

March 31, 2024
Easter Sunday

Meditation: "He is Risen!"

Jesus had loved them unconditionally. He had accepted them for who they were, and his love for them had set them free; free to love others unconditionally, just as Jesus loved them. And now the Romans had crucified him. At the moment of his death the temple curtain, the one that separated the temple interior from the holy of holies, was torn in two, from top to bottom. The gentiles thought this was a sign of direct access to God, but they don't understand the Jewish tradition of *kriah*, of tearing. When a loved one dies, you tear your clothing, an outward visible sign of the torn fabric of your heart. The holy of holies is God's throne room, the temple curtain the closest thing God has to clothing. The curtain being torn is a sign that, at Jesus' death, God's own heart was torn.

Anyway, Joseph from Arimathea, a wealthy man and politically well connected, asked Pilate for Jesus' body, so it could be buried. There wasn't any time to lose. It was, after all, Friday, after three o'clock in the afternoon already. In a few more hours the sun would set and the Sabbath would begin. They had to get to their homes by sundown, and Jesus needed to be buried first. Fortunately, Nicodemus brought a hundredweight of myrrh and aloes to anoint Jesus' body for burial. They wouldn't have time to do everything just right, but it would be enough. It was a good thing that the burial customs were so well established. They could hardly think; their minds were reeling with the reality of Jesus' death. Burying him came automatically, out of custom and practice. Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Salome, and Mary the mother of James watched on as the men lay Jesus in the tomb. At least it was a proper tomb; a new one, never used before, on the east side of Jerusalem, and it was even facing east, the direction from which the resurrection would come. The men rolled a large stone in front of the tomb when they were done. The last thing they wanted was some wild animal desecrating his body in order to fill its own belly.

They spent the Sabbath as if in a trance. They were numb. They cried. A lot. It was as though the Romans had killed them too. Nothing mattered now. Hatred, fear, violence won out over love after all. What was the point of living? Jesus' death was a crisis for the movement known as "The Way". The leader was dead and there appeared to be no way forward.

Then, early Sunday morning, the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene made her way to his tomb to mourn, as she ought to have when he was buried, had there been time. At first, she wasn't sure she was seeing right because her eyes were swollen with tears, but as she got closer, she feared the worst. Someone had removed the stone covering Jesus' tomb. No, not someone, someones. The stones were cut to be moved only by two or more strong men. This was no accident. Some group purposely removed the stone. It wasn't enough to kill him, now they had to steal his body? They had to commit an indecency to Jesus' corpse?

She ran to get Peter, and he and another disciple who was with Peter at the time ran to the tomb. Sure enough, Jesus' corpse was not in there. Only the swaddling cloths used to wrap his body remained. Why steal his body? What would that accomplish? Such an indignity revealed a new extreme in fear and hatred. The men left and Mary looked in. There were men sitting in there. They asked a stupid question, "Why are you weeping?" Why? Because someone found it necessary to not only kill but then to steal the body of the man I love. She turned to leave and almost ran into another man. "Who are you looking for?" he asked. The groundskeeper, maybe he moved Jesus to another tomb. She asked. And he spoke her name, the way only Jesus spoke her name.

Her mind was reeling. Jesus was dead. How could 'He' speak her name? But there was that belief, held only by a few, that at the end of time there would be a resurrection of all those who had been wrongfully put to death, perhaps even a resurrection of all who had died. It had never happened yet. Nobody had ever risen from the dead.... except Lazarus. Could it be Jesus? Could it be that this was the end of time? Could it be that this was the start of a new time? Could it be that God had finally said, "Enough!" to violence and hatred and fear? Could it be that God had said "YES" to the unconditional love that Jesus had shown them? Could this mean an end to sorrow, doubt, indifference and despair, and a start of joy, trust, love and hope? Could it be that Jesus is the first to rise from the dead? New life for Jesus? New life for the disciples? New life for all people everywhere? New life for all of creation? Could it be? "Rabbi" she yelled, and fell at his feet, tears flowing, only now they were no longer tears of grief, but tears of deep and profound joy. She wrapped her arms around his ankles, and she was never going to let go. And then he said something she could not bear to hear. "Do not hold on to me."

The Moderator, the Right Rev. Dr. Carmen Lansdowne, said, in her Easter message, "The Easter story is not a story of peace and benign hope. It is a story of disruption and grief, disbelief and uncertainty. And in the midst of it all, Jesus still shows up to Mary Magdalene, calls her by name, and says, 'But I am still here, and you cannot hold on to the 'me' you think you know.'"

Jesus' words for Mary are also words for us. You cannot hold on to the me you think you know. Mary had to let go of the bodily Jesus she had spent the last few years with. He was gone and had been transformed into something entirely new – the risen Christ.

The troubling thing about resurrection is that for there to be a resurrection, there first has to be death. Sometimes, as in the case of Jesus, it is a literal death. But the death of a way of thinking can also lead to resurrection, to new life. What would happen if the ideology of Hamas and of the government of Israel, an ideology that sees the other as an enemy, as a threat to their safety and security, a threat to their freedom – someone who has to be conquered or even obliterated? If Hamas and the government of Israel saw each other as

one people, collaborating together to build a life together, sharing the land and resources of Palestine, wouldn't that be new life? Wouldn't that be life giving for all?

To get back to the thought that we cannot hold on to the Jesus we think we know - what is it that we think we know about Jesus that we have to let go of? What is it that we need to learn about who Jesus really is? Where is resurrection for you? Where is there new life for you? Or, where would you like to see a death in order to bring in a new life?

Jesus said the kingdom of God has come near. It is here, and yet it is not here. It is here when we make the love of God known, especially to the most vulnerable in our society, and it is not fully here for there are growing numbers of people who rely on foodbanks, who suffer from mental disease, who suffer from addictions, who are surrounded by war and terrorism, who..... In a way, we are in that liminal time, that in between time, like the time between the crucifixion and the resurrection.

There is one thing about resurrection that I am sure about, and that is that it is about God's grace. It is by God's grace that we exist, that have life. It was God's grace that raised Jesus from the grave. It is by God's grace alone that we find healing, wholeness, forgiveness, and new life. And it is by God's grace that we have hope, and that we have a future.

The Moderator compared the current crisis of decline in the United Church of Canada with the crisis that was faced by the disciples of "The Way" at the time of Jesus' death. Now, as then, it is a crisis that looks like there is no future. The Moderator said that we, in the United Church, are pretty good about the 'Daring Justice' part of our new Purpose Statement. Where we need to work is on the 'Deep Spirituality' and the 'Bold Discipleship' parts. It will be in a renewed focus on the formation of disciples and in deepening our spiritual lives that we can find new life. The promise and the hope is that, just as Jesus "showed up" for Mary in her hour of deepest darkness, Jesus "shows up" for us here, now.

The Moderator concluded her message by saying, "This year for Easter, my prayer for the church is also the prayer of Martin Luther King Jr. that we remember that discipleship means coming together in the ways and teachings of Jesus to believe in a way when there is no way, not only in the seeking of daring justice but also in our formation as disciples of the Christ story. May it be so. Amen."