

The Avenue Uniting Church

Sunday 21st April, 2024

"Easter... so what?"



Listening for Sacred Wisdom

Acts 4:1-10

The small community of Jesus' followers is getting the attention of the authorities, just as Jesus did before them...

While Peter and John were speaking to the people, the priests, the captain of the temple, and the Sadducees came to them, much annoyed because they were teaching the people and proclaiming that in Jesus there is the resurrection of the dead. So they arrested them and put them in custody until the next day, for it was already evening. But many of those who heard the word believed, and they numbered about five thousand.

The next day their rulers, elders, and scribes assembled in Jerusalem, with Annas the high priest, Caiaphas, John, and Alexander, and all who were of the high-priestly family. When they had made the prisoners stand in their midst, they inquired, "By what power or by what name did you do this?"

Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them, "Rulers of the people and elders, if we are being questioned today because of a good deed done to someone who was sick and are being asked how this man has been healed, let it be known to all of you, and to all the people of Israel, that this man is standing before you in good health by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified, whom GOD raised from the dead.

A pastor in the USA tells the story of the woman who came to shake his hand at the end of the Easter service

"I've never seen such a crowd in church", she said'. He didn't know her, but apparently she was impressed by the number of people there for Easter worship.

Then, as she was shaking his hand and moving toward the front door, she added, "Do you suppose it will make any difference?"

He held on to her hand so she couldn't get away.

"What do you mean?" he said "Will what make a difference?"

"Easter," she shot back. "Will Easter make any difference for all these people, or will life tomorrow be the same as it was yesterday?"

That woman's question is a profound one. *"Will Easter make any difference for all these people, or will life tomorrow be the same as it was yesterday?"*

Does Easter make any difference in your life? Or mine? Have the weeks since Easter been any different for you from the weeks before?

How did what we did at Easter time help people to grow in faith and experience GOD present in their lives?" I try and work through this one from time to time, because it's important.

"Do you suppose that Easter will make a difference?" What kind of difference does it make for you? for me? For us, together?

I love the gospel stories of the resurrection of Jesus: they make me wonder.

I wonder how I'd respond to the news then – and how I do now.

And what difference it would – and does – make. Because it should make a difference to me. To us.

(I know that 'should' can be a tyrant of a word, and I try to use it sparingly, but in this case I think it's a good word).

Because the stories handed down to us make it clear that Easter did make a difference to the followers of Jesus.

Their lives were touched by new hope, new purpose and new life!

Have our lives been touched like that? I hope so! But it's sometimes hard to know, isn't it?

Easter hasn't been injected with all of the sentiment that surrounds Christmas, where people talk about wars stopping, or miracles happening, or families gritting their teeth and "getting along because it's Christmas...", and I think that's good thing.

But it still distressed me that the news I saw over Easter was so much about war in Gaza and Ukraine, gun violence in the USA, and all those stories, with an afterthought of "*oh, yeah, people went to church*".

And all of that followed closely by the terrible violence in Sydney this last week.

I try to hold all that in tension with all that I believe about why Easter happened, with my belief that love is stronger than hate, that life is stronger than death, that hope is stronger than despair. And at times I find myself sitting with Thomas, in wanting proof that anything has really changed at all.

Then I return to the stories, in the gospels, and see that they faced similar struggles.

You see, resurrection (however we understand that) didn't change the external situation of the disciples and friends of Jesus:

They were still under Roman rule, with all the disadvantages and dubious benefits that that implied. Life didn't become easier overnight, in fact in some ways it became tougher.

Externally, little was different. But in the lives of those first Christians, everything had changed!

They were living with an understanding that the spirit and way of Jesus lived on, and it transformed their reality, or at least how they responded to the way things were around them.

And gradually, very slowly, they began to transform their world. What they knew, and what they had experienced of Jesus in his lifetime, together with what they came to understand of his death and resurrection, gave them hope that his way was right - and the courage to see and join in his work in the world. The courage to let go of what had been, while he was with them, and look to new ways – the courage to acknowledge both death and resurrection.

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The story is told of a children's ward that was the most depressing ward in the whole hospital. The children there had little hope. That little hope was reflected in the faces of the nurses... nurses who requested a change in station, another assignment. Even the parents and friends found it difficult to enter and stay with these failing lives.

One man changed that by turning up dressed as a clown. The nurses were nervous, some of the parents were offended, but the children laughed. They sensed the clown loved them from his heart and hoped for them. The clown hoped that today was not the end of the world. He had a powerful influence on the children because he gave them hope.

The nurses began to work with the clown, and they began to laugh and smile. The children began to love the nurses' and parents, they in turn began to love the clown.

Then one day the clown didn't come to the hospital. His life had failed. But he lives on in that hospital ward, lives on in his smile which is still there because he gave those children hope.

Someone else is wearing his silly costume and smile now. But most importantly someone else is bringing hope through love.

And this is where, for me, Easter can make a real difference! When lives are changed, and people pick up – or pick up again – the way of resurrection, while still being brave enough to sit with the reality of death.

Maybe that doesn't change the world's 'big picture', or what we see going on around us in the world, tho' we have to keep praying and believing that it might, but in the way that we can respond to the world:

... dare I say, in being 'the clown' for the world, spreading the life and hope that gives meaning and purpose to our lives...

... working in whatever way we can, where we are ...

...living as people who have hope, even when life is hard for us, or for those we love.

Much as we wish it might, this often doesn't change the realities around us. Lousy things do happen to good people. There is brokenness in the world, and Christians aren't immune to it. But in the midst of that, there's hope. The way of Jesus the Christ holds both death and resurrection!!

If we look, we might see all around us living proof of this hope, this renewal, this change, in the lives of people.

In people in who have felt the forgiving power of Easter, the hope that they don't have to live with guilt, so their lives are changed...

In people who have sorrow, who have experienced grief, and yet have the hope and the promise there is more to death than pain, that there is the promise of resurrection.

In people who live with illness, who have the hope that in the Spirit of GOD there can be healing, and the the courage to live

In people in terrible situations, who seem to be far more concerned about helping others than looking after themselves. We saw this in Sydney last weekend. I think I saw it this week in Bishop Mar Mari Emmanuel forgiving his young attacker.

I saw it here too last Sunday, when one of us asked us all to pray for Joel Cauchi's parents –and don't they need our care and compassion!!

These things reflect the way of Jesus – the way of hope – the way of resurrection

We could go on and on, but I think you get the point. Easter can make a difference, because fundamentally it's about life which embraces hope, change, renewal, courage and strength, as the way of GOD, shown in Jesus.



Another story to finish, from the great storyteller Robert Louis Stevenson:

*The boy from the country came to London to visit his grandparents.*

*One night as it was getting dark, he sat on the front porch watching the sights of the city.*

*As he watched, he saw a man coming down the street.*

*The man would stop at each corner and pause beside the lamp post, and then a round globe of light would burst forth through the darkness.*

*As the boy watched in wonderment, the street gradually changed from night to a place of light.*

*He became so excited, that he ran into the house and called out to his grandmother,*

***"Come and see! There's a man outside poking holes in the darkness "***

Easter should make a difference... especially when we remember the one who calls us to go on poking holes, is also the one we call **"the light of the world"!** **AMEN**