

Easter Sermon: April 16, 2017
Ralph Connor Memorial United Church, Canmore AB – Rev. Greg Wooley

Today we celebrate the dawning of a new day.

Thirty-three ago, when Shannon and I headed off to seminary, we made a move from the flatlands of Regina, Saskatchewan, where it is sunny 350 days a year, to the pacific coastline of Vancouver, BC, where the sun makes an appearance on the 15 days a year that the sun isn't out in Regina. OK, I exaggerate somewhat. I looked it up, and Regina does have 43 days per year when there is no sunshine, which actually surprised me, while Vancouver has nearly double that – 76 days per year in which the sun does not make an appearance.

I had no idea how important the sun was to me, until I lived in a place where it was a less frequent companion. I wasn't able to locate a month-by-month breakdown of these statistics, but the first winter in Vancouver it felt like those 76 sunless days were all in a row. I was raised in a place where it would get to 40 below in the winter but at least it was sunny, and now I was carrying an umbrella everywhere I went, and shivering in the relatively balmy temperatures of minus-five to plus-five.

Then the spring came. For those of you from BC who were wondering when I was going to stop complaining about the weather, the answer is, "every year, in the spring." Springtime in Vancouver is the most startlingly beautiful season I have ever lived in, anywhere. The crocuses would start emerging as early as January, then by late March or early April we would see the cherry blossoms and then the apple blossoms, and plum and magnolia and all the rest. Not only was this a feast to my eyes, it restored my soul. The funeral pall of drizzling gloom that had rested on my head and shoulders and spirit throughout the long dreary days of winter was lifted, and replaced by brightness and beauty and optimism, a divine-infused hope of better days to come.

That, in many ways, is what this day – Easter Sunday – is all about: the dawning of a new day, and God's own promise of better days to come. The clouds part, the sun shines, the stone is rolled away and life has unimaginable hope once more.

People around the world – particularly in northern climes, where the cycles of seedtime and harvest are a bit more precarious – celebrate the coming of spring with a variety of religious festivals, many of which have themes of lessening darkness and growing light, or the death of a seed in the earth followed by the resurrection of new growth and harvest. The name of our resurrection festival, Easter, does in fact have its roots in the Saxon goddess of the dawn, Eoster, which is also the origin of the word East, the direction where we see the sun rise in the morning. Now, I know that some will happily take this admission of the connection between our resurrection festival and other springtime festivals as smug proof that us Christians just piggybacked on existing celebrations and made up the details, but I don't see it that way at all.

A growing school of thought, led by the Franciscan Catholic theologian Richard Rohr, are pushing us to put aside black-and-white, dualistic approaches to reality, moving away from "either/or" to "both/and." So instead of labelling my reality "right" and someone else's "wrong", we are urged to make our choices in life based on what is life-affirming rather than life-denying. Instead of devaluing this life and putting all our hope in the hereafter, we are nudged toward acknowledging the blessedness of all of it, this life and the life beyond. Instead of insisting that my boat is the only boat on the river of life that can successfully get me to God, I can be affirm the presence of many boats on the river, each of which is struggling to navigate the perils of life in favour of God's safe harbour of justice, and life, and love. As I move away from dualistic thinking, my field of vision gets wider, and I start to see even more of this wonderful gift of life. And, lest it sound like I'm heading toward an "anything goes" approach to life, as I see the different ways that people around the world seek to make sense of life and death and spirit, my focus actually sharpens. As I learn to see the world through different lenses, I see the importance of affirming the many virtues that seekers hold in common: courtesy, dignity, generosity, gratitude, perseverance, responsibility, tolerance, among others. There are many different ways that we approach the choice between affirming life or denying life, and those differences are as thrilling to the spirit as the different hues of the spectrum of light are a feast for the eyes.

Yes, there are strong similarities between the story of Jesus' death and resurrection, and the sacred stories of other traditions. Yes, there are elements of our Easter celebration that have come directly from

other religious homes. As finite humans striving to make sense of an infinite God, the parallels between the way that we seek the peace and presence of the divine, and the ways that others engage that journey, only underlines for me the legitimacy of the quest. The varieties of culture and language and religions add up to a profoundly exciting diversity, and that diversity suggests endless possibilities for seeking God: seeking God in ways that we will find God and will be found by God.

And so today, I notice what God's creative energy is doing in creation and what God's restorative energy has done in Christ, and as these two truths co-exist I am filled with awe and wonder.

And so today, I give thanks for the power of God's creative energy in creation. I will never truly understand the process of germination and growth, yet my very existence and the presence of every foodstuff that nourishes my body relies on that process. Thanks be to the gifts of creativity and growth! I see the commitment of so many in our valley, to expanding our understanding of whose land this is – which increases our respect for the first human stewards of this land, our indigenous sisters and brothers, and strengthens our resolve to preserve free passage for the wildlife who were on this land before we were – and in the presence of that passion, I feel the very presence of God. I pay attention to my body, and how good it feels to move, the refreshment of a cool breeze when I work up a sweat, the glorious warmth of sunlight breaking through the trees on a mountain hike, even the cleansing power of snow and rain, and I am humbled by the immensity of God's gift of life. In all processes of growth, in the emergence of new life, I am awash in the glory of God.

I see those same processes at work in the life, death and resurrection of Christ Jesus. This March and April, as we worked our way through the season of Lent, we encountered some wonderful narratives from the gospel of John that described interactions between Jesus and a variety of insiders and outsiders, and as one story came after another, the light of spirit grew, just as each day at this time of year has a bit more sunshine than the day before. We saw Jesus reaching out in brotherhood to Nicodemus, who saw the world in much narrower ways than what God was unfolding in Jesus. We heard him speaking to and listening to a Samaritan woman at a well, whose gender and nationality and religion created no barriers for Jesus. We felt his compassionate touch in the healing of a man blind from birth, and his ability to call us to new life in the raising of Lazarus. Throughout John's gospel, momentum builds, the clouds are parted and the light comes through. We see in these stories of Jesus, God's own intention for our lives and for all life: a desire to open our eyes, open our hearts, open our homes and our tables, open our lives to an expansiveness of love that we can barely even imagine.

We also see in these stories, an undercurrent of resistance from those who were threatened by Jesus: the colleagues of Nicodemus who wanted to see things in one way, and one way only; virtually all of Jesus' countrymen, who liked the limitations on interaction with women and foreigners and people of colour; the powerful people who determined which beliefs were authorized and which were not, who refused to believe that the new ways of Jesus could bring the gifts of sight and insight; and the political opponents of Jesus, who saw his gift of new life to Lazarus not as a gift of life, but as a threat to the established order which started the ball rolling towards' Jesus' own crucifixion. In each encounter where Jesus opened things up for people, someone wanted to screw things down even tighter, in a way we are far too familiar with in our world today. The light of Christ was growing, the beam was illuminating a wider swath, and those who sought to deny life attempted to extinguish the light altogether.

Today we acknowledge, that in our lives and in the life of the world, there are times when the clouds gather, when the sun is hidden, when death is all too real and life itself seems like a cruel joke or a mere rumour. Much as I would like to say that the story of Jesus was a straight upward incline that just kept getting better and better, there was a moment when it all fell apart, when the brutality of crucifixion appeared to have the last word. At Easter, we proclaim our trust in the life-giving power of God, who will not let death have the final say. The same God who bursts open seeds with the tender determination of shoots does not leave us in despair. The same God who tends to our woundedness helps us find the resilience to start again. The same God who, three decades ago sent us transplanted flatlanders nothing but clouds for twenty days at a time, rewarded our perseverance with blossoms and beauty.

Nine years ago, Christian singer/songwriter Steven Curtis Chapman suffered a sudden and unimaginably tragic death in his family. His CD, *Beauty will Rise*, attempts to embrace God's healing love in the midst of sorrow, and it includes this song called *Spring is Coming*:

*We planted the seed while the tears of our grief soaked the ground
The sky lost its sun and the world lost its green to lifeless brown
Now the chill in the wind has turned the Earth hard as stone
And silent the seed lies beneath ice and snow*

*And my heart's heavy now but I'm not letting go
Of this hope I have that tells me Spring is coming, Spring is coming....*

*Hear the birds start to sing Feel the life in the breeze
Watch the ice melt away The kids are coming out to play
Feel the sun on your skin Growing strong and warm again
Watch the ground: there's something moving
Something is breaking through New life is breaking through*

*Spring is coming, Spring is coming
All we've been hoping and longing for soon will appear
Spring is coming, Spring is coming
And it won't be long now, it's just about here.*

Those words, written amidst tears, pretty much say it all for those enlivened by Easter faith. On this day of resurrection may you, dear friends in Christ, find hope of new life. As we hear the words of Matthew speak of an empty tomb, may we, as inheritors of that tradition, be startled into seeing God in new ways. As we look around at emerging buds and hear the burbling streams and wonder at the hidden life of tiny insects, may we embrace those signs of new life as evidence of the loving, trustworthy power of life and love. In all of it, may God be alive and real in your thoughts and actions, your hearts, minds and spirits, and may Christ be alive in your thoughts and actions toward others.

Alleluia! Christ is Risen. Christ is risen indeed!! Amen.

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And... pictures of BLOSSOMS! <http://www.vancitybuzz.com/2015/04/fruit-blossom-season-in-kelowna/>

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