

Squamish United Church
Rev. Karen Millard
Easter II

April 12, 2015

Scripture Reading:

Acts 4: 32-35

John 20:19-31

Transforming Resurrection

Christ is Risen! Risen indeed!

The Easter cry isn't only for Easter of course. We are invited to celebrate this season for the next six weeks. Each and every Sunday is a celebration of the resurrection and we have these 49 days between Easter and Pentecost to focus our attention on the resurrection and all God accomplishes through it.

The gospel story we share on this Sunday every year is all about Jesus. We make it about Thomas but it's all about Jesus. It's about Jesus breaking into a room with locked doors and breathing life into a group of people paralyzed by their fears.

The doors are locked and the disciples are hiding in fear for their lives. Perhaps Thomas isn't when the disciples the first time Jesus appears to them because he doesn't want to be seen with them, or because he has stopped believing, or maybe the depression is too much to bear. Or maybe he has decided to get on with his life, rather than hide and mourn behind locked doors. If it's his doubt and fear that keeps him away, he's not alone. All the disciples all hiding behind locked doors.

It is much easier to doubt today than it is to have faith. Just look at the state of our world. Look at what people who stand up for their faith (any faith) are doing in the name of their God. Faith it seems has become more about having the right way than about being the way of love. Many wonder, Is there resurrection and new life in our world? And so sometimes we come to church on Easter or in the weeks after and our alleluias ring hollow and Easter acclamations wear a bit thin. If this is you, then the story of Thomas is for you.

Remember, this story is all about Jesus. If Jesus hadn't entered the room we wouldn't be reading the story of these men sitting in a quietly behind closed doors. If Jesus hadn't come in and spoken directly to their fears we might not recognize that life, death and resurrection are all essential parts of the journey. It is into their hiding place that Jesus breaks in to remind them to live. His words are "Peace be with you," "forgive," "love" He breathes Spirit life into them so that they will live.

No matter what you believe about how or in what form the resurrection took place the fact is Jesus lived on. Something incredible happened in the lives of these disciples. For it is here in this moment that Thomas makes a clear confession of Christ's identity – "My Lord, My God"

Finally after a life of teaching, a tragic death and a resurrection the disciples begin to get it. And their lives begin to be transformed. They begin to see that they too are called to live into the story of walking with one another and with the Holy through all of life's experiences.

That is where our Epistle for today comes in "With great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all." Acts 4:33 The lives of the disciples and apostles were changed because of their encounters with Jesus.

There is a lot of talk in church circles today renewal and regrowth. There is also a lot of talk about the church dying, usually in those conversations there is little talk about faith, it is all about structure. "There's a lot of talk among church folk about mission starts, congregational renewal, reaching the "nones" and being the church in new ways for the sake of a swiftly changing world. Programs, approaches, and plans abound in print and in cyberspace to address every phase of the process, whether it be gathering a new worshiping community or rebooting and refreshing a tired congregation. In short, there's a lot of good stuff out there, and it can be tough to know where to begin."¹

I don't have to tell any of you that this conversation can make ones head spin, and a whole congregation spiral, which is why in our faith it is always important to go back to the beginning. The first disciples were no more ready for prime-time discipleship and church planting than we are today. In fact, those faithful, hardy souls locked themselves away in the upper room trying to figure out what's just happened. And then along comes Jesus with a jolt of hope, an infusion of Spirit-life breath, and a peace that passes all understanding.²

Sharron Blezard writes "The writer tells us that this is just a glimpse, that Jesus did other signs to strengthen and equip his disciples, but that the recorded witness is for our benefit. These words are handed down so that we might believe and have life abundant.

It worked. We know the rest of the story. Once the first followers left that locked room, they got down to business spreading good news and living in the light of God's amazing grace and plenty. They had everything they needed, and they were willing to share with others. The reading from Acts this week charts the basic course of their movement-making. It wasn't a program available for immediate download to your hard drive. It wasn't a prepackaged plan for only \$49.95. It was (and is) a life afire to tell the story of our Lord and to be "of one heart and soul" holding all things in common so that the needs of the people are met.

¹ <http://www.stewardshipoflife.org/2015/04/signs-wonders-movement-making/>

² IBID

Jesus' simple guide for an abundant life in faithful community has been working well for more than two millennia. It's easy to contextualize, simple to follow, and provides proven results. When the principles practiced by the first century disciples are faithfully and fully implemented, the results are, well, abundant. You can tell when a congregation or worshiping community is working from this first century model; there's a real sense of common purpose, a generosity of spirit and resources, a desire to dig deeply into scripture and participate regularly in worship, intentional and ongoing faith formation, an open door and a hearty welcome, a spirit of mission and service—all of which are covered liberally with prayer and praise...

Bleazard continues "So if these principles are so fool-proof and sure, why aren't we seeing more growth in our communities? Why isn't the good news spreading like wildfire today in the United States and other western nations? Those are good questions, ones we should ask and ponder. Perhaps it has something to do with commitment and focus. Jesus demands 100 percent. He wants all of us—not just an hour a week or a place in the pew for festival worship, and not just a few dollars in an offering plate or service on a boring committee.

This is Good News we're talking about—life changing, world healing, and saving news with eternal promises. It's not the latest fad or trend. It's real, and we have to be real about it.

Pentecost is not that far away, friends. It's time to get ready. Read and reread this week's lessons. They all have something to say about practices and principles that will not just refresh and renew a congregation but that also will form disciples and radically alter the world (think in-breaking of the reign of God).

Who's interested in a revival? I know Jesus is!"³

That is what Jesus is all about. We are to be Easter people, encounters of our resurrection faith remind us that we are called to more as individuals and church. New life and growth is what we are called to even when it seems foolish. Even when it seems wiser to doubt, to believe that death has taken over. Chris Polhill wrote "It is easy for Easter to be a joyful time after the discipline of Lent. A bright celebration of spring and new life after the cold, grey winter. But resurrection is so much more than that. True it is joyful, but not a kind of bubbly party joy; true it is about new life, but it's about so much more than the life bursting out of the ground all around us.

Resurrection is seen in the places of damage - in the scars and wounds of life where we allow God to Easter within us. Because resurrection is about the very different pattern that God puts onto the harsh things of life that we bring to him. Resurrection never denies the pain and wounds of life; it is not a pretty picture covering up the nasty things. It is the reality of God with us; it is the difference God makes; it is the confusing change that turns our ideas upside down - but gives us life and hope again (even in our pain even in our doubt).

We are Easter people...But we doubt like Thomas; we doubt the reality of Jesus' resurrection, and most particularly we doubt that the Resurrection is for our life today....Maybe resurrection is too uncomfortable, too confusing, and we would rather leave it till we face death⁴ ourselves, to

³ IBID

⁴ Polhill, Chris "Fire and Bread" pg. 107

believe in the possibility of life after death. Having our beliefs and understandings of life turned upside down is disturbing for us. Change is disturbing but perhaps that is why when we are hurt or wounded people we are more willing to have faith or believe in the possibility of new life. Change then can only be for the better.

Stop for a moment and consider - where would you like to see resurrection in this world? Perhaps you have a place in your life where you would like to see a resurrection change. "Perhaps where you personally struggle with illness, disappointment, relationship issues - what would resurrection mean for you there, what needs to change?"

"Resurrection is at the heart of our faith; it is for every aspect of our lives today; it is worth our energy and our prayer; it is worth the challenge to our comfort, and the pain and wounds from staying with the hard and the difficult."⁵ Look for it, work for it, and you will see Easter surround you.

For us as a congregation I want to encourage us in this time of transition to face all of our fears, doubts, realistic thoughts, wonderings and questions with a resurrection faith. I want to encourage us as church and individuals to go back to the texts of this week and be transformed by them, just as the disciples and apostles of the early church were.

⁵ IBID