerned about the future of this church. We had just started organising some ways to reach out to the community and invite more people in, when we were locked down. During the lockdown, our numbers dropped. A number of our key members died. Some who had never missed a Sunday haven't come back yet. And there were people who were seriously concerned that this church was dying. I heard people say that we didn't have more than 5 years left (that was 3 years ago). I never believed that and I told you so. I thought we could reach out and gradually bring more people to church.

But with Covid and trying to keep things together and all the constantly changing restrictions and trying to keep up with all the pivoting we were doing, we kind of had our hands full just holding ourselves together. I asked you all to pray for Emmanuel. I prayed for Emmanuel. I prayed that God's Spirit would sweep through this church and this community and bring us new life and show us the way we should go.

But I never imagined what that would look like. I never imagined a neighbour church would give us a large chunk of money. Not enough for us to be living in clover, but enough to be going on with. And what's more, after seeing that, I have no doubt at all that God will continue to support us. In unexpected ways. In spite of our doubts.

And I had absolutely no idea that in the last year or two, God would send so many new people to this church. At first it was a trickle. Some of them were middle aged or older, like the majority of us, but then a handful of young people came or came back regularly. That was great. But I had no idea I would be sponsoring 3 candidates for confirmation and one for reaffirmation last night. My first confirmation ever and the first here in many years. But still, it was looking like our old life would be revived and we could go on living a little longer. We'd have a bit of a reprieve from death. Resuscitation.

And then this year, suddenly the flood gates have opened and we have had at least 2 dozen people from Africa join us, including children. Nearly half our congregation now. Younger people. People who were movers and shakers in their home churches. Last Sunday 5 new people came to this church. We have done absolutely nothing to attract these people and yet God has sent them. Exactly what we were praying for: younger people, capable people, new leaders, children and young people. And yet, not at all what we expected. Our wonderful new brothers and sisters bring us gifts we can't even imagine and have barely glimpsed yet. You, my African brothers and sisters, siblings, are the beginnings of the resurrection life God has sent us. You are God's amazing gift to us, our new way of life that we will have the pleasure of exploring together and living into. Did you have any idea when you applied to come to Canada that besides all the other things you were hoping for, you would also be God's gift to this little church? God's Holy Breath of fresh air blowing through here?

Living into resurrection life means being open to the unexpected ways God works. If you had asked me a year ago if God was going to renew our church by sending us some strong church leaders from another continent, I would have said it was most unlikely. And yet here we are today. God has prepared us a surprise party, my friends. So much better

than the resuscitation we were hoping for, God has given us resurrection to new life, more than we could have asked or imagined.

We at Emmanuel are a living example of Jesus' resurrection, a living example of the Holy Spirit blowing in most unexpected but delightful ways. I believe in the resurrection! I believe in Jesus' resurrection that first Easter morning. I believe in the resurrection life Jesus gives us, good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over. Eternal life in the Spirit. Never a dull day! God be praised for all the wonders he does for us, for the love and forgiveness he lavishes on us, for the new life he breathes into us! Welcome, Happy Morning! Welcome the Resurrection! Welcome God's gift of new life for us! Alleluia!