

Faith Mennonite Church
April 16, 2017 ~ Easter
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Responding to Resurrection
Luke 24:1-16

Christ is risen! (Christ is risen indeed!)

The church has been repeating this affirmation for over 2000 years! Each year we retell the story of the resurrection, and each year we struggle to comprehend how Jesus' followers experienced and responded to this new reality. We also struggle to understand the meaning of resurrection today. Perhaps the two times aren't as distant as they would seem. The very grammar of Luke's resurrection account suggests this is not a usual, predictable story. The very first word is "but," and that word appears six more times in the 16 verses that Noelle read.

What's more, Luke recounts three distinct responses to the resurrection. The women are first to learn the news because they go to the tomb at first light to dutifully care for Jesus' body. That was women's work... washing bodies, at birth and at death. And all too often those two events happened at the same time. Women died in childbirth, tended by women who loved them. Infants died in childbirth, tended by women who loved them. Women knew about death. They knew what to do about death: wash the body, apply spices, handle with loving care. Perhaps it takes that intimate relationship with death to be open to the possibility of new life.

The women readily accepted the words of the angels: "He is not here, but has risen. Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, that the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners, and be crucified, and on the third day rise again." Then they remembered...and they returned to their community and they retold what they had just experienced. It's not over! Jesus is still with us! His work among us continues! End of first response.

The second response isn't so positive. The disciples and others write off the women's story...women get emotional, you know. The disciples didn't show any curiosity or ask questions of clarification. They simply said it seems like an idle tale. All except for Peter. Peter was curious. He trusted the women's story enough to go to the tomb. He found the empty tomb, but saw no vision of angels. He was amazed, but he kept it to himself and went home. For once, Peter seems to be left speechless. For once, he doesn't jump to connect all the dots. Peter seems to need time, time alone, to absorb what is happening.

We can imagine that all of Jesus' followers, especially those who had followed closely or at a distance as he was on trial, being taunted and whipped, and finally nailed to a cross—all of these followers were experiencing what we now refer to as trauma. Remember, these were village folk from the Galilean countryside, who had followed Jesus to Jerusalem. They knew Jerusalem the way some of us know Chicago—we know the points of interest, the Art Institute, Millennium Park, the homes of a friend or two, or perhaps a hotel. Their point of interest, of course, was the temple. They no doubt stayed with extended family or friends when they came for Passover or other holidays. But they didn't know all the back streets. They probably didn't know how to blend with the crowd when Roman soldiers came around the corner. They were probably always a bit on edge. And this time, the conflict and fear were so thick. Jesus, their Jesus, the humble leader who had breathed into them life and meaning and purpose and belonging, the one who had announced the kingdom of God among them, was hung up to die on a cross. Crucifixion was Rome's way to instill fear and impose control. No matter how much Jesus had talked about willingly giving his life, in the moment of his death, Rome's game plan won the day. It created the intended trauma.

Peter, no doubt, experienced it more deeply than anyone else. He had the added layer of pain of having denied knowing Jesus at the point when Jesus was most vulnerable and alone. And he didn't just do it once, but three times in a single evening. Peter had boldly declared his allegiance only a day before,

telling Jesus that he would go with him to the end, to prison, and even die with him. Jesus had warned that it wouldn't be that easy and, of course, it wasn't.

In some ways, it's amazing that Peter was even with the other disciples. It would have been so easy for him to slink away, crawl into bed and stay there indefinitely. But he didn't. He stayed with the group. And when the women came and said the tomb was empty, that Jesus was risen, Peter went to see for himself. And he was amazed. Fifty days later, on the Feast of Pentecost, Peter would preach a powerful sermon in which he would declare that "Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with deeds of power, wonders, and signs that God did through him among you [...] this man, handed over to you according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of those outside the law. But God raised him up, having freed him from death because it was impossible for him to be held in its power" (Acts 2:24).

Peter clearly found healing and transformation between the day of Resurrection and Pentecost! It wasn't immediate. Healing seldom is. It took time. It took a moment of amazement and then going home, alone, to reflect, to recall what the women said to remember, to do just that and begin to piece it all together again. End of second response.

Finally, the third response: the two disciples walking to Emmaus. We usually read this as a separate story, and we will hear the full story next Sunday. But I like that our reading this morning includes the disciples on the road as a third response to the resurrection. Skipping ahead we find that they had heard the women's news before they left Jerusalem. It seems it would have been tempting to stay close to the group, hoping that Jesus would come and pay a visit, verifying the women's story. But maybe they were part of the "group think" that it was all an idle tale.

So why not head home? Why not get away from the city and put some distance between themselves and that horrible Friday event. These two seemed to be into "talk therapy." As they walked they rehashed the events of the past week. We're learning now that simply retelling a story can have its own retraumatizing effect. It can hold us in the pain, hold us in the moment of crisis. And that seems to be what was happening with these two because when Jesus appears and walks with them they do not recognize him. They simply go on talking, amazed that he hasn't heard about what has happened. End of third response.

An initial reading of this text, especially by women, can make us take sides and say, "See—the women got it right! They did what the angels said." But there is truth and meaning in each of these responses. As with living, and dying, there is never one right way. During his ministry Jesus met people where they were in the moment. He didn't ask for lengthy life histories or give a theological quiz before he touched and healed. He didn't expel any of his disciples, not even the one who would betray him, when it was clear they weren't always understanding who he was and what his mission was about. Why would he be different in his resurrection? Would the Risen Christ not be present with each person or group as they struggled to understand the new era that was unfolding?

The Risen Christ is still standing among the faithful, today, as we make sense of the chaos of our world...of chemical warfare and terror that is amazingly resistant to even the mother of all bombs...of violence in the Congo that recently claimed the life of MJ Sharp and his colleagues, and now has sent 5,000 Congolese Mennonites into hiding as violence continues there...of the threat of famine in parts of Africa...of the undocumented immigrant community in this country who lives in fear of deportation and the millions of families who have already been separated by deportation, including Mennonite pastor Max Villatoro from Iowa City...of the scourge of guns in our country and the way a life can be taken so quickly...

How do I know that the Risen Christ is among us when so much is wrong in the world? Because each of you are here. Some of you are ready, like the women from the tomb, to speak of all you have experienced. Some of you, like Peter, are experiencing something new at this very moment, but don't yet have words to explain your amazement. Some of you are walking and talking, not sure how to put it all together, not yet fully recognizing Jesus, but you're here anyway. And you care about the chaos in our world, yet don't turn your eyes away from it. You don't give up and lose hope. Many of you witness, in

your clients, patients, co-workers, fellow students, and neighbors, the suffering and chaos of others, and you recognize the face of Christ in that suffering.

And one of you, Paula, and your incredible family, show us the beauty of life, of faith, of determination as you walk through the valley of the shadow of death. We have had no better testimony to the resurrection than your presence here, Sunday after Sunday, giving thanks for each day you are given, giving thanks for the support of this community, giving thanks to God, the giver of life, for your family and the blessings you have known.

Resurrection reminds us that creation emerged from darkness and void, that the emptiness of a tomb like the hiddenness of a bulb, signals new life. Resurrection is God's yes to life, to the self-emptying, self-giving life of Jesus as he faced and took on himself the sin of the world. Christ is risen and goes before us, making the darkness joyful. Let us follow the risen Christ!