

St James United Church

Message for April 9, 2023

Easter Sunday

“Christmas in Easter/Back to the Garden”

- Preached by Rev. James Ravenscroft



Readings: John 20:1-18; Colossians 3:1-4; “Invitation” by Mary Oliver

Children’s message: Before I begin, I want to make sure you know there is a sad part of our Easter holiday. Two days ago, we marked Good Friday. It’s a day we remember how Jesus died a long time ago. He was killed because some people didn’t like what he said about God. But we are happy today because his friends went to the cemetery to say good-bye properly, and found the tomb empty, and not just that, somehow in a way we don’t understand, they experienced Jesus as alive through God’s power and God’s love. In honour of this, Happy Easter.

Children are given Christmas gift bag to open. In it is an Easter present.

They open it to find another Christmas gift bag. In this is an Easter themed present.

I’m sure you think I don’t really know what time of year it is after all. Don’t worry. It may feel as cold as at Christmas, but I know it’s Easter. I had you open a cross-holiday gift because I want you to think about how the two holidays are connected. We hear it in how we tell the stories. Like how at Christmas, we’re told that Jesus was placed in a manger when he was born. A manger is a feed box and so reminds us of communion, a special meal we’re sharing later today, which Jesus first shared with his friends on the night before he died. Angels came to shepherds to tell them Jesus had been born. They did this because Jesus would one day be known as the Lamb of God. He’s called this because he died around Passover when, in ancient Jewish tradition, families ate lamb together in memory of their ancestors having been set free from slavery in Egypt. And after Jesus died, his body was prepared with spices, one of which was myrrh. That is one of the gifts magi brought Jesus. As I said, Christmas and Easter go together. The main message of both is that God loves us so much God wants to be with us, to share every aspect of our lives, which included dying like we all do one day. In doing this God takes every part of being human and fills it with God’s life, promising to always be with us. God is with us through the Holy Spirit, in every person’s heart, connecting us as one family.

Adult message: Okay adults, did that make sense? Christmas and Easter are two parts of one truth. I’d like to explore this more in what we think of as a Christmas reading but I think is for Easter too. I don’t mean what we just heard. I’ll get to that. I mean the Prologue of John where we read, “In the beginning was the Word. The Word was with God and the Word was God. Everything came into being through the Word...What came into being is life...And the Word became flesh and dwelled among us.” We read this at Christmas because that day we affirm the Incarnation, God drawing near to us in Jesus, embracing all that it means to be human.

But before that John tells us that everything came into being through the Word and it was life. The Word is the creative impulse of God, part of God yet distinct, like an interface between God and creation. Through this, God is present in, with and through creation, everything shining with divine presence. We need to affirm this at Christmas because in winter everything

seems dead. We feel like we are separate, disconnected from God. But in spring we feel the truth of Incarnation in the thrum of that divine presence as the world becomes green again. This happens through the Word which fills everything with life. And begets more life, an idea captured in Genesis as God over and over again says, "It is good. It is good. It is very good" Everything is connected, us too, as we read in Genesis, God walked with Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. This sense of life and connection is for us, transforms us, if we open ourselves to it, if as Mary Oliver invites us to do, we linger with goldfinches in a field.

But as we know well, we don't always live that connection, in fact often act like we are separate - from God, from each other, from creation. This is described in Genesis as the fall when Adam and Eve ate from the tree of knowledge of good and evil. They wanted to be like gods. That's our pattern as humans, at some point wanting to be above the rest of creation, in control of it and in control of each other. But because of this we had to "leave" the Garden and "death" came into the world, a way to speak of our fear of death, the one thing we can never control. But as the prologue says, the Word became flesh and dwelled among us. It's a beautiful statement of who God is. When we "left" the Garden, God came with us. We thought God withdrew to heaven and left us alone, but God still walked with us, calling prophets to teach us, and then when the time was right becoming flesh and dwelling with us through Jesus. He taught us how our perceived separation from God, from each other, from creation was the source of so much hurt in the world, but doesn't have to be, that God is as close as ever, wants us to be close too, wants us to live the harmony and connection we knew in the Garden. That didn't sit well with some, this teaching leading to his crucifixion. But as we heard when Mary Magdalene came to the tomb, in a garden I might add, the tomb was wondrously empty.

Now I'm not going to speak of the what or the how of that empty tomb. The resurrection is after all mysterious. What is key is the impact of the resurrection. As I said, John wrote that the tomb was in a garden. I believe this is intended to remind us of Eden, especially with Jesus' final words, "It is finished", an echo of similar words in Genesis when God finished the work of creation. More than that. It is the first day of the week, when God began creation. And so, God is bringing about a new creation. It is in this context we're told that Mary mistook Jesus for the gardener. It's what Adam and Eve were supposed to be, told by God to tend creation. Here Jesus, and Mary with him, are a new Adam and Eve, and the Risen Christ present with us, helps us all to be that couple, to be gardeners again as we care for each other and tend creation. Paul writes to the Romans that all of creation has been waiting for us to remember this, and when we do we are, as he writes to the Colossians, thinking of the things above as we live on this earth, no longer feeling separate. In resurrection, we realize the intimate relationship with God we knew in the Garden was never lost. And it will never be lost, not even when we face our own death. We've always been God's children, created in God's image and likeness, God breathing into us, and all of creation, a resurrection identity which we affirm in baptism, which we will renew in a few moments, and celebrate every time we share communion.

Beloved, this is what we celebrate today and at Christmas, God ever in relationship with us, something we experience profoundly in Jesus, and through his resurrection God making sure we remember, the Spirit given to us through this day, with us and ever drawing us close to God in the Word. This is the gift of Incarnation and Resurrection, one truth of who God is and who we are. May we celebrate that today and always by living the gift of the garden, caring for one another, caring for all of creation, living the new life that Jesus shares with us. Amen.