

St James United Church

Message for April 20, 2025
Easter Sunday



“Shared Resurrection” - Preached by Rev. James Ravenscroft
John 20:1-18; Denise Levertov, “Ikon: The Harrowing of Hell”

What a powerful Easter poem. I am so grateful to Denise Levertov for so beautifully rendering into words the most ancient Christian understanding of this day. If you took part in Palm Sunday or Good Friday here at St. James, you would have heard me speak about how Jesus came down in order to lift us up, that his death was the ultimate descent as he embraced all our suffering, embraced what we fear most, and drew it all into God’s heart, filled everything with new life.

But as we just heard in Levertov’s words, most anciently we believe his descent went further still as he fell through the tomb and into the shadow world of Sheol, how death was understood then, where he met our legendary first parents, Adam and Eve, reached out to them as we see in the icon on the screen, lifting them out of their tombs, not just them but other biblical figures like Noah or David, in Levertov’s poem, Didmas (the thief crucified with Jesus whom he told would be in paradise with him), uplifting anyone who’d ever lived so they’d share in Christ’s resurrection.

We often call this the “Harrowing of Hell” but that’s the wrong name. The oldest versions of this image carry the title *Anastasis*, Greek for resurrection. In western Christianity, resurrection is pictured in an individualized way, Jesus heroically exiting the tomb. For the very first Christians, that way of imaging this day was unthinkable. In Matthew, we read that the dead emerged from their tombs at Jesus’ death and again after the resurrection. In this, he is drawing on the belief that there will be a collective resurrection at the end of the age. The good news of Easter is that we don’t need to wait for a new age. It’s happening now as we share in Christ’s risen life, as he goes to meet us as the women are told in Mark, not in a future heaven, but Galilee, in other words present in our daily lives; or walks with us as he does in Luke, helps us make sense of things as we share with him our fear and confusion over what’s going in the world; or reaches out to us in our grief, speaking our name as he did in John, that naming speaking of continued relationship, not just for Mary but all of us as he tells her he hadn’t yet ascended to his Father and their Father, his God and their God. Each time resurrection isn’t individual but shared, inviting us into connection, into relationship with him and each other, always a collective transformation, the cross no longer an instrument of death but a tree of abundant life for all.

We honoured that when the children brought you bowls of water as we remembered our baptism. We're baptized into Christ's death, and his resurrection. This is meaningful for us individually, of course, as we experience the Holy Spirit in our lives, enabling us to live into all Jesus taught. But we were ultimately baptized together into the body of Christ. Baptism is not about the future, Jesus risen to open the gates of heaven when we die. That is part of what this day is about but it is much more about this moment, otherwise resurrection is an escape from this earth. Why then are resurrection stories so tangible? Levertov's closing words, "he must return... and know hunger again, and give to humble friends the joy of giving Him food," is based on gospel accounts of resurrection. It grounds us in the fleshiness of our shared resurrection, where all of our lived experiences become moments of God's in-breaking with new life and liberating love.

And as I say this, I don't mean just the happy parts of our lives, the moments of joy. Jesus appears to Mary as she weeps at the empty tomb. Later on in this version, his wounds will be emphasized as he invites Thomas to touch the nail holes. The Risen Christ is with us in all of our experiences. They are not always easy to carry, and so I understand why we are tempted to turn Easter into an escape hatch, especially with everything that is going on in the world. And though we may feel alarmed, the solution isn't escape. Jesus certainly didn't. He spoke out. He spoke out against the injustices he saw, one of the reasons he was killed by the authorities. But they couldn't silence him, instead his voice was amplified in his followers who through his living presence could continue where he left off. In this resurrection isn't just Jesus falling through the tomb to lift up all those once held captive by death, but it's our falling too. We fall through present tombs, the deadened places in our world where we are more beholden to death than life, to war than peace, to anger than mercy, fall through these and into one another, where we lift each other up in communities that affirm life's abundance, where we share with each other, create together and seek the flourishing of everyone. In times of unrest like we're experiencing, we need places of love and unity, where we feel supported, where people can speak our name, where we teach each other how to listen for God speaking our name as well, where we are focused on raising our spiritual consciousness. But again this isn't escape. We do it to remain grounded, to know our fundamental identity as God's beloved to lift others up as the same.

This is Easter, more than Jesus heroically emerging from the tomb, but all of us lifted up, affirmed in our lives as we share in beloved community, soon to be expressed in communion around this and our collective tables. This is Easter, Jesus with us in our daily, often troubling lives, giving us courage and strength. This is Easter, the promise of God's abundant life right now, as Jesus lives in us and so continues to nurture a more abundantly loving world. May this Easter be our inspiration and our call. Amen.