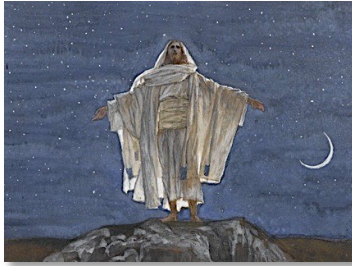


“What’s Next: Recognizing Jesus’ Presence”

April 16, 2023

Rev. Ann Eichhorn



Jesus Goes Up Alone onto a Mountain to Pray
James Tissot

Readings

Mark 16:5-8

And entering the tomb, they saw a young man sitting on the right side, dressed in a white robe; and they were amazed. And he said to them, “Do not be amazed; you seek Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has risen, he is not here; see the place where they laid him. But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going before you to Galilee; there you will see him, as he told you.” And they went out and fled from the tomb, for trembling and astonishment had come upon them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.

Blessing

Beth Richardson

Bless this day

When light returns,

Love astounds,

Life prevails.

Bless the grieving,

The lonely,

The hungry.

Hope is reborn.

Bless the young ones

And the old.

Bless the enemies

And those despised.

Bless this world,

Gripped by violence.

Peace returns.

God makes a way

Where there was no way.

Christ has risen.

Alleluia.

In this Protestant United Church of Christ, Community Congregational Church, we try to understand and relate our biblical and sacred heritage to our lives today. There is no doubt we celebrated something here last Sunday! Whether we believe in the body of Christ being physically resurrected, or the presence of Jesus born in each of us, or have had mystical otherworldly sightings, as a people of faith we can today acknowledge the lesson of which the Easter event reminds us each year, which is that we are, through Jesus' example, a new people, new community today. The old is dying or going away; something else is growing; love conquers hate; the new is rising. We are in fact at the first Sunday after Easter, looking at the "what's next?".

We are going to take a look at what is in the fifty liturgical days between Easter and Pentecost, the immediate time after the death of Jesus. This morning I pull from the good words of several authors to help us understand what happened in Jesus's tomb. In Mark Nepo's book *Awakening*, Parker Palmer says, "the Spiritual life is about becoming more at home in your own skin." He is talking about learning that light, air, and love are our home.

What the women at the empty tomb experienced was not only fear and disbelief, it was the end of all the hopes and dreams they had held for the future. The encounter at the empty tomb was necessary for them to shed the past as they had understood it, because it was no longer alive. It meant they had to shed what had been. That shedding included a dead way of thinking, seeing, relating, believing and experiencing. They were at a moment which was inviting them to open to self-transformation. And they were afraid; they ran off. To their credit, further texts tell us that along with the disciples and hundreds of others, they eventually began to understand that the presence of Jesus was within each of them as an ongoing example of how to be in touch with God's presence and how to strive to live a better life – a life of light and love. *They* became the resurrected, as followers of a new way. Clarence Jordan said it this way: "The crowning evidence that Jesus was alive was not a vacant grave, but a spirit-filled fellowship. Not a rolled-away stone, but a carried-away church." Author Blumhardt goes on:

It is not enough to celebrate Easter and say "Christ is risen." It is useless to proclaim this unless at the same time we can say that we have also risen, that we have received something from heaven. Christ's future is not one single point in an absolute remoteness for which we are to wait. It is now, or it is not at all.

God is about renewal. New possibilities can dawn on us, and the more we sense these new possibilities, the more we can look for higher and greater things here on earth. We can bring hope into everything – into our daily lives, into everything at which we work, and into anything that we touch. Author Mark Nepo helps us with this hard to understand concept.

From the beginning, the key to renewal has been the casting off of old skin. What does this mean? Not that we can live forever, but that the way to stay closest to the pulse of life, the way to stay in the presence of that divine reality which informs everything is to be willing to change. To change whatever has ceased to function within us. To shed whatever we are carrying that is no longer alive. To cast off our dead skin because dead skin can't feel. Dead eyes can't see. Dead ears can't hear. And without feeling there is no chance of wholeness.

He goes on:

Living is not easy, and living openly is both wonderous and dangerous. And shedding, no matter how useful or inevitable, always has a pain of its own. So it is not surprising that there are many feelings peculiar to human beings that prevent us from shedding what has ceased to work, including fear, pride, nostalgia, a comfort in the familiar, and a want to please those we love. When we cease to surface our most sensitive skin simply to avoid conflict with others, we remove ourselves from all that is true.

A poem of Jan Richardson says it this way:

In the leaving, in the letting go, let there be this to hold onto at the last: the enduring of love, the persisting of hope, the remembering of joy, the offering of gratitude, the receiving of grace, the blessing of peace.

Nepo offers us “mana” as a Polynesian word to describe an extraordinary power or force residing in a person. Carl Jung later defined it as “the unconscious influence of one being on another.” What Jung speaks to is the fact that the energy of being real has more power than outright persuasion, debate, or force of will. He suggests that being who we are always releases an extraordinary power that, without intent or design, affects the people who come in contact with such realness. In this way, without any intent to shape others, we simply have to be authentic, and a sense of mana, of spiritual light and warmth, will emanate from our very souls, causing others to grow-not toward us, but toward the light that moves through us. In this way, by being who we are, we not only experience life in all its vitality, but quite innocently and without design, we help others be more thoroughly themselves. In being real, in staying devoted to this energy of realness, we help each other grow toward the one vital light. We can practice this turn toward the light and being real on a daily basis, by saying what we really feel, whether that is sad, scared, mad, happy, or discouraged, by staying in touch with our authentic selves.

Shedding what is dead, getting in touch with how we can be real, acknowledging the presence of the spiritual DNA of love in us and around us – what do we do with any of that? David Whyte in his book *Consolations*, reminds us that love is the conversation between the possible and how we shape it in the real world and that “[our] work is the inside made into the outside [in which we live].”

Here at CCC, this little church of believers on the hill, what is our community about? First, we are *not* a clique, club, sect, or exclusive privileged group of people. We are more like a family of equals, working together to make life better for others. We are real in our welcomes, real in our empathy, real in our compassion, real in our relationships, real in our hopes, dreams, and prayers. We are real in our reaching out to address the hate, violence, and apathy that seeks to engulf us every day. We seek to be open to hope, the good, the beautiful, what astonishes us (for astonishment opens a portal to our hearts). One of our Stone Soup participants last week spoke of the move away from the rational to feelings within us.

I think there were a couple of things that happened this week in our political world that speak of small new beginnings, renewal of values that matter, and people being real with their actions. I name the two black Tennessee legislators Justin Jones and Justin Pearson who, for speaking out against gun violence and the continued murder of innocent children, youth and adults, were charged with an offence that

cost them their elected legislative positions. The outcry of their communities, of people of faith, people calling for justice, was immediate and successful for the moment in getting these men back into their rightful seats in the legislative body. If you heard any of the interviews with either of these two remarkable twenty-seven-year-old men, you heard men who are grounded in their faith and who know what justice is all about. They have heard the anguish of their neighbors living in poverty, fear, and deprivation. They know well the journey and teachings of Jesus, Martin Luther King, and Mahatma Gandhi about non-violent revolts and revolutionary beginnings. No one knows where these events in Tennessee will go next, but as a people of faith, we can be hopeful, supportive, attentive, and prayerful for continued success towards justice and the end to violence.

Another not so visible public picture is of our president in Ireland this past week to celebrate peace with the people in a land where for so long there was no peace. President Biden lifted up to our attention an example of people learning how to live in harmony with one another, an example of how the peace of God can prevail when people seek it out.

I will end with the words of another long-gone German author, Eberhard Arnold, long deceased.

The deepest mystery of the early church lies in the very presence of the risen Christ himself, who makes his dwelling in each person's heart and reveals the power of his presence. Fellowship in his Word meant life-creating and life-shaping power. It meant the (relationship) of being truly bound together in prayer and the breaking of bread, of becoming a genuine community, embracing the whole of life. Everything depends on seeing the mystery of the risen Christ as unconditional love. There is only one thing that knows no conditions: that is love. And it is through the experience of God's love in Jesus Christ that love is put into practice by us.

Beloved community, let's be real and see how far we can spread the love.

Amen

