

**Sermon: Easter Sunday, April 4, 2021 – John 20: 1-18**  
**Ralph Connor Memorial United Church, Canmore AB – Rev Greg Wooley**

Easter Sunday, of all the Sundays of the Christian year, we proclaim life. We proclaim hope and renewal and emergence and all things that help our spirits to arise. We proclaim the glory or resurrection. On this day of all days, I do not want to say one thing that will lessen the good news of Jesus Christ, or the unedited power of resurrection life. I do, however, want to name an important reality of the Good News: that is, the more real this news is, the better it is.

Watch at: <https://youtu.be/xj2LGFLrq54>

Reaching back to my earliest memories of the cross and empty tomb, I have heard the Easter story so many times over the decades and it has remained both completely fresh and completely familiar. Each year I hear this story with the eagerness of a child, listening to a favourite story being read for the umpteenth time... and each year, something new comes forth. What speaks to me afresh this year, is a hard thing but a “real” thing: and that is, when Jesus rises to new life, he is interacting with an inner circle that is nothing short of traumatized. While I’ve always acknowledged the difficult emotional swing from Good Friday to Easter Sunday, I now sense that the inner circle are not just sad, discouraged and worried. They’re not just shocked or surprised. Depending on how long they stayed at the cross, depending on what things they saw that could not later be un-seen, we would describe them in modern terms as traumatized, perhaps even suffering from PTSD. And that, to me, shapes the miracle of Easter in very different terms.

I make no claims of expertise when it comes to trauma – it is a difficult, unique thing. But I have found one particularly helpful article, written by Theology Professor Shelly Rambo in the Christian Century periodical. She describes how important it is for Ministers and indeed, anyone offering Christian comfort and support, to be sensitive to what will and will not be helpful for someone living with trauma. “Experiences of pain, loss, and suffering” she writes, “are part of human experience, and in time many are able to integrate the suffering into their lives. But *trauma* refers to an experience in which the process of integration becomes stuck.” She goes on to describe the way that Christian theology has often fallen short of the mark in dealing with traumatized people and traumatic suffering, “often approaching the topic of suffering [by attempting to] make sense of evil within God’s rule of the world [and by] framing suffering as an abstract problem to be solved. This approach can hover above the realities of what someone is experiencing. Rather than trying to offer an explanation of what is taking place, theology needs to witness to what is taking place.” She goes on to outline how important it is that we never diminish or rationalize what people are experiencing, or, even worse than that, make them feel guilty or faithless because of the lingering ache they feel, or their anxiousness at potentially being triggered back into their trauma. We are called not to explain away, but to accompany, listen, honour, create safe and honest space.

For those of you who are wondering by now about my earlier words about keeping things positive and hopeful on this Easter Day, the Good News I want to convey here is that although the language of trauma is only about a century old, it’s an emotional experience that God in Christ has understood forever. When we read the Easter story, of women going to the tomb to tend to their dead friend’s body, and meeting instead someone they assumed to be the gardener, I now wonder if there is some buffering going on here. Jesus can understand the trauma they must have experienced at the foot of the cross because, well, he was on the cross. So he gives time and space to adjust – gradually revealing, first of all that the stone is not in place, then that the body is not here, and only as they were able to absorb it, that he was in fact Christ arisen. There’s no judging here, no minimizing of what

they saw, no telling them to move instantly from devastated to joyful, just a gradual reveal that kindly invites them to take a new reality that will be wonderful.

When Shannon and I were talking a few days ago about how traumatic the cross would have been, she reminded me of the other thing that God in Christ kept on doing in response to the trauma absorbed by his beloved friends. Christ kept showing up! For the next few weeks, the gospel readings are all about stunned, disheartened, worried disciples attempting to come to grips with their present reality ...and then Jesus is with them. Disciples are walking to Emmaus, and then a stranger starts walking with them, recognized as the risen Christ when they break bread together. Frightened disciples gathered in an upper room to console and encourage each other in their fear and, wait a minute, Christ is with them! The fisherfolk disciples are having little success on Galilee, a stranger from shore guides them to an abundant catch and – could it be? – it turns out to be Christ, with whom they share breakfast on the beach. This multiplicity of post-resurrection appearances speak of a God who acknowledges the trauma of death by showing up and being present again and again and again, as often as we need it, in every location and scene and season of life. The Divine reality in our lives is founded, not in ungrounded happy talk, but in the deeply grounded engagement of whatever we need to live abundantly.

This description, of a God who does not just leave us stuck but keeps walking with us, companioning us, tending to our wounds and our sorrows and our heartbreaks and our dislocations, is such good news in this spring of 2021. Each of us has experienced thirteen months of strangeness. Some have been required to be on the front lines and others have not been allowed visitors. Some have felt compelled to try to do everything, some could barely find the energy to be up and dressed. Some wonder if COVID is a thing at all, and others have buried friends and family and tried to process their grief without the benefit of even one hug. For many, this past year has been not just unprecedented, but full-on traumatic, with more challenges to come as we stumble into the light of a new day where the rules have yet to be determined. And amidst all those differences, God's grounding, resilient presence has not gone away and we have every reason to believe that God in Christ will keep showing up. However long it takes to find new ways of being that are healthy and hopeful and authentic, we know that the process is shared by a wise, caring, experienced God who has also been wounded. Amidst trauma, is one who knows both crucifixion and resurrection.

And so we honour and, if possible, even celebrate this timeless story of the Christ, whose actions stated decisively that death does not have the final say – life does! We walk gently with the women who had seen things they could not un-see, we open ourselves with them and the rest of the inner circle of followers to the beloved risen friend who remains present in spite of loss, trauma, confusion, and seemingly endless liminality. And as we recognize and celebrate that beautiful presence in their lives and ours, we embrace this moment, and look to the horizon line before us, and Alleluia is sung with our very breath.

Alleluia, Christ is risen! Christ is risen indeed, Alleluia - and Amen.

Reference cited:

Rambo, Shelly. "How Christian theology and practice are being shaped by trauma studies". *Christian Century*, 1 Nov 2019. <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/critical-essay/how-christian-theology-and-practice-are-being-shaped-trauma-studies>