

**Sermon: Easter Sunday, April 17, 2022. John 20: 1-18 and Isaiah 65: 17-25
Ralph Connor Memorial United Church, Canmore AB – Rev Greg Wooley
Sermon preached at Rundle Memorial United Church, Banff AB**

This is the day of resurrection. The gloom of Good Friday is replaced by a glorious new day, the body laid in the tomb after the crucifixion is replaced, miraculously, by Christ arisen. And so this morning we celebrate with the Easter response, Alleluia, Christ is Risen! Christ is Risen Indeed, Alleluia!

Those of you who were at our Palm Sunday service one week ago – or saw it online – will recall the angle of approach that we took that day. We imagined ourselves at the original Palm parade, with Jesus entering Jerusalem to shouts of “Hosanna”. We imagined ourselves, though, not as excited, palm-branch waving spectators, but as disciples –people who not only knew *about* Jesus but *knew him and were known by him*. We imagined ourselves as those who had experienced much with Jesus, who had travelled with him, loved him, shared one common mission. For three years we had heard Jesus’ addressing injustice and indignity, not just as unfairness, but as an affront to God. And in all those shared experiences he embodied all these things, that for Jesus, it wasn’t just “words.” He cared about the human price of inequality. And it dawned on us that the concern Jesus had for these things was consistent with the big story of God’s love for the world.

Rev Vickey Gibbs preached a wonderful sermon in 2016 in which she challenged each person in her congregation to be “a follower” of Jesus, “not a fan.” That’s what I was aiming at last Sunday, in encouraging everyone who finds value in the ethics of Jesus, or who perceives their life’s journey to be walked beside the risen Christ, to understand themselves as disciples. Our call is to be disciples of Jesus’, not just spectators; followers, not just fans.

Disciples, those who have walked some miles with Jesus, approach the events of Holy Week from this bigger context. Good Friday isn’t just a terrible stand-alone day when the death of Jesus cleared some ageless debt with God; no, Good Friday is the culmination of a process of disrupting the status quo, a path followed by countless advocates for social change across the ages. For millennia, we have seen that talk about love is well and good... until it starts pinching those with power. When the words about justice and equity interrupt the life narrative of those who live with ease, crucifixion-or-its-equivalent might not be far off. As Marcus Borg (p.273-274) put it, “Good Friday is the collision between the passion of Jesus, God’s own passion for justice, and the domination system of his time.” The disciples had experienced with Jesus a number of times when they just barely escaped the aggression of an angry mob, even back home in Galilee... and now they were heading to Jerusalem, where religious and political power intersected in “bigger” ways than they did back home. They knew that Jesus was going to keep pushing against injustice, and they feared what the consequences might be.

And Easter, Easter in all its glory, is more than just a single miraculous day when the usual rules of life and death are suspended. It is a day that proclaims eternal life. And Easter, to return again to the words of Marcus Borg, “is about God in Christ triumph[ing] over the powers that enslave and afflict the whole of creation.

Easter means that the powers of this world do not have the last word.” Hopes of eternity? Absolutely, and a renewal of God’s intention for life, here and now.

Theodore Parker, in the 19th century and Martin Luther King, Jr., in the 20th, spoke of “the arc of the moral universe that bends toward justice,” and that same message was proclaimed by an empty tomb, and a risen Christ. The amazing events of Easter morning speak of the enduring love of a God who accompanies us through those terrible, Good Friday experiences of our lives, and walks with us into the dawning of a new day that will have no end. Easter proclaims hope that is eternal and abundant *and also* very practical, in the way God-in-Christ accompanies those who mourn, those whose personhood is denied, those who cannot sleep for the mortar fire that punctuates their nights.

I was so pleased to see that the table of scripture readings appointed for Easter Sunday this year included the reading from Isaiah 65 that Trudy read for us. Hearing those words, alongside the words of Good Friday crucifixion and Easter Morning resurrection, remind us of God’s long-standing connection with the lives of those who have little and live precariously, those who watch as the economic powers-that-be take what little they have. These words, written some 600 years before Jesus, spoke of a new realm much in the way that Jesus spoke of a new realm, telling anyone in a dire situation that God was not just *with* them, but *for* them. Just listen to the beautiful phrases in the middle of this text:

“²¹ They shall build houses and inhabit them; they shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit. ²² They shall not build and another inhabit; they shall not plant and another eat; for like the days of a tree shall the days of my people be, and my chosen shall long enjoy the work of their hands. ²³ They shall not labor in vain, or bear children for calamity; for they shall be offspring blessed by the Lord.”

There may be such inequity in your life, in which case I hope that you hear the way God advocates for you; or this image from Isaiah may spur you to imagine how much it means for someone who has been forcibly removed from their homeland, or a people whose rainforest was ploughed under to plant a cash crop for a multinational, or someone who has seen a child die before their time, to hear that God recognizes the impact of these things in their lives, *and is ultimately committed to a world that will not be governed by such cruelty.* For me, hearing Isaiah’s words today connects the other-worldly aspects of Easter with the very real concerns of the world we live in. Isaiah’s vision of purposeful life for all people reaches to the people of Ukraine and Yemen and Palestine, the people of Afghanistan and Korea and Ethiopia, and to refugees everywhere - including five in Nepal and Malaysia whom we are actively working to bring to the Bow Valley. God’s desire for a full lifespan for all, touches the memory of children who never came home from Residential Schools, and it opens us to the reality of those in this land and around the world without clean water, proper shelter, and healthy breathable air. The remarkable message of Easter resurrection ties in with God’s eternal presence with those who suffer, God’s encouragement for those who have lost hope, God’s call for redistribution and reparation for those who have been wronged, and a long arc of history that does indeed bend toward justice.

On this Easter Sunday, people of God, we are called to recognize God’s goodness, expressed in all these ways. We marvel at the resurrection of Jesus, and even as

we look at the stone rolled away from the tomb, we long for other doors to be opened for those who have grown accustomed to being unwelcome. We proclaim the rising of the Christ, even as we embrace his sturdy, stubborn support of those targeted and demeaned and disadvantaged by the world. All of these things, and more, go into our declaration of Jesus as the risen, human expression of God's unquenchable passion for justice... and we say, Alleluia, Christ is Risen! Christ is Risen Indeed, Alleluia. Amen.

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