

Sermon: April 24, 2022 – John 20: 19-31**Ralph Connor Memorial United Church, Canmore AB – Rev Greg Wooley**

Occasionally, something happens in one's life, or in the shared experience of a community, that forever changes how a scripture lesson will be read.

For me, a scripture whose interpretation was changed by an event is today's gospel reading about Jesus entering a closed gathering of disciples one week, and revisiting them a week later when Thomas was with them. And the event that changed how I read these words, was the early days of COVID, March-May 2020: pre-vaccines, even pre masking mandates, when the main guidance we got was, "wash your hands, disinfect, keep 2m distance and when you can, stay at home, away from others, except for essential services."

Here's what I preached on the first Sunday after Easter two years ago, regarding this same scripture reading: "Our first point of connection with this reading is some similarity in our settings: the disciples were behind closed doors, so are many of us. They were concerned about chaotic happenings around them, and how to stay safe in the midst of that, and so are we. They were gathered as a community of love – and we, well, we can phone and Zoom and text and email and Skype. We may only be able to gather in a virtual sense, but attentive, caring community – that can still happen and is still happening".

From now on, every time I hear these words from John 20, I suspect this will be the first mental image that comes to mind: Jesus' coming to the disciples even though they were behind closed doors. In their distress, he came to them. They had good reason to be concerned: their friend and leader, Jesus, had been put to death by the state, would they be next? And if the reports of the tomb being empty were true, would other people accuse them of hiding the corpse, in order to start rumours of resurrection?

Into their worries, into their "what ifs," Jesus appears. In miraculous fashion, according to John, but to me it's not so much the mode of appearance, as the fact that God-in-Christ shows up amidst their need. Did then, does now.

And when he showed up, what did he do/what did he say? Given how badly this same group of disciples had let him down in his final week in Jerusalem, he would have been more than justified in going around the circle one by one, enumerating their shortfalls, shedding the clear light of day on their fade-away in his hour of need. Peter, in particular, who denied knowing Jesus three times over, must have expected some kind of rebuke.

But Christ arisen knew what Jesus the teacher, preacher and healer had known: there are pivotal moments in a relationship, when you need to choose your words very carefully. He knew this group so well but now his task was to prepare them for a new type of relationship, shaped by ways of being in the Kin-Dom of God. So his first words to them were "Peace be with you" – and then he repeated it - and then he empowered

them, by instilling in them the power of the Holy Spirit, to be those to carry the message of peace and forgiveness into the world. Similar to the words “be not afraid” which were often used by angels visitant, Christ’s welcome of peace would help them out in the moment, if they thought they were seeing a ghost, but these words of peace were not just momentary.

Christ brought them a blessing of peace: peace within their hearts, peace within their group of apostles, peace within their ongoing relationship with God-in-Christ, but this peace was not just a placid, personal state of mind. This peace – peace in its fullest sense, a peace founded in justice and equity - was something that they were commissioned to take into the world. Their shortfalls in Jesus’ final week were not going to define their ability to serve in his name, and the forgiveness that Christ extended to them was to reach out through them into the world around them. Empowered by the life-breath of the Holy Spirit, commissioned by Christ, they were to be the emissaries to the world for the cause of peace.

Today, as people of faith and as citizens of this planet, we offer our solidarity with the people of Ukraine, we pray for peace, and at noon our Church bell with ring out this same message. And while the formal request for us to do so comes from the Ukrainian Catholic and Ukrainian Orthodox Churches, their request clearly acknowledges the importance for global peace and justice as well as peace and justice in Eastern Europe, global welcome of refugees as well as the welcome of emergency immigrants from Ukraine, and a global outpouring of hope and prayer for all whose life circumstances are diminished by tyranny. The first words of the Risen Christ to those who were in fear and mourning, “peace be with you,” are words which reach from us to all who need to hear them on this day.

It's important to note that the specific “direction” of the Peace bestowed by Jesus, not just inward but actively outward, connects to something that was shared in Gordon Hall a couple of nights ago. Rabbi Rick Kline led a group of us in a Passover Seder, the sacred and symbolic meal of Judaism which recounts the narrative of God’s deliverance of the Hebrew people from their enslavement. Rabbi Rick invited us to ask lots of questions, and we took him up on that, and one of the thoughts he shared regarded the nature of “call” in Judaism.

When I think of the “call” stories in scripture – the call of Prophets like Samuel and Isaiah and Jeremiah – the call to Mary and Joseph and the Shepherds abiding in the field – the call of Saul/Paul, which we will look at next Sunday – in each of these call stories, my attention tends to go to the character traits and life circumstances of the person being called. Call is, after all, a very personal thing, and it makes sense that it would be: God sizes up the specific ways that this individual will best serve the cause of love, and names that to them.

As Rabbi Rick related it, however, in Jewish thought these stories are not so much about being “called”, as being “sent.” If regarded as a “calling” the focus might remain too tightly on the personality of the one being called, but if regarded as a “sending”, the

focus is mostly on the one who is sending – that is, God - and the needs and hearts of those to whom you are being sent.

To me, this very much fits what the Risen Christ does with the disciples in that closed room, and what he does with Thomas one week later. He gives them what they need – the power of the Spirit and, especially in the case of Thomas, evidence that he has indeed risen – and then sends them out by the Power of the Spirit to be those who spread the peace of Christ, the message of forgiveness, the call to reconciliation. Not dominance; peace. Our yearning for peace in Ukraine and elsewhere, our commitment to a reconciling path with our Indigenous hosts on this land, our desire to identify places of brokenness and disadvantage within our surrounding community and, if possible, be an active participant in building equitable relationships, all involve this process: listening for God's desires, embracing God's urgings for peace and justice, and looking outward, with respect, at the needs of others. Not just being *called*, but being *sent*.

Two years ago, the Risen Christ came to us in a time of apart-ness: mostly at home, except for the brave souls who kept going out there day after day to provide essential services. Now, Christ comes to us again, but the landscape is very different. Some are gathered here in Church, another thirty or so will be viewing the YouTube version at home, others download the sermons posted on the website each Sunday, still others participate in the Mission of the Church in entirely other ways. We ponder, we wonder, we go deep with God, and as those "sent" in Christ's name we look outward. We are overrun by news of the atrocities being perpetrated in Ukraine, we know there are horrible-and-unreported things happening elsewhere, and we are urged to let that hard news fuel our engagement of the pursuit of peace. We are so aware of the dividedness of this nation and others, and God's urging is to find ways to be a bridge-builder in some aspect of your life. And even if we continue to have a need to be indoors right now, there's ways to turn one's attention beyond those four walls, to reach out with love into the life of another. And again, although we are not all together in one place or one mode of gathering, we are, as congregations working together in Christ's name, called to purposeful actions of love, and hope, and peace, inspired by the Spirit which simultaneously draws us together and pushes us beyond ourselves.

Into the fear and worry and confusion of the apostles, Christ appeared. He spoke of peace, he empowered with the Spirit, he sent, with reconciling love. May we know the inspiration of that same Spirit, and embrace that we, too, are sent – for the purpose of peace. Amen.

References cited:

Easter 2020 Sermon: <https://ralphconnor.ca/sermon-april-19-2020-john-20-19-31/>

Prayer for Ukraine and Peace for the World:

<https://www.councilofchurches.ca/news/april-24-2022-prayer-for-ukraine-and-for-peace-for-the-world/>

© 2022 Rev Greg Wooley, Ralph Connor Memorial United Church