

St James United Church



Message for March 31, 2024

Easter Sunday

“The Why of Resurrection” - Preached by Rev. James Ravenscroft

Readings: John 20:1-18 and 2 Corinthians 5:17-20

“Christ is risen! Christ is risen, indeed!” We began worship with these words, a traditional affirmation of what draws us together today. Yet if I was to ask a few of you at random what you believe by that statement, I am sure I would get many different answers. And that's OK. Why should we expect to agree on what we mean by resurrection when the New Testament writers didn't either, each offering a quite different story with often contradictory details?

They told different stories in large part because the gospels weren't intended to be treated like historical accounts. Written long after what they describe, they are spiritual reflections, the authors sharing the impact that Jesus' resurrection had on their lives. So rather than worry about the what of the resurrection, perhaps we need to focus on the why.

The why is revealed in details of the story, and one detail is how Mary Magdalene went to the tomb and found it empty, a situation verified by Peter and the other disciple. I wonder if the tomb is empty not just to say that Jesus was raised, but to tell us how we are to live that reality in our lives. Tombs often become shrines, the person within venerated more for themselves than what they said and did. Those who make a shrine tend to get stuck in the past, something Jesus warns about when he tells Mary not to cling to him. We do that with shrines, hold on to what was, but Jesus needed her to be open to what was coming next.

And what happens next is that his followers are enlivened by the Spirit to collectively embody all that Jesus did and said. Perhaps the miracle of Easter is not just the resurrection of Christ, but the resurrection of his beloved community as well, his risen presence with them empowering them to leave behind the locked rooms they'd been hiding in since his arrest and go into the community to continue sharing his message of God's loving justice, compassionate kindness, and reconciling peace. That's the message the Roman authorities in concert with the religious establishment tried to silence by killing Jesus. But rather than end the movement that he started, they actually ended up catalysing it.

But I don't think it was their action that catalysed it. As you will recall, Mary recognized Jesus as he spoke her name. Since that first day, Jesus has been speaking our names (*speaking some names of people who are present*), calling us personally and collectively to embody his presence. And so, we gathered a few moments ago with Adam and Lesley to baptize William.

By baptism we are in Christ, our name spoken by him, and become a new creation. Again, this is more than a what but a why as we're called into Christ's ministry of reconciliation, not the old way of anger and revenge that still dominates the world but a new way as we seek God's commonwealth of love, lift burdens from others, seek the best for all. It's for this that Jesus speaks our names and gifts us with his Spirit. I invite you to think about what you are called to, what your ministry of reconciliation looks like, what loving justice, compassionate kindness, reconciling peace is in your own contexts? Adam, what does your ministry look like? Lesley, what does your look like? What will William's ministry of reconciliation look like one day or his sister Sydney's? What is (*again speak some names of people who are present*)? Any of us?

While our ways of living that ministry will vary, there are some commonalities we know from further details in our gospel. First, both Peter and the other disciple ran to the tomb, the disciple who stayed at the foot of the cross along with Peter who denied knowing Jesus three times. We live in a world of much judgment but as a risen community we are to be a place of forgiveness, of faithful and failed, often in the same person. Further to this, after speaking her name, Jesus told Mary to tell the other disciples about what happened, making her his apostle to the apostles. Sadly, over time this significant role was set aside by the church, her authority deemed a threat. And women are still viewed that way in much of the world, even in Canada we've yet to reach gender equality. But Jesus' call of women as disciples remains before us. So as church we seek to be a community of partners, women, men, and every gender in between, equally able to lead, to serve, to teach.

Finally, as Mary is sent to tell the others, so are we. We live Jesus' teachings as a resurrection community so we can embody them in the world. We still see so much of the old way of anger and revenge: horrors happening in Gaza, Haiti, Ukraine, Sudan; people who can't afford food let alone a home; there's a drug crisis unfolding across the country with little real effort to help; a worrying rise in anti-trans rhetoric, making trans visibility day more vital than ever; the climate crisis carries on; plus there's ongoing racism and inaction on reconciliation. These are issues that weigh on my heart and many more situations weigh on yours. Jesus gives us his identity, shares his Spirit with us, so that we can rise with him and so respond to them with his heart, with an ethic of God's loving justice, God's compassionate kindness, God's reconciling peace.

The resurrection is not just something that happened to Jesus but is shared with us, embodied in us, made possible in baptism, and renewed every time we celebrate communion. At both the font and table Jesus appears as he did with his first disciples, enabling us to rise in his Spirit again and again, and to continue living his way. We may not all agree on what we mean by "Christ is risen" but we can all live the why, Christ risen in us. Amen.