

Low Sunday 28th April 2019 ChCh-St. Luke's

Readings: Acts 5:27-32, Rev.1:4-8, John 20:19-31

Reflection:

"The strife is o'er, the battle done, the victory of life is won; the song of triumph has begun.
Alleluia!"

So begins a well-known Easter hymn. Interesting words to consider having just marked another ANZAC remembrance - the horror and futility of war and our continued prayerful longing for peace. Challenging words as we live with the 'new normal' of armed police outside al Noor mosque in the aftermath of terrorism in our city and the approach of Ramadan; and as we lament and grieve the recent Isis attacks in Sri Lanka. Is this what 'Low Sunday' is all about? Well, no. Low Sunday is so called simply because nothing can quite match the heights of last week's Easter celebration – the mystery, joy and truth of resurrection:

"The strife is o'er, the battle done, the victory of life is won; the song of triumph has begun.
Alleluia!"

Perhaps you could proclaim these words with confidence; you know in the very depths of your being that it is true. If so, give thanks! You're very fortunate. But perhaps you would find this hard or impossible to proclaim, let alone believe. It may sound great, but life still feels full of strife. Triumph isn't how you describe reality. Death and cruelty, terror, pain, environmental degradation, sickness and sadness remain in the world and weigh on your heart. Well you're in good company -

Jesus' friends didn't wake up singing alleluias. They were confused not confident, shattered not excited, looking straight at death, not imagining something better. They didn't recognize Jesus when he appeared. Mary thought Jesus was a gardener. On the road to Emmaus, he seemed a clueless stranger. While fishing, the disciples didn't realize that it was Jesus beckoning to them on the beach.

They were afraid. That's the most frequent description at the first Easter: FEAR. The doors are locked for fear of the Jews — and much more.

Fear along with the grief and trauma of being disoriented and overwhelmed by loss, the shattered assumptions, hopes and dreams, and not knowing what will happen next. Jesus' friends are plunged headlong into the reality of death, loss and grief. Isn't that a familiar place? The crushing, gut-wrenching agony of loss...or perhaps even the FEAR of loss? A time when you've had to lock the doors of your heart to protect yourself from further pain - even the bitter-sweet pain of Love?

Sometimes Love isn't easy to accept. When we've been betrayed, had our trust shattered, when the vulnerability of opening ourselves one more time is just too risky. Resurrection is not easy to accept. Earlier that day, Mary Magdalene had gone to the other disciples and said: "I have seen the Lord." Hearing the news wasn't enough. They needed to be shown, not just told.

When it was evening, Jesus came through the locked door, stood among his friends and said: "Peace be with you." Both the appearance and words are consoling, encouraging and graced gifts. My peace, my wholeness, my shalom is yours. Fear, grief and denial don't matter. I love you. Peace.

On Good Friday afternoon when I visited al Noor mosque, there were no locked doors, nor locked hearts. The young Somali woman whose three-year-old brother had been shot on March 15th, showed me through the mosque – where her brother had died, where others had tried in vain to escape, she showed me the bullet-wounded walls and makeshift floor coverings still awaiting new carpet. And my grieving Somali sister physically touched my heart as we shared – and she named me as a soul-sister. There were no locked doors, the wounds were there to be seen and touched, and the words spoken were “Peace” “Salaam alaikum sister.” Is this not resurrection?

‘After he said this, Jesus showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord.’ Jesus shows his wounds. Jesus is not simply alive, not simply God. Jesus is both human and divine, crucified... and risen. By these wounds, seeing and touching these wounds, we are healed. (And when we allow trusted others to see and touch our wounds, healing begins, resurrection happens.)

But Thomas didn’t see the wounds. Thomas wasn’t there. Where was he, I wonder? Separated, excluded, entombed in his own grief? How would he have felt on hearing the others’ seemingly incredulous claim – “We have seen the Lord!” Oh, what aching, longing to believe...oh, what fear in disbelieving! Hearing just wasn’t enough. The group didn’t believe what Mary said. Thomas didn’t believe what the group said. Each needed an experience of the risen Christ in person, in flesh – to see, to touch. But not just that. Thomas also needed to be seen, to be named, to be met, even in his disbelief and utter vulnerability.

So dear, blessed Thomas asks, on behalf of all of us, for more: “Unless I put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe.” And Jesus comes – a week must have felt like eternity - and offers what Thomas needs, invites him to touch the wounds. Touching wounds changes Thomas, and he proclaims: “My Lord and my God.”

Resurrection doesn’t come as we expect. Resurrection comes amid tears in locked rooms, to people face-first with death. In our own losses and griefs, we may believe God is with us, that resurrection is true. But we may not feel it. If you’re afraid or grieving, listen to the good news. You are not alone. That’s how the first Easter was too. Jesus will come to you, just as you are.

Like Thomas, speak your truth. Pray your need for first-hand experience, for touch. Name what gets in the way. Imagine what more, Thomas and the others said together in that locked room. Like them, express and be specific about your grief, your loss, and your limitation to belief.

Like Thomas, speak your truth to - and stay in - community. Don’t go off alone. We all need a trusted companion on our resurrection journeys. Thomas told his companions: this won’t work for me; I need more. Then he waited, and they waited with him ... at least another week... which must have felt like eternity. If you are waiting for new life, tell a trusted companion or group your experience and allow them to wait with you. Together with friends, wait and weep to witness the resurrected Christ.

When Jesus comes—and he will come—Jesus looks with love, seeing and knowing what we lack, how we doubt, what we fear. “Peace be with you,” he says. “Put your hand in my side.” Consolation, love and surprising, graphic touch: notice the echo of Holy Week. Remember Jesus

reassuring his frightened followers during that last great conversation on Maundy Thursday. Jesus washed each of their feet and then said: "Love one another as I have loved you."

Jesus demonstrated and instructed love with touch. Jesus said: "I'm not your master. I'm your friend. You all be friends." Love by washing feet. First, let yourself be loved. Like Thomas, show your feet, your need, your imperfection, your hopes and dreams, doubts and grief. Be real, be known. Show your wounds. Let yourself be washed, be listened to, be loved.

Having received, then take the basin and towel yourself. Wait with those who weep. Wash feet. Witness and touch wounds tenderly. Put your hand in her side. Listen to your companion's pain, doubt and fear. Speak consolation, encouragement and grace: 'Peace be with you'

Slowly, surprisingly, not as expected, we will be shown Love come alive. Slowly, surprisingly, not as expected, we will touch and begin to sing: Alleluia! Amen.

Alleluia! Christ is Risen!

Helen Roud