

North Kildonan United Church

18th April 2021 ~Rev. Don Johnson

“Peace be with You”

Acts 3: 12-19

I John 3: 1-7

Luke 24: 36b-48

Living God, for whom no door is closed, no heart is locked, draw us beyond our doubts, till we see your Christ and touch his wounds where they bleed in others. Amen.

“While they were talking about this, Jesus himself stood among them and said to them, ‘Peace be with you.’”

On this third Sunday of Easter, we hear Luke’s account of how Jesus, now risen from the tomb, appeared to his followers. For the last two Sundays John’s Gospel has been our guide, but now we turn to Luke for another account, another perspective of those post-Easter, post-resurrection days. Luke will go on to write a second book of the New Testament, the Acts of the Apostles, in which he will chronicle first the promised coming of the Holy Spirit to the disciples at Pentecost, and then record the accounts of the spread of the Gospel and the development of the early Church. But we can save that until Pentecost.

In today’s gospel reading, the first word the risen Jesus offers is a word of peace. And for his confused, perhaps frightened friends, who wanted to believe yet were so full of doubt, a word of peace was essential for them to calm down, to ease their terror and turn down the shouts of doubt and disbelief ringing in their hearts and minds. They needed reassurance; they needed a sense of peace.

They had just heard of a mysterious stranger who had walked along the road to Emmaus with a couple of the disciples, a stranger who spoke with authority about the recent events concerning Jesus, how this Jesus, put to death, was alive. The two sad disciples had told the stranger of how hopeful they had been when Jesus was alive, and now, accounts are coming out that Jesus may be alive again, but how could that be? The discussion between the two disciples and the stranger continued, and as they reached Emmaus, they urged him to stop and have a meal with them. “Stay with us, because it is almost evening and the day is now nearly over,” they say. The stranger accepts their invitation, and in the words of Luke: “When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight. They said to each other, “Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?”

Our gospel begins at this point. The Jesus who walked the road with the two is the same Jesus appearing to all of them. But to their eyes, he seems like a ghost, and naturally they are terrified. And in an approach echoing John’s account of Thomas and Jesus, the frightened disciples are invited to investigate the wounds Jesus still bears, the holes in his body made by the nails of the cross. But more is required for them to dispel

their disbelief. To quiet that disbelief, to prove he's not a ghost or a figment of their imagination, Jesus takes a piece of fish and eats it, and then explains the scriptures to them and his place within the story of God's salvation.

The resurrection, belief in the resurrection, is the foundation of Christian life and teaching. Everything we do in church draws its life and purpose from this essential conviction that on the third day Jesus was raised from the dead.

The two sacraments of the Church, Holy Baptism and Holy Communion, are each grounded in the reality of the resurrection.

Think for instance of a typical Communion service, such as one we celebrated on Easter Sunday. That Communion, held on such a high and holy day as Easter, still has at its' heart the experience of symbolically sharing a meal, the experience which echoes Jesus breaking the bread with those two disciples at Emmaus, echoing Jesus revealing his wounded body to the disciples and then eating a piece of fish. Of course, that account by Luke is not the only reference to the Sacrament of Holy Communion in Holy Scripture, but it is an important aspect of our sacramental practice. In a sense every Communion is an Emmaus moment, the Risen Christ the host of the Lord's Supper, welcoming us to his Table, feeding us with his body and blood.

Similarly, with Holy Baptism. Jesus took a Jewish cleansing ritual, a sign of repentance, forgiveness and new beginnings practiced and proclaimed by his cousin John the Baptist, and transformed it into a profound symbol of the promise of eternal life. As Jesus died and rose from the dead, so too does every baptised person symbolically go under the water, like a death, and rise up from the water, like a new birth into the family of God. Some Christian traditions make the baptismal experience more vivid by literally putting a person completely under the water and lifting them back up again. We use a sprinkling of water on the head, just as effective and less wet!

Through symbol, ritual, sacrament, we attempt to convey and make alive profound beliefs. So we share some bread and each have a sip of wine or juice, or we put some water on the forehead of an infant or a child or an adult. Through simple, everyday items, God's love is conveyed to us.

With the water of baptism, we proclaim that one more person has joined the family of God, a family membership that crosses all barriers and welcomes all people. So too with the bread and cup of Holy Communion. Jesus promised that whenever we celebrate this holy feast he is amongst us, and we are reminded that this simple repast is but a foretaste of the heavenly banquet awaiting us in the life beyond this life. The touch of water that shows us we belong to the household of God, the bread of heaven that assures us of God's never-ending love for each of us. Simple acts, yet profound in meaning.

Of course, sometimes our rituals can get in the way. Many years ago, I was invited to take part in my niece's baptism in Aylmer, Quebec. Naomi was 9 years old and I was in the area when the baptism was scheduled. It's always been a treasured part of my

ministry to be able to baptise my nieces and nephews and then in later years my great-niece and great-nephew.

So the day came for Naomi's baptism. Using the traditional approach to baptism, and wanting to do the best job I could of it, I began the Sacrament of Baptism by asking the name of the child, as we do. Naomi's parents, my brother and my sister-in-law replied, Julia Naomi. With the pride any uncle has in baptising a member of the family I duly baptised Naomi and we continued on with the service as she and the children went to Sunday School. Later on I heard that when Naomi was in Sunday School, her classmates said: "So, he's your uncle and he doesn't even know your name." So much for our best intentions not working out.

In today's gospel from Luke, and in last week's gospel from John, the Risen Christ endeavours to calm the fears of the disciples with his words of comfort: "Peace be with you."

We have needed to hear these words during these past COVID months. We need to hear that reassuring, comforting, encouraging voice of Jesus in our hearts: "Peace be with you." The disciples were fearful that the presence before them was a ghost. Our fears these past months were not spectral, they were not about, as the old saying goes:

"From goulies and ghosties and long-leggedy beasties

And things that go bump in the night, Good Lord, deliver us!"

No, our fears of COVID were, and in many ways still are, more concrete and physical and tangible. We have been tested and challenged in ways we couldn't have imagined a year ago, and while we can see light at the end of this seemingly unending tunnel, we are not quite there yet. We have precautions to maintain, masks to wear, vaccines to receive and perhaps most sadly, distances to keep. We are not quite there yet, but the time is drawing closer when the hold this virus has on us will be broken and what a glorious and happy day that will be.

The story is told of the last moments of John Wesley, on the 2nd of March, 1791. As he held the hands of those who loved him, it was recorded that his final words were: "Best of all, God is with us."

When the time comes for us to look back on what was, not what is, but what was the pandemic for each of us, I hope that we will be able to find reasons to echo John Wesley's words. I hope that we will believe that God indeed was with us through these trying weeks and months, reaching out to us through the kindnesses and encouragement and generosity we received from others, and in turn which we extended to others.

Beloved, peace be with you, this day and in all the days ahead. Amen.