Psalm 118: 1-2, 14-24 NPMC

Luke 24: 1-12 Easter Sunday

Acts 10: 34-43 March 27, 2016

**Do you believe in resurrection?**

Christ is Risen! He is risen indeed! Easter is the greatest celebration for those of us who follow Jesus. It eclipses all other stories: even that of Christmas. This is the ultimate story of rescue – our rescue! The resurrection of Jesus, the rising of Jesus, is the pivotal story of faith and on it rests the sum total of our encouragement through Jesus the Christ and our love for God in these days of the Holy Spirit’s presence with us. This is a weighty story indeed and so it is incumbent upon us to re-imagine how the truth of the empty tomb changes the world and changes our lives.

So, let us listen to the ancient story of faith upon which is built this amazing account of the God, who centuries later, emptied the tomb. The foundation of our Easter story of resurrection finds its bedrock in the Hebrew Scriptures, the Old Testament. Psalm 118 is a testimony to resurrection and restoration. Renewal and return are always a part of God’s story with us. God has been saving the world for all time; has been bringing life out of deathly situations: rescuing people from the brink of total defeat. Hear the ancient song of praise for God’s action and salvation. Imagine how this story is a part of the resurrection panorama of this Easter Day!

**Psalm 118: 1-2, 14-24 Joel**

This is the day God acted. Let us rejoice and be glad in it! The psalmist tells of narrowly escaping disaster. God brings back from the precipice this one, who now, experiencing salvation recounts the story. This redeemed one shares with all the world the way in which God delivers – from what exactly, we do not know – but God restores life to be lived yet another day. For this we are compelled to sing psalms of praise and thanksgiving and recount the deeds of the Lord. God revives and restores life.

Resurrection, rising, is a theme of God’s good news throughout the whole Bible. In some places it comes in the form of salvation bringing new life and in other stories resurrection is that of rescue and in still others as in this morning’s celebration it means a bodily arising from death. Do we believe in such transformation? Do we, do you, believe in resurrection?

For we are confronted with the ultimate story this morning: Jesus rises from death. The account of Jesus’ resurrection in Luke describes women who had accompanied him in his community ministry arriving upon a scene that totally “blows their minds.” They come to Jesus’ burial site prepared to perform the ritual act of anointing a dead body and to say their good-byes…and there is no dead body.

**Luke 24:1-12 Joel**

God has acted once again and as God does - always. Jesus does not stay dead. This is a shock, a surprise. It is puzzling, amazing and unbelievable. Life has been restored. Death is the lesser of the powers. Jesus rises. What images and at so many levels! When we have trouble believing, as did Peter and the disciples, that at the most basic level Jesus actually came back to life, we need not fret. Is it not enough to begin with the understanding that God’s redeeming and rescuing power is greater than the evil of the world? Is it not enough to begin to explore this mystery with the assurance that God is all about life and living and overcoming the things of darkness and death?

Luke recounts that the disciples, upon hearing the testimony of the women who had seen the empty tomb, did **not** believe that Jesus was alive. The women’s story is dismissed as an idle tale. Peter, in order to see for himself, runs to Jesus’ gravesite and finding the linen cloths by themselves, goes on home, amazed. That is a pretty standard reaction…now, where from here? How to explain an empty tomb? Could this be resurrection?

Fast forward the story a few years and we catch up with Peter in the Book of Acts. We hear him testifying to the fact that Jesus is raised from the dead. The testimony of the women on that Easter morning is the focus for his preaching and teaching. Whatever path or lonesome valley Peter walked between this public preaching event in Acts and the empty tomb in Luke he is convinced of Jesus’ return from death.

**Acts 10:34-43 Joel**

God has acted again in the life of Peter the Apostle: Peter, the one who promises Jesus his total allegiance through thick and thin, Peter the one who betrays Jesus, deserts Jesus and is completely stumped at first by the resurrection of Jesus. Through Peter, God has brought into focus the awe-inspiring power of life and love over death and has made a stellar witness out of a well-intentioned but oft-times, uncertain follower. Peter’s strong testimony underscores the truth that God has been rescuing, saving, resurrecting since the very beginning. Yet it is in Jesus that peace comes to the world in a new way. That is what the mystery of resurrection is all about. Through the forgiveness of sin and through the filter of Jesus’ kindly way with people, the world is given the opportunity to understand in a new way the power of life over death, of love over fear.

In raising Jesus, God gives us the opportunity to rise above the all too common deathly habits of our disenchanted world. For far too many people there is no sense of mystery, of beauty, of love in their daily lives. We see rather so much territoriality, bullying, terror and death; these things are not the manifestations of resurrection hope. If you believe in resurrection you have no need to wield power over another. There is no desire to hold hostage, provoke fear or make threats. The power of resurrection takes these tendencies and exposing them for what they are, acts of darkness and cowardice, shines upon them the light of peace, forgiveness and love. Do you believe in resurrection?

Do you believe that God has the power to transform death into life? How does the truth of the empty tomb change the world and change us? I had to stop and think about this – hard! And this is where my hard thoughts led. Christian folks are arguing and fighting among themselves over inconsequential matters of doctrine. I continue to speak about this because I believe that this disagreement represents a huge divide in world view and it has the power to rip the church to pieces. We disagree over the interpretation of scripture and as a result determine who can be a part of our group and who has to stay out. This has nothing to do with Jesus’ kind way with folks. Jesus wasn’t into setting up denominations and splitting them apart. Jesus was concerned about shalom in body and in spirit; about everyone’s relationship to God. That is why he was killed. He got in the way of those who thought they knew best on behalf of everyone else. Jesus stood up to bullies and power-brokers and wealthy religious aristocrats. He got killed for it. Can the empty tomb change the world?

You bet it can! The empty tomb is a sign of encouragement, of courage. God raises Jesus to show us that death and division do not have the final say. So let’s be courageous. All too often I want to roll that stone right back over the opening of the tomb and keep Jesus confined and lifeless. No, let’s celebrate an empty tomb and join with the hope that comes with Easter morning. It takes courage and patience, love and steadiness, forgiveness and good humour. Let’s continue to talk to our Christian friends who disagree with us, actually to our Mennonite friends who disagree with us. I guess the hardest thing is to try to stay connected to family members who disagree with us. The closer to home it gets, the more difficult it is to stay in relationship when we do not define faithfulness in the same way.

The empty tomb, the resurrected Jesus, gives us the courage to keep working toward peace and hospitality. I found a document the other day that I knew was around somewhere but I had no idea where I had filed it. It is an important find for me. It is a booklet entitled “Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective – DRAFT – October 1993. I bring this to you on this Easter Sunday morning because this shines the light of truth on some of the traps we fall into as the church. Today, in 2016 Mennonite congregations in North America are using this document as a weapon against each other. Article 19 of the Confession of Faith states that: “We believe that God intends marriage to be a covenant between one man and one woman for life.” This statement is now being used to determine whether or not someone is breaking the rules of our Mennonite rulebook.

There is more in this document that I found. It lists the names of the authors of this document. No, it was not God who wrote the Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective. There are 10 names: some American and some Canadian. And I want to share a few sentences from the opening instructions of this draft document when it was a work in progress. I apologize to those of you in our congregation for whom this past history of the various branches of the Mennonite Church is unfamiliar and not particularly relevant for your experience in the life of faith. However, I think that this story is helpful one for all of us to ponder. “Since 1985, the General Conference Mennonite Church and the Mennonite Church have been developing a new confession of faith. A joint committee was appointed to draft a proposed confessional statement. Two major purposes were originally identified for the proposed new statement: 1) to reformulate central teaching on faithful Christian life and practice in Mennonite perspective, and 2) to provide a basis for greater unity between the GCMC and the MC in faith and life. If adopted by the churches, the confession of faith may also be used for instructional purposes and for conversation with other Christian groups….Each congregation studying this proposed confession of faith is asked to complete the response form enclosed in this booklet and return it to the committee.” The responses were to be sent to offices at our seminary in Elkhart or to the national church offices in Winnipeg.

I and a few others here this morning were a part of a group from Nutana Park who offered our feedback in May of 1994. 22 years ago we participated in writing a document that was supposed to help us in conversation and unity. The great value of the Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective is as a guide to on our Anabaptist theology and as a forum for conversation that can lead to greater understanding of the faith. It was never meant to be a rule book or an instrument for dividing the church.

And so for us today, at the entrance to the empty tomb we can be inspired to continue God’s work among us. We will go into the future embracing the original intent of our Confession of Faith, written by ordinary folks and for a very positive purpose. It may be the opportune time for our Confession of Faith to be re-written – once again. This is how God brings about new life and this is how Jesus goes about his ministry, letting go of those things that restrict: living fully into resurrection hope.

For me this there is great power in the resurrection stories we have heard today. God continues to act and new mysteries are revealed. God continues to save, rescue, restore and new ministries appear. God continues to encourage and forgive and hearts are opened. We bring our denominational troubles to the entrance of the empty tomb and God will imagine new ways of being the church. We need not be afraid. We bring our congregational transitions and changes to the entrance of the empty tomb and God will accompany us into new ministries. We bring our personal troubles, concerns, ill health, relational difficulties and spiritual hunger to the entrance of the empty tomb and God will fill our hearts with love and with peace. And as all of the stories that we hear from scripture today attest we now take up the stories of transformation that have changed our lives and we share these with anyone who needs to hear them. That is how the empty tomb changes the world. Story by story and prayer by prayer the work of Jesus is done in the lives of people around us. Through acts of love and kindness in the light of an empty tomb we carry on the work that God begins in Jesus and shares with us.

Thanks be to God. Christ is Risen! He is risen indeed!