

Easter Sunday: I know you are looking ...
Sunday 12th April 2020

St. John's Presbyterian, Mt. Roskill
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Readings: Psalm 114, Exodus 14:10-31, 15:20-21, Matthew 28:1-10, Romans 6:3-11

Jesus rose on Easter Sunday. It's a simple thing to say, to state, but there is no more significant even in all of human history. The resurrection is central, critical, to the Christian faith. In fact, the apostle Paul, writing to the Corinthians stated, **"... if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins. Then those also who have fallen asleep (that is, who have died) in Christ are lost. If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied. But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the first-fruits of those who have fallen asleep."** Without the resurrection Christianity is no different to any other socio-logical control system of the masses be it religious, political or humanitarian. The resurrection sets Jesus and Christianity apart from every other claim in this world. Why? Because Jesus overcoming death is the one thing that humanity, the world, has never been able to achieve. We have never been able to stop the rot and decay, the continuous breaking down, that has been a part of the physical order since the Fall. These pathogens, these viruses we face at the moment, what are they? They are infectious micro-organisms that produce toxins, enter tissue, colonize it, hijacking nutrients, immunosuppressing the host so they can feed and reproduce and kill. In other words, they do nothing good. Like demons their only goal is to wreck and destroy, recreating more of their own evil, sucking out life until it is gone. Jesus came to do the exact opposite. Jesus said, **"The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full."** But what hope of life would that be if the author of that life itself was dead Himself? It would be futile. Jesus didn't avoid death, He embraced what he had to do, suffered, died, overcame death and rose to life. He didn't avoid it He conquered it in a way no one had ever done before. Jesus is the first to do so, the first of many who put their faith in Him. To those who follow Jesus He promises the same overcoming power and life, not just in the next but in this world as well. And please do note here: this is not a power that avoids trouble, difficulty and suffering but one that engages with it and comes through. Just as we have to do.

This morning our first reading takes us back to the Hebrew people coming out of Egypt. Having escaped Egyptian tyranny and captivity, after God sent the plagues upon Egypt, the Hebrews now found themselves having to escape the Egyptians a second time. Once the plagues had stopped and things started to return to normal the Egyptians began to question themselves: why did we let the Hebrews go? They were the slaves, the workers, those who made the economy function. How quickly humanity forgets the lessons of pain – that's why we still have so much warfare around the world, why human influenced climatic change continues apace, why we have so little defence in the face of a world-wide pandemic. We have our lessons but once life starts to get comfortable, we revert to our old selves. We have had wars, we see the increasing pace of climatic change, we have seen pandemics but we don't change until we are forced to, even if it is for our own good. Just look at the world leaders around the world who have refused to act on COVID-19 in anything like a timely manner. Their nations will pay the penalty in lives lost. Some are only moved, as Pharaoh was, when tragedy strikes them personally. Egypt endured the plagues but only when death occurred did Pharaoh finally respond in reluctant obedience to God. Archaeologists are all but certain that Rameses

It was the Pharaoh who dealt so cruelty with the Hebrew people and who lost his first son in the final plague. Once the period of mourning his son was over Rameses II's anger grew with Egyptian peoples' to public acclaim he personally took the army to chase down the Hebrews and drag them back to slavery. The response of the Hebrew people when they saw the charging Egyptian army is understandable. Again, that frailty in human nature was exposed. Hadn't they seen all the miracles God had just done in Egypt. Hadn't the whole nation of slaves been freed? Who'd ever heard of that in human history? Hadn't the Egyptians given them provisions and wealth to carry away with them. Didn't they have new leaders in Moses and Aaron that the Almighty God was clearly speaking through and performing great miracles through? Isn't it good and clear leadership one needs in a time of crisis? But what do the people do? They start by crying out to God in terror and when nothing seems to happen what do they do? They start winging and whining, moaning and bewailing their fate, and then they turn on their leaders. There is nothing so fickle and scary as a mob, as the fearful, the brainless, led by the incompetent. Nothing so blind as those who demand of God without seeking His wisdom and guidance... and remember, this was a people that had the tangible presence of God going before them by fire and by cloud. How foolish are those who believe and act as if God serves them and not the other way around. There are none so foolish as leaders who do not listen to God, who cannot look forward and who fail to plan.

In contrast consider the response of Moses. A study in calm. He can look forward by looking back. The God who broke into his life at the burning bush with a new life mission and had guided him, reluctant though he had been, was hardly going to let them down at this point after all they had been through. It was not Moses plan that was being worked out it was God's. Here was a lesson, not just for the Egyptians, not just for the Hebrews, but for the world. What had begun for the Hebrew people, in isolation and fear in their homes, unable to come out because of the plagues ransacking their world, would end with a new world ... unless they mucked it up. Unless, they forgot the lessons they were getting and of which they had already been a part.

God then gave Moses two firm words: **“Do not be afraid. Stand firm and you will see the deliverance the Lord will bring you today. The Egyptians you see today you will never see again. The Lord will fight for you; you need only to be still.”** And again **“the Lord said to Moses, “Why are you crying out to me? Tell the Israelites to move on.”**

God wanted two things of the people and of Moses. The first, to stop and listen, to be still, to be quiet and wait on Him. When they did, they would find that God would fight for them. There's an important lesson here for every nation. The second was to stop crying out and to move on with His plan. This is so often the way of the world, to rush on in fear, in self-wisdom, demanding of God when they way of God calls for peace, calm, rational thinking and then faithful appropriate responsiveness. We might see some contrast here in the current world responses in crisis between those who act irrationally in fear and self-interest with those who follow clearly thought through science and medical processes. How much more-so in the life of faith is a calm spiritual wisdom critical. As the prophet Zechariah said to Zerubbabel, it is **“not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit,’ says the Lord Almighty.”** Great things can be achieved when one waits upon the Lord and follows His way. How much more do we, as people of faith, need to wait quietly on the Lord to see what He has to say especially when the world is in chaos. What lessons are we to learn? And then how are we going to move forward differently, expecting miracles, when God says to move forward?

When the disciples saw Jesus crucified, or heard the news if they were hiding away, they too reached that moment of crisis. They too so easily forgot all that God had done in their presence, the things Jesus had done and had said. In their very fear and concern they fell back on their weak human nature rather than looking forward in faith. It was the women who were well versed in the practical duties of life. Life had to go on and whatever else they needed to honour the dead. Now the three days were past they could go to the tomb and the soldiers would let them prepare the body properly. As in Lazarus' case everyone knew a body that dead could not be revived. Matthew's gospel account is sketchy on detail but summarises the salient points. According to Matthew two Mary's went to the tomb although John and Luke speak of three, not that it matters, they had a job to do. A violent earthquake shook the ground as the stone was rolled back from the tomb. An angel making a point. The guards were paralysed. The angel told the women not to be afraid, he knew they were looking for the crucified Jesus, but he told the stunned woman, Jesus had risen, just as He said. Furthermore, they were to tell the disciples to make their way to Galilee where Jesus would meet them. Then Matthew tells us Jesus greeted some of them again, although he is indistinct, the other gospels fill that out more roundedly. Then again, they are told to go to Galilee.

We are all looking for God to act. We all want God to do something dramatic. We think in some ways it would make faith easier, our faith stronger. But God's ways and thoughts are far beyond the greatest of human imaginings. Here, at the climatic point in history, Jesus meets only briefly with His close inner core telling them to go to Galilee. A trip of some 130 kilometres or so. They would have to be patient, be determined, be willing to do what Jesus told them and not what they might want to do, which until that moment had been to flee Jerusalem as soon as possible. In the midst of their confusion and self-doubt the disciples had to come back to basics. Quiet, planning, trusting and following God's plan. Faith that Jesus was in charge and that His way would ultimately work out. Whatever they felt, whatever their fears, whatever their confusion one thing had changed their lives. Jesus was alive. Death could not hold Him. Everything they thought they knew was on its heads. Only one reality mattered – be with Jesus. Even Thomas, pragmatist that he was, already heading out of town to restart his life, turned his life around, immediately, instantly, from that moment. The God of his forefathers who has rescued his ancestors from Egypt and captivity was rescuing them again. Not from the Romans, that was immaterial, but from the punishment of sin that ensnares and that drags a person away from God into eternal darkness. Jesus had overcome death. What He said was true, was vindicated in the most incredible way. Where the disciples had been doubting God, doubting their own decisions in following Jesus now there was faith that would not be quenched. Oh yes, they'd still make mistakes along the way, but they knew for certain that they had been baptised into Christ, into His death and into His resurrection in way that had never known or understood was possible. Everything that happened in this world, would happen in the rest of their lives, would now be lived in the knowledge and experience of the glorious resurrection of Jesus. What may happen to the body, their bodies, was nothing in comparison to what was coming, of that they were sure. So sure in fact, that every one of them would become martyrs. They knew the world needed to hear a message the message of God's great love for each and every person and how great that love was demonstrated in the life and death of Jesus Christ. Not only that, but by being baptised with Him each one of us appropriate the new life in Christ for ourselves. They knew that the power of God, the incredible life-giving power of God was at work in them and that they too would experience that incredible,

unimaginable resurrection from death to new life with Jesus. As the Hebrews had followed Moses and passed through the waters of the Red Sea and their enemies had perished so too the disciples and people of faith know that in following Jesus we will see our own salvation, the devil perish and a whole new world open before us. Yes, we are looking, so is the world, and we have to pray that in these times, the lessons of the past are understood, the lessons of the present recognised, and many more eyes are opened to recognise the Risen Lord and to bow at His feet. He alone offers forgiveness, love and a whole new life from this moment forward. He is Risen! He is Risen indeed!

Amen