

North Kildonan United Church

4th April 2021 ~Rev. Don Johnson

“That First Easter Morning”

Isaiah 25: 6-9

I Corinthians 15; 1-11

John 20: 1-18

Gracious God, open our hearts and minds by the power of your Holy Spirit, that we may hear your Word with joy. Amen.

“Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb. So she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, ‘They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him.’” (John 20: 1-2)

John’s account of that first Easter morning begins quietly, peacefully, in darkness. Three of Jesus’s followers, still wrapped in grief at his death, are beginning another day without their friend and teacher. One of them, Mary Magdalene, has come to visit the grave, not an unusual act for a mourner. It is still dark, and she believes that the one who was the light of the world, the hope of her world, is dead. She has come to weep some more, to weep for this man she saw die so cruelly just a few days before.

She comes with no expectations, other than knowing that this is where she needs to be. She arrives, discovers the stone that had been blocking the entrance to the tomb has been rolled away, and the body of her friend is gone.

She runs to Simon Peter and John, not with news of the resurrection, but with fear that a grave robbing has taken place. The race back to the tomb begins, and little by little the reality of the resurrection is revealed.

The resurrection story begins with these three disciples. Think of the account you just heard. One sees the grave clothes neatly folded and believes. One sees the same thing and there is no indication that he believes anything. One is surprised into believing by hearing the sound of her name. In each of these we find ourselves at one time or another. John could have written a less complicated story, perhaps something like this: *“Mary Magdalene, Peter and the other disciple went to the tomb. They saw the linen wrappings lying there and believed Jesus had risen from the dead.”* But he didn’t. Instead John leaves room for each of us—for one who sees and believes, another who sees and leaves uncertain and one who needs to hear her own name.

Actually all four gospel writers could have written exactly the same account of that Easter morning, but they didn’t. Instead, each one provides a particular perspective on the Resurrection, a perspective that when combined with the other three enriches the picture and the understanding of that day.

But let us be clear. The Gospel writers, as well as St Paul, are trying to describe and record an event of profound magnitude. In his reflection for Easter Sunday, Father William O'Malley puts it this way:

"No one saw it happen. The early writers are very forthright about that. If they had wanted, they could have sketched a real Spielberg scene: 'The rocks seemed almost uneasy, trembling. Then they began to shimmer and quake, etc., etc.' But they were honest enough not to. All we have is the testimony of people who claimed to have encountered him alive after he had been demonstrably dead. What's more, they went to often horrifying deaths rather than deny that experience of Jesus risen. All they had to do was say, 'We were fooled. We made it all up to get a following.' But they didn't. Something earthshaking had happened to them. That's undeniable. Good Friday, they cowered like rats behind the locked doors of the upper room. Then, in little more than a month, those same despicable turncoats were out on the streets! Preaching fearlessly of their experience. Daring imprisonment, ostracism, rejection from the Temple that had been the focus of their lives. Because they claimed to have experienced the inconceivable: a man come back from the dead. Every one of their martyrdoms was a death-bed confession to that experience. I tend to believe that."

In his book Surprised by Hope Bishop Tom Wright makes the point that the crucifixion of Jesus was the end of all the hopes of the followers of Jesus. As the gospels point out, the disciples usually didn't understand the teachings of Jesus, and they certainly didn't understand that Jesus would be put to death by Rome. As he writes: *"Nobody dreamed of saying, 'Oh, that's all right-he'll be back again in a few days.' Nor did anyone say, 'Well at least he's now in heaven with God.'"*

The appearances of the Risen Lord changed everything. The teachings of Jesus that the disciples misunderstood when he was first with them were now clear to them. Jesus, the same Jesus they saw die on the cross, now appeared to them alive, in his body yet not quite his body. This Jesus was no ghost-yet he could pass through walls and not be limited the way ordinary humans are.

The Resurrection changed everything. As St Paul wrote to the Corinthians:

"Now I should remind you, brothers and sisters, of the good news that I proclaimed to you, which you in turn received, in which also you stand, through which also you are being saved, if you hold firmly to the message that I proclaimed to you—unless you have come to believe in vain.

For I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers and sisters at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have

died. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. Last of all, as to someone untimely born, he appeared also to me.” (I Corinthians 15: 1-8)

Jesus Christ is alive, raised on the third day, and that is what makes all the difference. That is what lifts the story of Jesus from being yet another chronicle of a good person who met an untimely death, to a life-changing encounter with the One who is the Resurrection and the Life. The resurrection transforms the written word into the living Word.

Jesus Christ is alive. I cannot scientifically prove it, but by faith I believe that he rose from the dead. And that faith is nurtured and encouraged when I see Christ at work in the lives of faithful people, people who take seriously the gospel, people who have caught his vision of what life really can be, people who labour to ease the burdens and gladden the hearts of those in need, for those hungering for a word of hope and promise and love.

Jesus Christ is alive, and when I am faced with the reality and the finality of death, which at times has been often during my thirty plus years of ministry, the prayers of the church and the words of the gospel sustain me and give me hope, and allow me to offer the promise of eternal life to the grieving. Because Jesus has risen from the dead, death does not have the final word—rather the final word is found with the One who, in the beginning was the Word, whose life was the light of all people, the One who is our Life and our Hope. This does not mean I do not get angry or sad or mournful – I do all that and more – but those emotions are underpinned with the hope and the joy of resurrection and the conviction that not only will we see our loved ones again, but that there will also be some kind of justice for those who never really had a chance at life.

Jesus Christ is alive, and that is why I so appreciate the words of John Updike in his poem *Seven Stanzas at Easter*. Updike, a famous American author of the second half of the 20th century, wrote this poem in 1960. Though he wrote it for a contest at a Lutheran Church and won a \$100 prize, which he then gave back to the church, his words are as essential today as they were 61 years ago. In this age of doubt and dismantling of the foundations of the faith, the points he makes strike a chord with me. Perhaps they do with you as well. He begins:

*"Make no mistake: if He rose at all
It was as His body;
If the cell's dissolution did not reverse, the molecule reknit,
The amino acids rekindle,
The Church will fall.
It was not as the flowers,
Each soft spring recurrent;
It was not as His Spirit in the mouths and fuddled eyes of the*

*Eleven apostles;
It was as His flesh; ours.
The same hinged thumbs and toes
The same valved heart
That—pierced—died, withered, paused, and then regathered
Out of enduring Might
New strength to enclose.
Let us not mock God with metaphor,
Analogy, sidestepping, transcendence,
Making of the event a parable, a sign painted in the faded
Credulity of earlier ages:
Let us walk through the door.
The stone is rolled back, not papier-mâché,
Not a stone in a story,
But the vast rock of materiality that in the slow grinding of
Time will eclipse for each of us
The wide light of day.
And if we have an angel at the tomb,
Make it a real angel,
Weighty with Max Planck's quanta, vivid with hair, opaque in
The dawn light, robed in real linen
Spun on a definite loom.
Let us not seek to make it less monstrous,
For our own convenience, our own sense of beauty,
Lest, awakened in one unthinkable hour, we are embarrassed
By the miracle,
And crushed by remonstrance."*

Christ is Risen! Christ is risen indeed! Alleluia, alleluia, alleluia!
Amen.