

In Plain Sight

Based on John 20:1-18

A few of us have been gathering for several weeks for a “Lenten” Bible Study. Our time focussed on the book “Easter For Progressive Christians” by Rev. Donald Schmidt. We finished our time together last Thursday (via Zoom) and all agreed it was time well spent. We were fascinated by the discoveries we made and very appreciative of the varied comments that were shared by one another.

Rev. Schmidt takes each gospel account of the death and resurrection, highlights similarities and points out the differences in the stories. It is really quite engaging when one looks at the story in a comparative way.

One of the things that caught my attention was how frequently it appears that Jesus is unrecognized. In Mark’s Gospel the disciples don’t believe Mary had seen Jesus and that Jesus has come back. Jesus appears to the men but is not recognized. (Mark 16:12) “After that he appeared ***in a different form*** to two of them who were walking along in the countryside.”

In Chapter 24 of Luke’s gospel two disciples are on the Emmaus road and they were talking about everything that had happened. Vs. 15-16 says, “While they were discussing these things, Jesus himself arrived and joined them on their journey. ***They were prevented from recognizing him.***”

And of course, in today’s Gospel reading shared by Wayne, Mary thinks Jesus is the Gardner. It is only after Jesus calls her by name that Mary understands who it is. Filled with new hope she runs and tells the others that she has seen the Lord.

Later in John’s gospel there is another occurrence where Jesus appears but is not recognized. This is the story where Simon Peter and a few others go fishing and Jesus appears on the beach, to tell them to cast their net on the other side of the boat. John 21:4 “Early in the morning, Jesus stood on the shore, ***but the disciples didn’t recognize it was Jesus.***” And finally, also from John’s gospel we have the story of Doubting Thomas, who needed to see Jesus’ wounds to believe who he was.

It is curious, don’t you think, that so often this is the case, Jesus appears, but those closest to him don’t really “see” him. They think he is someone else. It doesn’t enter their minds that the prophecy could really be true, that Jesus would rise again on the third day after his crucifixion.

Rev. Schmidt suggests this **“is a strong indication that the risen Christ is experienced rather than physically seen.”**¹

I believe that to be true and we shared opinions about this in our study group. For me, we don't have to wait for Jesus to return some day in the distant future, the resurrected Jesus is with us all in the here and now. Too often however that is not recognized, we are waiting for some miracle to be created out of thin air or by magic, rather than recognizing that we can experience the resurrection each and every day. We can also be a part of that incredible life-giving experience ourselves.

Just yesterday my wife was having a telephone conversation with a good friend who is experiencing some tragedy in the family. It was a heart wrenching story. (Pic) They spoke on the phone for quite some time. Lenore concluding with the remarks that her and I would both keep everyone in our prayers and also noting that she (Lenore) would be available anytime day or night to listen if needed. That is a simple human gesture of generosity and kindness, but it offers the possibility of resurrection, resurrection hope in a space of despair.

I know this congregation to be a people of incredible spirit. You might not know or appreciate it, you might not recognize it, but you all are part of the resurrection promise. Think recently of the support you have provided to our friends who are grieving. Kind words, phone calls, some food dropped off on a doorstep, a card or a prayer. Each time you do one of those things Jesus is standing next to you, or is with the recipient. He may not be actually seen, but he is experienced.

You are doing the same thing in community during this Covid Pandemic. Incredible acts of generosity, albeit perhaps simple, are profoundly in the “resurrection wheelhouse.”

We are experiencing resurrection as all of us understand through the actions of front-line workers in hospitals and care homes, who work tirelessly to care for the vulnerable, and those that have been infected by the virus. We are experiencing it in companies that have “retooled” operations to produce hand sanitizer and personal protective clothing such as masks and face shields. We are experiencing it through the dedication of police, paramedics and firefighters who continue to perform their essential services, possibly putting themselves in harms way. We are experiencing it as innovative Canadians find ways to provide essential meals for the needy, and continue to provide necessary emergency housing for those that have no resource.

¹ Easter for Progressive Christians, Donald Schmidt, p. 52

If one stands back and takes stock, this resurrection experience is testimony that Jesus lives with us, in this time and place.

As believers of this theology, it is really a theology, a way of acting out our faith, I think there is an incredible opportunity for us in “servant ministry” to keep the resurrection promise alive, both now and in the months ahead. We can do that in multiple ways.

A starting point can be to continue to do what we have been doing in our ministry together for some time. Phone someone and stay connected. Stay connected with family and friends. Don’t downplay the seriousness of the crisis we face at this time, but remain positive. Be infectious, but in a good way. Every new case of Covid 19 that we hear about brings with it anxiety, concern and doubt. In Jesus’ final days there was all of that and more. But he remained positive. We need to do that too, so endeavour as much as you can to spread hope and blessings around as if they were viruses.

What will the future hold? Where will this experience lead?

Well we don’t know the answers to those questions, but in Christian communities we are going to have a unique opportunity. The Pandemic crisis will at sometime become a historical event. When we don’t know, but it will. The stories of heroism, cooperation, national and international collaboration, resilience and patience, will for a time be front and centre. They will be in tabloids, newspapers, magazines, on twitter, Instagram, Facebook and in the daily news. However, like the pandemic itself, they will eventually fade. We have an opportunity to keep them alive and with the stories remember resurrection’s promise. Out of negativity, chaos, and death, new life can emerge.

We have our Gospel accounts to tell us about Jesus’ life and ministry. Stories that jump alive each time we read them. We can retell the stories of the Pandemic in the same way. We can speak about how nations across the globe united in their efforts to stop the deadly virus from spreading easily. We can speak about honest and steadfast Government leaders and health officials who really cared about the basic human condition, and the welfare of communities and individuals. We can speak about innovation, self-sacrifice, reciprocity and perseverance. The examples will be innumerable.

These are all resurrection stories. They are all stories where Jesus was in the midst, perhaps unrecognizable, but alive and influential all the same. For us these stories give us cause to celebrate the life and re-birth of Jesus. For the non-believers these stories give us cause to inform and perhaps, even educate.

Can you see yourself having this conversation with someone? “Do you remember back in April of 2020 during the Covid epidemic when Mrs. Smith delivered a full-on Easter Dinner to the Wesley’s house, because they were in quarantine and couldn’t get out.” “Do you remember the two children who stood outside the window of their mother’s care home putting their hands on the glass and mouthing “I love you?” “Those are resurrection stories.”

We celebrate resurrection today, and every Easter Sunday. In truth it is evident every day through experience when we recognize it. It may not seem to be Jesus at work, Jesus alive among us, but that is the truth. ***It is in Plain Sight.*** It’s the same truth that Mary and the disciples witnessed so many years ago.

The resurrection is here, through you and me, Jesus can be experienced every day!

Thanks for listening this morning.

Amen and Amen

Rev. Ian McLean