

Second Sunday of Easter - April 19, 2020

Readings: Acts 2:14a, 22-32; Psalm 16; I Peter 1:3-9; John 20:19-31

Call to Worship:

The Lord is risen!

The Lord is risen indeed, Alleluia!

This is the day the Lord has made;

let us rejoice and be glad in it!

Prayer:

We are blessed, O God of Life,

that on Sunday, the day of resurrection, you raised Jesus from death.

In him we find eternal life.

In Jesus you make all things new.

We praise and adore you.

May we, who are witnesses of Jesus' resurrection live his risen life.

May we always be your Easter people,

through Jesus Christ our Lord who is alive! Alleluia! Amen.

John 20:19-22

¹⁹ When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jewish leaders, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." ²⁰ After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. ²¹ Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." ²² When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit.

Reflection:

It is Easter evening, and despite the earlier earthshaking news that Jesus is alive again, his disciples are in lockdown.

They are gathered in a house, still in shock.

The doors are shut, the windows closed,
keeping out danger, locking in fear.

(We know the feeling.)

Traumatized by current events, and despite the amazing news of the empty tomb, threat still feels all too real, the future too uncertain.

And there are questions, naturally!

How can Jesus be alive when he died so horribly?

How can Jesus be alive when the forces that killed him still seem to be in control?

What is to become of us?

What can the disciples do but huddle together hidden and uneasy? . . .

Given the events of the previous few days and their own stark failures of betrayal and denial in their friend's darkest hour, the air in the closed house is stifling, thick with dread, guilt, doubt, grief, suspicion, paralysis. Not a good place to be. But to go elsewhere seems more than they can bear or risk. . . .

We resonate with the disciples' experience,
perhaps particularly in these days of lockdown and fear,
huddled (virtually) against the threatening chaos of the world
against fearsome powers we cannot control.

Traumatized by current events, and despite the amazing news of the empty tomb, threat feels all too real, the future too uncertain.

So many questions, naturally!
Why? When? Where is God?
How can Jesus be alive when the forces of death seem to be in control?
What is to become of us?

As we huddle behind closed doors, the air is thick with weariness, fear, sadness, bewilderment, conflict, paralysis. Not a good place to be. But to go elsewhere seems impossible and more than we can bear or risk. . . .

But the story does not end on that dismal note--neither for Jesus' disciples nor for us.

To return to that first Easter night. . . .

Suddenly! There is another Presence in the room. Jesus is there!
He has passed through the protective walls,
the locked door,
the closed hearts,
to be with his friends.

He speaks peace to them.
He shows them his wounds.
It really is he, the Crucified One, risen to new life.

He speaks peace again, as if they haven't quite taken it in the first time.

And before they have had a chance to collect their scattered wits, Jesus commissions them to carry on his work.

"As the Father has sent me, so I send you."

Then he breathes into them,
as God breathed into the first human in the garden,
as God breathed into the dry bones in Ezekiel's valley.

The breath of life,
the creating, restorative, energizing Spirit of God,
the Easter Spirit.

And what amazing results!
Immobile, stale, frightened human beings are transformed into
vibrant, refreshed, courageous disciples!

Expression of doubt turns to confession of faith.
Denial becomes proclamation.
Aimlessness converts to purposeful action.

For Mary, Thomas, Peter and the rest--the doors and windows of their lives are opened wide to let the exhilarating currents of resurrection life sweep over them and through them. The Risen Christ comes into their musty, tired gathering like a breath of fresh air--and there is a new creation.

There is a new creation.
"If anyone is in Christ," writes Paul, "there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!"

This is the hope in which we live, even and perhaps especially in our isolation.
There is another Presence in the room. Jesus is here!
He has passed through the protective walls,
the locked doors,
the glass shields and computer screens,
to be with his friends.

The Risen Jesus penetrates our barriers and stands among us, offering peace.
He breathes into us his very life: "Receive the Holy Spirit!"
The breath of life,
the creating, restorative, energizing Spirit of God,
the Easter Spirit.

The Easter Spirit:
not a Hallmark creation
not a cheeriness we conjure up ourselves
not produced by crocuses and pussywillows.

The Easter Spirit
is the Spirit of the Risen Christ,
breathed into his Body the church,
unleashed into the world for good.

The question is being asked in these days, "Who will we be when this pandemic recedes?" What things will change for the good in the new world? How will we do things differently for the good of all and the well-being of the planet? What are we learning about caring, about connection, about community? We are learning, for example, that our lives depend on underpaid cleaners and personal care workers--people too often invisible in a society that values overpaid celebrities. What difference will that newly acquired appreciation make as we move forward?

As for us--who will we be as the church in this new world? What is God creating in and through us during this time? The questions are unsettling (which is fair) and anxiety-producing (which is understandable but unnecessary). Just think of the amazing transformation in those earliest friends of Jesus because of his risen presence among them! That same transforming power is at work in us, too. So wherever our questions lead us, we may take heart because the Risen Jesus is here among us,

 come to be with his friends,

 blessing us with peace,

 inspiring us toward new life and joy!

Amen. Thanks be to God!

Prayer:

Thanks be to you, O God, for your glorious gospel. Thank you for the presence of the Risen Christ among us and for the breath of the Spirit giving us life. Open our minds and hearts and lives to receive your goodness and to share your love.

Loving God, we pray for the many places of brokenness in our world. We think especially of those suffering in the COVID-19 pandemic, those with the disease, those who have lost loved ones, those working hard to respond to the pandemic, and those who have lost work or lost hope. Grant your strength and healing power to all in need of restoration. May the whole earth experience your gift of new life and hope.

We pray for our congregation, for The Presbyterian Church in Canada, and for the church around the world. In these days of unexpected challenge, when worship and fellowship have been disrupted, strengthen our trust in you and our concern for others. Make us good stewards of time apart to reflect on your presence with your people in circumstances of deep challenge and to discern where you are leading us. Remind us of our unity in the Risen Christ with all your people past and present. Sustain us in your joy and hope

We also pray for ourselves, our family and friends, our neighbourhoods and community. We lay before you in silence all the people and concerns on our hearts and minds today. . . .

Gracious God, in your loving purpose, answer our prayers and fulfill our hopes, through Jesus Christ the Saviour of the world. Amen.

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you. Amen.