

Bringing New Life

Easter Sunday, April 9, 2023

by Intern Pastor Jory Mickelson

Good morning! GOOD MORNING! I am so happy for all of us to be together today. So happy to have you here, to have us all here sharing our lives, our time, and our presence with one another this morning. Welcome to those of you who are new or newish. Welcome to those of you who have been here a long time and a really special welcome to those of you who were dragged here by family or friends or even by your own sense of guilt. I have been where you are and I know this can sometimes be an uncomfortable space. I want you to know you are welcome wherever you are coming from today. Welcome also to those watching online. It is so good to be able to be in this place with you.

Most of us don't end up in the Emergency Department because we are in really good health. Although you probably know someone in your life who will say just that. After getting a ride in an ambulance to the hospital, with doctors and nurses crowded around the person will say, "I don't even know why I am here." But most of us know if we need serious medical attention, we head to the hospital. In the same way many people suffering from addiction don't end up in a 12 Step recovery meetings because their life is going great. In my 28 years of recovery, I don't remember a single person coming into those rooms saying, "My life is going so well, I figured I would just stop in and help you poor alcoholics." It's true! But how many of us have ever thought about Jesus and his ministry like this?

By earthly standards. By the expectations of Jesus' followers, after the parade into the city of Jerusalem, the crowds shouting Hosannah. After the authorities took Jesus away. After the trials, the beatings, the torture and the state sponsored execution of Jesus. No one thought Jesus and his ministry was a success. The religious leaders of Jesus' time celebrated his failure. The governmental powers were relieved that the Jesus problem was finally dealt with.

By our standards, Jesus on Good Friday was a failure. On Saturday when Jesus lay in the tomb people mourned him. Others wanted to forget about it all as quickly as possible. No one wanted to be handed over to the authorities in association with Jesus after what they just saw happen. Not even his disciples. The same is true for us too; no one likes to get too close to failure. We are afraid it might rub off on us. Today we are ready to celebrate Easter and happily forget all about the rest. We say, give me the Resurrection and the Life. He is risen indeed alleluia! And this is good. Easter is a joyous celebration!

But what happens after Easter Sunday? What happens after the Easter baskets are dug through and meal with our friends and family is over? What happens after the leftover ham is either eaten or tucked away in the freezer? Where does Jesus go after the Sunday service? What happens to the Risen One after the lights are turned off, the heat turned down, and the church doors are locked? Where is Christ in the world? Where is Christianity outside of these walls the rest of the week?

So much of what gets called “Christianity” today in the world is actually bullying, overly simplistic, and wrongly used for political and economic motives. The people and institutions who hijack Christianity make it increasingly difficult for the world to see real Christian ideals and values that remind us we and creation are sacred—God made and therefore good—and that our dealings with one another should reflect this truth.

It's no wonder that people and the world thinks Christianity is hypocritical and judgmental. It is all they can see and hear in the media. The most strident voices, the most attention-seeking and attention-grabbing voices take up all the room.

Walter Bruggeman, a great theologian, claims our faith has the ability to cut through both numbness and denial. Our faith quite literally cuts through death and the tomb in Jesus Christ. So where is that power today? Where is it?

It isn't in the political arena or in the mouths of the politicians on both sides of the aisle.

It isn't in the spectacles and the scandals of the churches we see in the news.

It isn't in our school board or city council meetings when people scream at one another, calling each other terrible names.

It certainly isn't in the willful pollution and degradation of the environment and it not in the hoarding of wealth and resources by a few individuals and corporations.

So where is it? Where is that power that can cut through the world's numbness and denial?

Where is God anyway?

More and more the world around us can feel like the tomb. Or an empty tomb, hollow of God's presence. The world can feel more like the absence of God than the presence of the Risen Christ. So where is God?

God won't be found taking sides for you or the other side in a heated argument. As it says in Acts today, God shows no partiality—Jesus is Lord of all. Not Lord of the Republican party. Not Lord of the Democratic party. Not even Lord of the Vista Drive Neighborhood Association. But Lord of all. Jesus is Lord of all. If Jesus isn't the Lord of all than he is the Lord of none. Jesus died for all of us or he died for no one.

As Lutherans we know that scripture is never to be used as a weapon against other people. We don't use the Word of God to win an argument. As Lutherans we believe scripture is the Living Word. A living word, a lifegiving word. A word alive in the world because Jesus is always about bringing new life. New life, not death and destruction. New life, not division or oppression. New life, which we might also call hope. This is why we can proclaim with the psalmist today I shall not die, but live and declare the works of the Lord!

A church, just like any town or city, and state or country is made up of people. And each of these people—you and I—and you—and you—all have our own hopes and aspirations, as well as our own viewpoints, our own problems. Each person here today is contributing something uniquely your own to this gathering. Each person here today is contributing something no one else can to your families and your communities—because each of us, you and you and Pr. Russ and you are

unique, wonderful, difficult, cranky, beautiful, clumsy, sinning yet still holy creations of a Loving Creator. And what God creates, God declares good.

So where is Christ, who we celebrate today as rising from the dead? Where are we to see Jesus in the world today if not in our media, our politics, and our crises? If Jesus is always about bringing new life, where are the signs of life today—beyond the Easter lilies in the sanctuary?

God's new life is rising up quietly all over the world, maybe so slowly we don't even notice it. Like small blades of green grass or budding leaves that we don't really notice until everything around us seems to be green and full of life. The Holy Spirit is renewing us and the world in ways we may not realize surrounded by all the noise, distraction, fighting and injustice going on around us.

Martin Luther says, and I am paraphrasing here: "Serve one another through love, comfort the afflicted, support the weak, help your neighbor in all ways to bear infirmity, endure trouble, and their burdens in life. The world, and our own reason says these things are of no value, Luther says. But indeed, such things are of the most value.

Luther goes on to say serving God is nothing else than to serve our neighbors, doing good to others in love. It doesn't matter who we are helping—our families, friends, small children, service workers and especially our enemies and those we disagree with. Luther tells us if we do not find ourselves among the needy and the poor, where scripture shows Jesus during his ministry on earth, then we know there is something off with our faith. That we are missing the mark. That we have strayed from Christianity's real values.

If our faith isn't helping us to bring new life into the world. If our faith isn't motivating us help our neighbors and to love and serve those we disagree with and are different from us, then it really isn't from God. As the much loved Mr. Rogers would say, "Look for the helpers. You will always find people who are helping." In the quiet. In the background. Probably not drawing attention to themselves, and yet they are there. Giving a hug. Sharing a meal. Mending something or mending someone that is broken. Allowing God's love to come back into the world through love and service to others.

There are so many ways that the community of Christ Lutheran Church is reaching out in love and service to the community and so many ways that the individuals with us here today are reaching out in their own lives into their neighborhoods and communities, in love and service to help others.

But we don't do these things because we fear punishment from God. We don't do these things to make up for our sins. We don't do any good deed as Lutherans because we think it will get us points with God or get us closer to heaven. As Lutherans we confess and believe that Jesus Christ through his death and resurrection has already saved us from sin and death. As Lutherans we believe we are already saved. And it is because of this miracle, because of the cross and an empty tomb, because of this great gift, we are freed up to turn to our neighbors and all of creation in love and service. Love and service to others. Love and service to our communities. Love and

service to our families. To love and serve one another by the great love we have been shown by God through Jesus Christ. That is what we are celebrating here today, on Easter Sunday.

What good news! What joyful news this is for us and the whole world. Jesus Christ is risen from the dead and we too share in that new life. We, each day, are invited to walk into that new life, to enter into God's Kingdom here and now. To turn to the world in love and service because of that goodness. To continue to help bring God's love, God's peace, and God's power to earth.

This is the good news I have heard this week and bring to you this Easter Sunday!