

Sermon: Slow but Sure Text: Luke 24:13-35 April 26, 2020
Rideau Park United Church, Ottawa ON. Rev. Steve Clifton

I was serving three small churches that were an hour and a quarter north of the big town in the region. It was Easter morning and I travelled from one church to another, celebrating Easter in the traditional way. We read the Easter morning story of the empty tomb, of the stone rolled away. We sang "Jesus Christ is Risen Today" with gusto. We celebrated Easter with joy.

And then I drove another hour north to a small church that had no minister. And I celebrated Easter again. Same big songs. Same Easter morning stories. But the joy wasn't there.

In that little church, the happy stories and triumphant music of Easter morning didn't quite ring out as they sometimes do. In my three churches things were ok. People had their struggles as well as their joys, their challenges with their triumphs. But in the little church to the North, things were not ok.

They had suffered a number of communal blows. They had lost their minister under very difficult circumstances. They were questioning their future as a congregation. So, singing "Jesus Christ is Risen today, our triumphant holy day" wasn't quite right. Christ was risen, but no one felt triumphant. In that time and place joy was a bit of a reach.

I thought of that Easter Sunday long ago, as I prepared for this Sunday today. It is the season of Easter. We celebrate the Resurrection of Jesus for 50 days, Easter to Pentecost. Easter is a time for joy. But... in the midst of a pandemic, in a week clouded by the dark events in Nova Scotia, what level of celebration seems right? In the season of Easter 2020 we may not feel triumphant; our Easter joy may be muted.

With Covid 19, some of us may be struggling. For some there is financial worry. For others, isolation is growing difficult. For still more there may be health worries. And there is grief because we have all lost something. Contact with friends, separation from family, the suspension of beloved routines or of anticipated plans... And there is the uncertainty about the future. How, when will our isolation end? When will we feel safe going out again?

Not having concrete things to look forward to is psychologically, spiritually hard for us. As Andrew Sullivan wrote this week: "We human beings... orient ourselves in time, looking forward to the future. When that future has been suspended, humans...flounder. " We struggle when the future is unmarked by anticipated events."

On Easter Sunday we read the stories from Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, stories of an empty tomb. Jesus is risen. Alleluia!

But in all the gospels but Mark, which ends abruptly, the Easter morning story is not the only Easter story the writer tells.

In John for instance, on Easter evening, Jesus friends are not out celebrating. They are locked in a room in Jerusalem, hiding in fear. And a week later they are back in that same room, still fearful and the doors are still locked. Then sometime later they are back in Galilee fishing on the sea, resuming their pre-Easter life like nothing really happened.

In Luke's gospel as we read today, after the Easter morning story of the empty tomb, two of Jesus friends are headed home on the evening of Easter. And they are not skipping and dancing along the road. They are heavy with sadness and doubt.

And in every one of these Easter stories, the ones that don't happen on Easter morning, Jesus comes. The risen Christ appears. In the upper room, behind locked doors, Jesus comes to show that he lives. And a week later he comes again to that same room and shows his friends that he is risen. And then while they were fishing in Galilee, he comes to the beach and makes them breakfast. Again Jesus lives.

And on the road to Emmaus, as we read today, Jesus comes to walk with his worn and weary friends on the road.

So, it seems that there are two kinds of Easter stories. There are the Easter morning, empty tomb stories where women run and tell, and angels proclaim wonderful news

And then there are all those later stories, where followers struggle to fully embrace Easter's joy. And maybe, in this season of Easter, it's the latter stories that speak to where we are. In all these stories Christ is risen. He appears, he speaks, he invites touch, he blesses, he breaks bread...But Jesus followers are not quite ready to celebrate.

In time Easter will transform them. Jesus followers create new, radically inclusive communities of love. They will be courageous and daring in faith. But in these later Easter stories they aren't there yet. And so, it's ok if some of us aren't there yet, in our time and place. It's ok. It's even Biblical.

In the gospel shared today two of Jesus friends walk the road in confusion and despair. It's the evening of Easter Sunday. They are headed to Emmaus, a village on the outskirts of Jerusalem. They share their sadness with the one they meet on the road. He walks with them, opens scripture to them and their hearts are warmed by his word. They invite him further in. They visit with him. Then they recognize its Jesus and are filled with wonder. And their excitement carries them back to Jerusalem. They walked home in a cloud of gloom. They run back in the light of joy.

In the story about the Emmaus road there are two things that we might notice.

First, when the travelers come to their home, Jesus seems to be going further, so they invite the stranger in. They ask Jesus to stay with them. And then their eyes are opened, and they know him.

Might we find a gift in asking Jesus in? We might welcome Jesus into our isolation. We might invite him into our worry, our sadness, our senses of loss. We may make a space for the Holy in our days and then might our eyes be opened to something more?

Second: In the gospel, it reads that it's in the breaking of the bread that Jesus is known. It's in that act that the risen One is recognized, there with them... Sometimes that detail is seen as a reference to Eucharist, to communion, where we break bread and Christ is present. Might it also be that in something as everyday as breaking bread, in something as ordinary as eating a meal which we do three times a day, Jesus may be recognized?

In simple everyday things might we know the truth of God's presence. Might we see God in our isolated pandemic world? Might we glimpse the Holy in our covid 19 routines?

Lots of us are walking. I know I have seen nature drawing close, herons in the Rideau Canal, wild turkeys in the local baseball field, a pair of ospreys nesting in a high tree, then soaring away above the Rideau River. A friend saw a moose in his Orleans' suburb. All over the world as we have gone inside, God's creatures have ventured out. Might we see God in the resilience of God's Creation, in the spring flowers that are poking through the soil, offering new color to the world.

Might we see Christ in the needs of the vulnerable, know God is there in the worries and cares we carry in our hearts.

Might we see the Holy in the kindness of grocery clerks, the courage of health care workers? Might we see Jesus in the faces we view through zoom meetings, in the kind words shared by text or on the phone?

At Easter there is a traditional greeting that is exchanged. One person says "Christ is risen!" and the response is: "He is risen indeed!"

I recently read that in some Orthodox Christian communities, a third phrase is added: *"I can see him in your face."* *Christ is risen. I can see Christ in your face.* Where might we see Jesus in our lives as we live them now?

Easter comes. The stone is rolled away. The tomb is empty. Christ is risen. Jesus lives.

But sometimes, as in some of the Easter stories in the gospels, we are not ready to grasp the good news. Easter sometimes dawns slowly for us. But Easter's dawning is certain.

May our eyes be opened to the presence of the Holy, to the closeness of the love of God, to the face of risen Christ.

Peace and courage. Amen