

Rideau Park United Church
Sermon: Now What?!? (Rev. Jim Baldwin)
Easter Sunday, April 5, 2026

That's the question that came to mind this week, as I was preparing the service for today. We have spent the last six weeks travelling through Lent; many of us fasting, meditating and praying, as we prepared ourselves spiritually for the experience of Holy Week once again.

We have celebrated Christ's entrance into Jerusalem with the waving of palm branches - and considered what it meant for the coming messiah to ride into town on a donkey, while emperors and kings appeared on horseback.

We have gathered with Jesus and his disciples in an upper room, to witness the institution of the first communion service - and to hear the Great Commandment about loving one another. Then we followed him into the Garden to pray, we heard the story of his arrest and abuse - and we stood by while he took his last breath on the cross.

Today, we come together to celebrate the message that was first heard at the empty tomb; the proclamation that is at the heart of our Christian faith, "He is not here, for he is risen! Christ is risen indeed. Hallelujah! Amen!"

The services for the past six weeks have been filled with beautiful music and messages of hope. There has been a gradual building of energy that has culminated in worship that can only be described as glorious...not only here...but in Christian churches around the world!

But if you're like me...you might be thinking..."Okay...now what?" What happens next? Where do we go from here? What do we do with everything we have gained from six weeks of fasting, prayer and meditation? Because if it is to mean anything, it has to make a difference.

I can only imagine what it was like for the followers of Jesus. They have been his travelling companions and his disciples for three years. There must have been a moment when they said, "Now what?" Maybe it happened at his arrest or crucifixion. It surely must have happened when he released his final breath. Even

with the news of his resurrection, they were still in hiding because they didn't know what would happen next.

But we do...because we know the story. We know that Jesus will appeared to them behind locked doors. He offered them words of peace...he showed them his hands and side...he filled them with the Holy Spirit...and commissioned them to go out and offer God's grace to the world. That's what's was next...for the disciples, and that is what is next for we who call ourselves a Christian people.

What started six weeks ago, does not end on Easter morning...this is just the beginning...and our readings give us some pretty clear instructions about where to go from here.

One of the things that stood out for me when I was reading the Gospel for today, was the interaction between Jesus and Mary when she realizes *that's* who she was talking to outside the tomb. He said to her..."Do not hold onto me." He meant it literally..."Don't hold onto me, because I still have work to do." But it also speaks to me as a metaphor. We have received this tremendous gift of God's grace...but we are not to hold onto it...we are to give it away; loving one another as Christ loves us.

Then in chapter 3 of Colossians, we find instructions from St. Paul that illustrate how a life of love and grace should be lived. To begin with, he says, "Set *your mind* on things above...since *you* have been raised with *Christ*, set *your hearts* on things above...let go of earthly things, like anger, rage, malice, slander and words that destroy...instead...put on the image of the Creator." Then Paul said something really significant: "there are no longer any divisions among God's people, because Christ **is** all, and is **in** all."

If you are looking for instructions for how to live a life in Christ, the next part says it all:

"Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as God forgave you. And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity.

Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful. Let the message of Christ dwell among you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom through psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit, singing to God with gratitude in your hearts. And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of Jesus, giving thanks to God through him.”

What a wonderful world this would be if everyone who claimed to be a follower of Jesus, could follow these instructions; living their lives in peace, grace and love.

In a reflection on the theme for this Easter Sunday, John van de Laar points out that while the focus is on *resurrection*, the particular emphasis is on the *liberation* Jesus brings. We’ve already heard Jesus say to Mary, “Don’t hold onto me.” In chapter 10 of Acts, Peter proclaims that *God does not show favouritism...therefore we are no longer to call anyone impure or unclean...but instead, to offer forgiveness in God’s name...thereby letting go of centuries of oppression in the name of religion.*

Van de Laar then points to *the role of women* in the resurrection story as *another great moment of inclusion* in the history of God’s people. “The message is clear – the resurrection is not just about finding life for after we die. It is *a doorway to life* for all who are denied life through exclusion, oppression or judgment.

The challenge, then, is to embrace this life each day – to learn to become both *those who are enlivened by God’s resurrection life* in the face of the violence, oppression, injustice and death of our world - and to become - *those who bring resurrection to those around us*, through service, welcome, generosity, compassion, solidarity, dignity and love.

As long as the resurrection is only an anomaly in history, it has no real value for us. But, when it becomes a reality that infiltrates our lives and our beings, it transforms us into those whose every thought, word, action, value and attitude celebrate and release life into our world.”

Van de Laar notes that Easter is celebrated the world over for the life that Jesus brings to us all...but that this message of inclusion, liberation and life is often subverted by versions of faith that project Christ’s life only into the heavenly future, and only for a select few. In light of this, he suggests that “it may be appropriate to spend some time in repentance, and in renewing our commitment

to share Christ's inclusive, liberating life with all people. This commitment applies to issues like immigration, poverty, war; people of other cultures, religions, races, genders and sexual orientations." With this in mind, "the message of this year's Easter celebration is this: as long as we deny life to others, we have failed to embrace and experience of resurrection for ourselves."

I think that is the main criticism people have of religion today and Christianity in particular; a message of liberation, love and grace...has all too often been expressed in ways that exclude, judge and confine...which is the exact opposite of giving life.

Recently, this has resulted in a movement that promotes the de-construction of religion. Some proponents would have us do away with the church completely...while others simply want to *let go* of the religious structures that confine the life and teachings of Christ, in order to *liberate* Christ's love and grace.

One such author is Roger Wolsey who has written a book entitled, "Kissing Fish: Christianity for people who don't like Christianity." His writing caught my attention on social media this week, when he was addressing the message of Easter and resurrection. In chapter ten of his book he states:

"Some churches don't preach a literal resurrection. Here's how they celebrate Easter. Jesus returns every time we forgive ourselves and others, love unconditionally, extend mercy, offer compassion, act with loving-kindness, feed the hungry, protect the oppressed, heal the sick, visit the prisoner, speak truth to power, make peace, seek reconciliation, and pursue restorative justice."

His work presents an accessible and engaging introduction to progressive Christianity – a growing movement that reclaims the radical love, inclusivity, and transformative message at the heart of the Gospel. He calls his readers to return to the radical roots of the Christian tradition; exploring a path that embraces mystery, fosters compassion, empowers us to love boldly, while living authentically in today's complex world.

In short, he is calling us to return to the beginning...so we can begin again...and that's a pretty great place to start. Amen