

St James United Church

Message for May 8, 2022

Fourth Sunday of Easter



“Raised to Wholeness”

- Preached by Rev. James Ravenscroft

John 21:15-19; Acts 9:36-43; “Naming the Heartbeats” by Aimee Nezhukumatathil

I hope you’ve been paying attention over these weeks because there’s been a shared focus as we’ve explored the impact of resurrection on us, examining how it’s about more than just going to heaven, but growing spiritually here and now, including accepting the wounds in our lives and not avoiding them, how resurrection draws us out of ourselves into wider and wider connections with God, others and all creation. Overall, resurrection is a spiritual gift that reveals who we are, enabling us to claim a living identity in Christ, one that lifts us up, raises us into wholeness.

We hear of this in a quite literal way in Acts as Peter is called to Joppa because Tabitha, also known as Dorcas, has died. After speaking with her grieving friends, Peter prays over the dead woman and restores her to life. It’s a resurrection story, but not just because she’s raised from the dead. It’s part of a wider narrative of transformation beginning with Philip baptizing a eunuch from Ethiopia, Saul receiving a vision of Christ on the way to Damascus and is himself baptized, followed by two healings, Aeneas and Tabitha-Dorcas, then Peter baptising Cornelius, a Roman soldier, after having his own perspective changing vision. Throughout this narrative, God breaks down barriers to widen the circle of grace. We see this in the gender balance of the back-to-back healing stories, but more than that, Tabitha-Dorcas, the one raised, herself lived that widened circle, known by both her Hebrew and Greek names in the same story, no part of her identity overlooked. A commitment to equality was a big part of early Christian life, a reality missed by Christians seeking to roll-back rights for women to choose what happens to their own bodies.

It’s really all about lifting one another up, honouring our whole selves - our bodies, identities, beliefs, experiences, nothing viewed as a barrier to being loved, not even what we’ve done. I am thinking of Peter who’d previously denied knowing Jesus three times. But in our gospel, continuing from last week, he is given a do-over, asked three times if he loves Jesus. Notable is the lack of judgment on Jesus’ part. He just helps Peter let go of what happened and move on. Jesus doesn’t say “I forgive you” or preface his questions with assurances of love. He does not need to. Peter’s action never jeopardised Jesus’ love. It feels parental, maternal, as Jesus invites Peter to grow not through punishment but encouragement. He then commissions Peter to continue where he left off, lift people up, which he does for Tabitha, Cornelius and others.

And that’s how Jesus is with all of us, mothering us into wholeness, encouraging us to grow and learn, loving us unconditionally as we are and not what we think we’re supposed to be. I

saw this beautifully expressed in a TikTok video recently. A professor stands in front of a class and pulls a \$20 bill from his pocket. He asks who'd like it. Everyone puts up a hand. He then crumples the bill and asks who wants it. Again everyone puts up a hand. He drops it, steps on it, grinds it into the floor. As you can guess he asks who wants it and gets the same response. He explains that they kept wanting it because the value of the bill never changed. Regrettably, he said, that's not how we see ourselves when we feel put down or ground into the dirt by life. But he said, we should never forget that our intrinsic worth doesn't change, no matter what happens in our lives or how others view us. This is a prime outcome of Christ's resurrection.

You'd never know it though for how we talk about ourselves or each other. Again thinking of last week, I find a good example of this in our historical approach to communion. Based on our Methodist heritage you'd expect we'd want to share in the Lord's Supper as often as we can. John Wesley encouraged just that, he himself receiving communion several times a week. He also believed that people should prepare themselves and considered membership in a Methodist Society as proof someone had committed to do just that. Hence people showing a card before taking part in communion. It didn't take long for the card to be turned from a proof of membership into one of worthiness to partake. Rather than people regularly coming to the table to be strengthened by this sign of God's unconditional love and restoring grace, it was common in Newfoundland for just the minister and an elder to take part. The same happened to Presbyterians. John Calvin encouraged weekly communion, but the people felt so unworthy that the most they agreed to was quarterly. Thankfully we celebrate communion monthly, and yet, Cowan Heights United has moved to weekly. Don't panic, I'm not suggesting we do it here (although there may be a link between increase in practice and congregational growth). I can hear people telling me weekly communion is too Catholic (despite that Orthodox Anglicans, Lutherans, Disciples of Christ, a growing number of Methodists include communion every week). I wonder if the "too Catholic" claim is an excuse, for so long told we are unworthy that we believe it, despite the witness of unconditional love the Risen Christ showed Peter as they shared breakfast, showed Saul in last week's readings, is shown in story after story across both testaments. We are loved. We are worthy, accepted as we are. Would that we claim that for ourselves, recognize we are special to God, each and every one of us God's favourite child.

And when we do, we will discover that we are part of an incredibly wide circle of grace, a family that is larger than blood relations, than a congregation or community, than a nation or even all of humanity, but all of life held in love by a mothering God who raises us into wholeness, all of us as one whole. This for me is the heart (pun intended) of Aimee Nezhukumatathil's "Naming the Heartbeats". Her poem starts unapologetically family centred, but extends ever outward as she imagines how we're all connected as one body sharing in the act of dreaming. I pray on this Mother's Day that we see this to be more than a dream but a lived reality, all of us loved, thus connected, part of the circle of God just as we are, worthy, graced, called to raise others up with the same all-accepting love. Amen.