

# St James United Church

Message for April 17, 2022  
Easter Sunday



“An Idle Tale?”

- Preached by Rev. James Ravenscroft

Readings: Acts 10:34-43; Luke 24:1-12; “The seed quickens in countless hearts” by Caryll Houselander

Christ is risen! (*Christ is risen indeed!*) “Christ is risen indeed” is how we usually respond to the announcement of resurrection. But it wasn’t the first time that statement was made. When Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James and the other women announced, “Christ is risen”, the reaction of the male disciples was to dismiss their words - “Nonsense!” It was understandable. After all it might seem wishful thinking brought on by grief, although regrettably a view strengthened by sexist assumptions. I likely would have reacted the same way. In fact, many of us still do, taking it on “faith” the tomb was empty while entertaining other possible explanations to such an idle tale.

One challenge is how we understand “faith”. We assume it’s accepting a statement as true even if it can’t be proven. Add to this a tendency to see the gospels as literal histories and no wonder we hesitate. But they’re spiritual reflections of a post-resurrection church expressing not only what they were told about Jesus, but a lived experience of his ongoing presence with them, and we still do two millennia on, some even, like 20<sup>th</sup> century artist Caryll Houselander, have deep spiritual experiences. Christ’s risen life was no idle tale to her. That’s because faith isn’t just an assent of the mind but an assertion of the heart. Despite their first reaction, Jesus’ disciples had a series of prayerful encounters with him. Their ongoing trust in their relationship with him, in all he’d said and done, created space for them to experience him as present, instilling hope, bringing peace, giving them strength. It was transformative. As we read in Acts, the disciples, previously hiding from the authorities became fearless, like Peter telling Cornelius about Jesus without thought of the consequences. Their experiences weren’t delusions but holy encounters that shifted something within them, enabling them to see God, themselves, one another, the world, differently, as Jesus had seen it. He was living through them.

And he lives through us, taking on his identity, through the Spirit, a reality we’ll reaffirm today as we renew our baptismal faith and I sprinkle you with water, and then as we share in communion. This is the heart of Easter for me. Not just an empty tomb two thousand years ago but Christ still present, transforming us so we too can see God, ourselves, each other, the world as he did. Often people speak of Easter’s impact as death being defeated, heaven now open to us after we die. I don’t dispute that as a consequence, but it feels like the wrong focus. It isn’t dismissing the message as the eleven did, but domesticating it. That makes it an idle tale, Easter about what Jesus did for us when it is really what he does with us, bringing about the experience of heaven,

God's grace and love, with us here and now. Caryll Houselander reminds us that resurrection is the climax of a process that began in Mary's womb thirty years before, "God with us" becoming incarnate not in one soul but countless souls, over and over again. This poetically grounds resurrection in the whole of Jesus' life as he took every human experience, including death, and filled it with grace. In so doing he made it clear that nothing is beyond the reach of God's love.

No one is beyond that reach either. As I said, Jesus embraced all that we are, but he challenged us too, especially how we treat some as more loved by God than others – wealthy more than poor, men more than women, "righteous" more than "sinners" – and spent his life showing how untrue that was. He did this mostly through meals, the open table a vision of heaven on earth, a sign of God's love for everyone. In this he was at odds with Rome and the religious leaders of his day, the cross an attempt to kill his vision. But it lived on as his disciples gathered at table once more. The words "Christ is risen" was no idle tale because he was with them, transforming their hearts to extend the reach of God's love beyond what he had done, enabling Peter to affirm that "in every nation, whoever worships God and does what is right is acceptable."

This was new for Peter, but Christ's life was growing in him. And ultimately Christ's life grows in each of us, especially whenever we gather around the table and like his disciples experience him with us. He continues to feed us, transforming our hearts so that his life will grow within us. We need to come to the table because the resurrection is a climax of Jesus' life but not the end of it. Easter is more than a day, liturgically the beginning of eight joyful weeks culminating in Pentecost. But it's also the beginning of a new age that will only find its fulfillment in the future. Again, this is where the story of resurrection can seem only an idle tale. It feels like the world is mired in the same angers and hatreds as in Jesus' day, the same thirst for war seen most recently in Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Yet in God's grace Easter is being fulfilled as the arc of history bends toward justice.

In this, resurrection isn't an idle tale. It's not as we see a fuller appreciation in our communities for diversity, including in this congregation when we became an Affirming Ministry. It's not an idle tale as the settler church faces the truth of Indian Residential schools, seen profoundly in the pope's apology to survivors and his commitment to come to Canada in July. It's not an idle tale because despite the war in Ukraine, there's actually a global decrease in armed conflicts and an increase in diplomatic resolution. And despite how the beginning of the gospel was over-layered with sexism, in the first decades of Christian community, women were called to exercise leadership. We have gone through a long period where that understanding was eroded, but in many churches women and men share in ministry equally. That's no idle tale as Christ lives in us, transforming hearts and through the Spirit enabling us to be his presence, extending the reach of God's grace and love.

So, as we continue to celebrate the resurrection of Christ on this day, may we live it every day. The statement that "Christ is risen" isn't nonsense, not an idle tale. Christ is risen indeed, as we renew our baptism, at this table, in our faith communities, in each and every one of us, in our world. Amen.