

A Kind of Resurrection

My process for writing the weekly sermon is usually the same. I read the assigned readings well in advance to narrow them down to one reading on which to focus. Then I re-read the reading for the upcoming Sunday on either Sunday night or Monday morning. I pray, meditate, study and read about the writing so when I sit down on Thursday to sketch the outline I have a fairly good idea where to focus and highlight. Come Saturday afternoon I sit down, re-read the reading, pray for a few minutes and then start fleshing out the outline.

Not this week.

I've been intentional in reflecting daily on the readings for Sunday. Come Thursday I wasn't in the right headspace to draw and outline. I didn't worry too much about it because it's Easter Sunday. I've been preaching Easter Sunday and versions of the resurrection for more than a decade. This should be a piece of cake.

Except it wasn't.

You know that Holy Week is my favourite week of the Liturgical Year. It is when the deep dive taken during Lent comes together as we take the walk through the last days of Jesus earthly ministry. Working on the liturgies for Holy Week is something I look forward to...tweaking them every year for the situation we find ourselves in. This year I introduced two brand new services from Iona that were quite well received. I tweaked three other services. Re-arranged the Cedar "Palm" Sunday liturgy. And then started on the service for today.

Except it wouldn't come together...something was missing.

Traditionally, during Holy Week I am grasped by the impulse to take on a "project" of some description...re-organizing the office, decluttering my home, cleaning out my car. This year I decided to do a deep clean of my flat. I've got about four more hours left to do. I ran out of steam yesterday.

I'm struggling this year.

You know my best friend and partner David Fuller died suddenly in November. He and I shared a love of many things, one of which was Holy Week. We would talk about new hymns, which readings we were using, how we would incorporate local traditions and new scholarship, etc. It was never about the number of people attending; rather, it was about reaching those who did attend. And without fail, every year, with God's help, we reached those souls who attended. And in doing so, we were changed as priests in the Church; as children of God; and as servants of Jesus.

The opening slide shows us a beautiful depiction of Mary of Magdala, Mary the Mother of James and Salome as they are on their way to finish preparing Jesus' body for burial. They are all wearing veils and there is a jar of oil for cleaning as well as a butterfly, which symbolises new life. The Chinese artist He Qi calls this piece "Women Arriving at the Tomb".

These three women would have been hurrying as the sun rose to complete what was started three days previously. They had been present as Jesus, their friend and teacher, had been stripped, whipped, mocked and crucified. His disciples were scattered in abject terror, and it was left to them to properly prepare him.

Except there wasn't enough time.

By the time Jesus had died on the cross, the sun was beginning to set, so his body was hurriedly prepared to be placed in a new tomb, given by Joseph of Arimathea, using spices and oils brought by Nicodemus. He needed to be off the cross and in the tomb before sunset, because it was not only the Sabbath, but the festival of the Passover.

I wonder what those three women did while they were waiting for the Passover feast to finish so they could return and properly prepare their friend for the ritual burial he deserved, not the hurried ritual he had received? Did they find it difficult to concentrate on their chores? Did they find themselves in a bad mood? Or did they wander about, not knowing what they were doing, feeling as though they were in a bit of a daze?

We'll never know.

So, the time comes for them to go to the tomb, and they are so overcome with emotion, they haven't considered how they are going to move the heavy stone that is rolled to seal the tomb. It's only when they are nearly there that they ask each other "Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?" (Mark 16.3, NRSV). And as they reach the tomb they realise the stone has been moved. Who or what has moved the stone? There's no time to be frightened. They need to complete the task they started on that fateful Friday.

Except, he's not there.

As they bend over to enter the tomb they see, what is described as "a young man" who was most likely an angel. For starters, he begins with the most angelic of sayings "Don't be alarmed". Yet, they are incredibly alarmed. Who is this man in the tomb? Why does he know where Jesus is? Nothing looks the way it is supposed to, and yet, nothing has been as it should be for three very long days. What on earth is going on? The angel tells them, "Do not be alarmed; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here." (Mark 16.6, NRSV) He tells them that Jesus has gone ahead of them to Galilee, and they will see him there, but first they are to tell Peter and the disciples what they have seen. They are also sternly warned not to tell anyone else what they have heard and seen.

And in true angelic fashion, the three women are terrified, despite the angel's admonition not to be alarmed. They flee the tomb in "terror and amazement" (Mark 16.8, NRSV) and do not tell anyone else.

Can anyone relate? I certainly can.

This liturgical time last year, we had just entered the pandemic lock-down imagining it would be a couple of weeks, a month at the most. Then it was going to be at least summer, and then the fall. We were able to partially re-open in September but returned to lock-down before Christmas. Surely after Christmas things will have settled down enough that we can re-open with COVID restrictions in place, right?

Nope, not even a little bit.

So, we did our best to reach out through email, phone calls, porch drops and pastoral visits. We listen to Premier Horgan and Dr. Henry. We pray to God, imploring the Holy Spirit to give us strength and Jesus to show us patience.

We continue to wait as vaccines are developed and a vaccination plan is set in place. We are told we can gather for outdoor Worship and a limited number of small in-person Church gatherings. And as we are putting plans in place for this, we are rolled back again.

Again.

Yes, Jesus the Christ was crucified, died, rose and appeared again. That happened more than 2,020 years ago. And still, we wait for his return.

Yes, we just walked together through Holy Week. From the Protest March last Sunday, Stations of the Cross on Monday, Service of Servitude on Tuesday, Service of Unyielding Love on Wednesday, Hand-Washing on Thursday, Meditations on the Cross on Friday, Service of Lament yesterday and now the Day of Resurrection today.

This year doesn't feel joyous to me. I am in the place where I struggle to make plans or hope for anything in the future. I feel like those women who had a duty to perform and weren't able to do so, as the one they were going to prepare, was gone.

At Christ Church, the bare cross has been placed in repose across the entrance to the altar, as we are not yet permitted to share in the Eucharist in person, or online. The altar is in a liminal state of Good Friday.

And yet...

And yet, today is Easter Day - the Day of the Resurrection and it is the First Sunday so we WILL share in Communion together, both online and, for those who wish to do so, from your vehicles, with COVID protocols in place.

While we may feel that we are in a liminal state of Good Friday, we are, in fact, living in a liminal time of Holy Saturday.

We know that death is not the end.

We know that Jesus has been Resurrected and will return to earth again.

And yet, for now, we wait.

We wait for Jesus to return.

We wait for our beloved buildings to re-open.

We wait to receive our first or second doses of the vaccine.

We wait to see, touch and hug our families and closest friends.

We wait...

And yet...

Amen.

Easter Sunday Sermon

4 April 2021

Mark 16.1-8

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