

St James United Church

Message for April 7, 2024
Second Sunday of Easter



“From Fear to Fellowship” - Preached by Rev. James Ravenscroft

Acts 4:32-35; Jn 20:19-31; “Not at your Beck & Call” in *Awed by Heaven; Rooted in Earth* by W. Brueggemann

Here we are, a week after Easter Sunday. But not in the gospel reading we just heard, at least not at first. We pick up today where we left off last Sunday when Mary told the disciples she'd seen the Lord, and now in the evening of that day, he appears to them as they're locked away in fear of the authorities. It's an amazing moment that we are given to reflect upon each year on this Second Sunday in the Easter Season. I presume that the compilers of the lectionary did that because the second half of the passage happens a week after they first experienced the resurrection, but I like how it starts on that first Easter day. That feels like a reminder that we're called to live every day as Easter, to be an Easter church shaped by Christ's resurrection, an Easter people transformed by his animating and abiding presence with us.

He animates us, as he did his disciples, through his breath, enlivening us spiritually as surely as when God breathed into the first human and gave them life. So, what does it mean for him to have done this? Well, what does he say to them? First, he says, “Peace be with you”, a greeting that is more than a prayer for an end to conflict but for right relations between people and creation. He then commissions them with the words “As the Father sent me, so I send you.” It's in this context that he instructs them about forgiving and retaining sin. He commissions them to his ministry of reconciliation, to live into all that he did with them, even in that moment of their fear. I'm sure they were afraid not just of the authorities but of what it meant for Jesus to come to them after they had failed him so much. But he wasn't there to judge them. He was there to love them back out of their fear, back into relationship with him and each other. He wanted for them then, what he'd always wanted for everyone, to be reconciled. And to make his point even more clear, he showed them his wounds, what he endured to draw people together and to put an end to our drive toward divisive hatred and anger once and for all.

He was calling them to a very different model of being together than what was on offer from their religious leaders and the Romans. Be it through an assembly line of sacrifice in the Temple, or the grisly machine of conquest and war, their world ran on fear. It ran on a fear of personal failure and the belief that we need to spill blood in a Temple sacrifice to make things right with God, and on a fear of violence that the powerful instilled in others as a way to exercise control. But Jesus was raised from the dead to reveal how that way of thinking does not align with God's way of thinking, that God's way leads us out of fear and into relationship. This is one way by which the cross heals us, Jesus not deflecting fear onto others as scapegoats and so perpetuating both fear and the violence it engenders, but accepting to be a scapegoat and so absorbing the fear, reflecting back acceptance and healing love. It's a shocking proposition to people who grew up in

a culture of fear. I wonder if that's why Thomas doubted Jesus appeared and insisted on touching the wounds. He couldn't believe it was really him, that he had accepted all that pain and still loved so deeply, wished them peace. But he did, showing them, as Walter Brueggemann suggests that God isn't bound by the way we fall into fear, but instead wants to heal us so that we can experience true and lasting freedom.

That freedom transforms our relationships from hierarchies of dominance into circles of compassion. Which is why we hear in Acts that the disciples shared everything in common. In their time most people lived at a subsistence level. It was a life of hard scrabble that kept people separated from each other. This was used to the advantage of those in power, keeping people focused on surviving rather than challenging the injustices they faced. But as we read, Jesus' disciples found a different way, one that honoured the ministry of reconciliation Jesus had called them to. They pooled their resources as a way to make sure that everyone's needs were met and, in the process, chose fellowship over fear. In our day, we are called to choose fellowship again, especially as we see fear used as a wedge between people. If we're to model our lives on Jesus, we are called to be a place where relationships are healed, where new friendships are fostered, often across the artificial social boundaries that too often keep us apart.

Let me share an example of what I mean in this. Many of us face challenges with the high cost of living right now. Economists tell us this is caused by various factors including residual effects of the pandemic and the war in Ukraine, factors over which we have no control. But when we are afraid, we want some control. So many people are blaming the high cost of living on the price on carbon, even though it's proving to be an effective way to lower emissions and most people get more back in rebates than they pay out. Placing the blame on the "carbon tax" is a way to deflect our understandable fear onto others but it's pulling us apart. What if instead we were to take the model of Jesus to heart like we heard in Acts, and find ways to not deflect fear onto others but to channel it into fellowship as we support each other and share what we have. A carbon price is a way to share everything in common, doing so across time as we work to pass a liveable planet on to our children and grandchildren. In the meantime, we can share in other ways with those around us. We can set up community kitchens where people buy in bulk in order to save money and then prepare meals together. Likewise, we can share important and once well known skills, like knitting, darning, canning, gardening, skills that will help people cope with higher costs and live more sustainably. Both ways of sharing are also a way to build relationships, and not just within the congregation but connecting with neighbours and with younger folks too. That's just one example of sharing, of coming together rather than letting fear pull people apart. I'm sure you can think of lots more. At their core is modelling what Jesus wished for his disciples, peace between us and peace with all of creation.

To live in peace, to share in supportive relationships is a way to be an Easter church, responding to the breath of the Spirit Jesus shared with his disciples, and with us as well. It is a gift that takes us back to the fellowship not just of that first Easter but also of the Garden of Eden as the first humans lived in connection with each other and with creation. Jesus came to return us to that ideal, to lift us from fear and into fellowship with each other. That is the Easter promise that we are called to live each day. May we do so. Amen.