

Prelude:**[Annie Schulz]****Gathering thoughts:****[Doug Schulz]**

Welcome to this Grace Mennonite Church worship service here in the middle of April as we continue our Easter through Pentecost series theme that we have called “Good News is Springing Up”. The COVID-19 pandemic is not over, but advances are being made with vaccinations, and we live in hope of our world becoming safer and safer health-wise even as we pray for things like equitable distribution of the vaccines as well as wider wisdom among political leaders near and far to provide peace and justice in nations. As you will hear today, the resurrection of Jesus makes a difference to our personal bodies and souls, and to the hopes of the whole world!

We thank our musicians and technicians again for their faithful service, and Jan Steven for preparing today’s reflection on the Easter hope focus. Beth Woelk is taking some ‘staycation’ days after a loaded earlier part of the week dedicated to MCEC (Mennonite Church Eastern Canada) *Transition into Ministry* program sessions integrated with her regular Grace ministry work. I will be leading today with help for some readings from Annie as well as Mary Koop.

Our Call to Worship and Opening Prayer, and later Benediction, are inspired and adapted or adopted from Easter resources in the *Sing the Story* songbook.

Call to Worship:**[Annie & Doug Schulz]**

Annie: Come people, watch this day for the light that darkness has not overcome. Watch for the fire that burns a new beginning in the brilliance of the rising sun. Watch for the glow of life that gleams in the growing earth, in the eyes of all creatures, and in the ever-living flame of our own soul.

Doug: Come people, pay attention to the stories of Jesus - about the women who saw and proclaimed “He’s alive!”, about the humbled ones who walked the road home feeling lost and alone but then Jesus came to eat bread with them, proving “He’s alive!”, and about the disciples who met him at the water’s edge when fish-for-a-day was all they could believe in, but Jesus showed up, teased them, touched them, and proved to them again, “He’s alive!”

Annie: Come people, we are the family and friends of Jesus, and though numbed by his death and aware of our own death coming one day, we come gladly with our curiosity and with our compelling needs to confirm the rumour that he is alive.

Come, let us hear him call us by name, and feel his touch of power and grace.

Prayer: [Doug] Risen Christ, when fear and doubt seem all that's left, tell us again the stories of faith. Touch us with your promised presence, and set our minds at peace. AMEN

Scripture: **Psalm 4** **[Mary Koop]**

- 1 Answer me when I call, O God of my right!
You gave me room when I was in distress.
Be gracious to me, and hear my prayer.
- 2 How long, you people, shall my honor suffer shame?
How long will you love vain words, and seek after lies? Selah
- 3 But know that the Lord has set apart the faithful for himself;
the Lord hears when I call to him.
- 4 When you are disturbed, do not sin;
ponder it on your beds, and be silent. Selah
- 5 Offer right sacrifices,
and put your trust in the Lord.
- 6 There are many who say, "O that we might see some good!
Let the light of your face shine on us, O Lord!"
- 7 You have put gladness in my heart
more than when their grain and wine abound.
- 8 I will both lie down and sleep in peace;
for you alone, O Lord, make me lie down in safety.

Hymn: **"Christ Is Alive! Let Christians Sing"** **[Voices Together #359]**

*Christ is alive! Let Christians sing. The cross stands empty to the sky.
Let streets and homes with praises ring. Love, drowned in death, shall never die.*

*Christ is alive! No longer bound to distant years in Palestine,
but saving, healing, here and now, and touching ev'ry place and time.*

*In ev'ry insult, rift, and war, where color, scorn, or wealth divide,
Christ suffers still, yet loves the more, and lives, where even hope has died.*

*Christ is alive, and comes to bring good news to this and ev'ry age,
till earth and sky and ocean ring with joy, with justice, love and praise.*

Prayers of the People:

[Doug Schulz]

Our prayers today are authored by writers Susan Miller and Michael Seward.

[O Jesus,] you come to us
In unexpected places,
In a crowded room,
In a journey on a dusty road,
In conversation,
In the stillness.
You come in the midst of our doubt, our fear, our sorrow
You come in the power of the resurrection
No pain and suffering is unknown to you.

You bring us peace
And we pray for the places where there is no peace
Countries torn by war
Refugees seeking homes
Prisoners facing torture

You bring peace
Peace to the tensions and conflicts within us
To the regrets, the failure,
The broken relationships
The lost friendships

You bring peace
For you are a friend to us
When we are alone...
Unseen you are there

You bring us peace
And we pray that we too
may become peacemakers.

Eternal God, to whom all may come through [Jesus],
lay your healing hand upon all those who are sick.
Make your loving presence known to those who are lonely.
Give your strengthening power to those who are weak.
May those who lack be filled, those who mourn be comforted,
those who worry be calmed and those who seek forgiveness find it
in Jesus Christ; through whom we pray. Amen.

Hymn:

“We Have Seen the Risen Lord”

[Stan Pethel]

*In the darkness, in the quiet, we had come to anoint Him;
heavy hearted, drenched in sorrow, how could we live without Him?
Suddenly we saw there an angel all in white,
then we knew that He had risen.*

*Refrain: We have seen the risen Lord,
we have heard His gentle voice saying, “Be not afraid.”
We have felt His conqu’ring power, known the glory of this hour,
we have seen the risen Lord.*

*We were walking, to Emmaus, we were speaking about Him;
things had happened, we were helpless, there was no hope without Him.
Then another joined us, and strangely warmed our hearts,
and we knew that He had risen.* [Refrain]

*We were fishing, catching nothing, wond’ring what to do without Him.
In the misty light of morning our lives were empty without Him.
Then a man called to us, standing on the shore,
and we knew that He had risen.* [Refrain]

Scripture:

Luke 24:36b-48

[Jan Steven]

36b Jesus himself stood among them and said to them, “Peace be with you.”
37 They were startled and terrified, and thought that they were seeing a ghost.
38 He said to them, “Why are you frightened, and why do doubts arise in your hearts?
39 Look at my hands and my feet; see that it is I myself. Touch me and see; for a ghost does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have.”
40 And when he had said this, he showed them his hands and his feet.
41 While in their joy they were disbelieving and still wondering, he said to them, “Have you anything here to eat?”
42 They gave him a piece of broiled fish,
43 and he took it and ate in their presence.

44 Then he said to them, “These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you—that everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled.”
45 Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures,
46 and he said to them, “Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day,
47 and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem.
48 You are witnesses of these things.

Reflection: “Bodies Matter: A Resurrection People”

[Jan Steven]

As you may know, we recently welcomed grandbaby Walter into our lives. We got to see his first picture on Monday, March 29. And that was wonderful.

But it was nothing comparing to Tuesday – when Tom brought mom Julie and baby Walter home from the hospital.

I got to hold Walter, to smell him, to kiss his sweet head, and rub his wee feet. And a few days later – because Julie had pumped some breast milk – I got to feed wee Walter. It was and is a beautiful experience.

We humans are designed for touch – as babies and kids and adults and as seniors. Bodies matter. Human touch and interaction matter. Feeding people matters. And today, Jesus returns once more to the lakeside in his post resurrection body. He invites them to touch him. And to feed him.

He says, “See my hands and my feet, that it is truly me. Touch me and see, for a spirit doesn’t have flesh and bones, as you see that I have.” When he had said this, he showed them his hands and his feet.

And he asks them for something to eat and eats it in front of them. The Gospel writer, Luke, reports, “While they still didn’t believe for joy, and wondered, he said to them, ‘Do you have anything here to eat?’ They gave him a piece of a broiled fish and some honeycomb. He took them, and ate in front of them.”

They are experiencing the resurrected Jesus – who has very real body. He is not a ghost and this matters, though I hadn’t given it much thought why.

Laur and I were on a hike with our beloved theologian and dear friend John Rempel. And I told him of my challenge. That to believe that Jesus was only raised in Spirit was somehow depressing. And that believing Jesus arose bodily from the dead was truly Good News. But I wasn’t sure why.

Then we got to chatting about the writings of theologian N T Wright and two things happened. Laur reminded us that we had met up with the primary intent of a walk of historical sites of Port Dalhousie. And two, my eyes crossed with mental exhaustion. I am so not a theologian.

Laur, John, and I agreed that there must be a book that distills in a light reading fashion some of the thoughts of N T Wright. He has written over 40 books – many of them are the size of the large blocks from one of the old locks we were admiring.

Later that day I went online and found and ordered “Simply Good News” – less than 200 pages long. And I listened to a number of Thomas Wright’s seminars in podcast form. I do not pretend I have my mind wrapped around Wright’s teachings, so I’m simply going to provide you with some gleanings from this book. And encourage you to buy a copy for yourself.

*And if your eyes gloss over at any point – in this sermon or reading the book. Here is the key take-away. **Jesus is the Good News in person.***

PART ONE

N T Wright makes a point of asserting that Jesus rose from the dead BODILY and not just in Spirit. And this makes sense to me...

1. I do not believe that Jesus merely swooned on the cross and never died, and his apostles came and rescued him. The Romans were professional killers.

2. I cannot believe the grave was empty because wild animals broke into the tomb and stole and devoured the body of Jesus. If you have ever hiked in the wild...you’ll notice that predators make a terrible mess when they fight over and drag off parts of a body.

And put more positively...

3. All four of the Gospel writers assert that Jesus returned in body, not in a ghost-like form. A new body with new abilities – a glorified body - but definitely a body.

4. All the disciples continued, after meeting Jesus in his resurrected body, to share the Good News. While only two deaths are described in the New Testament, church tradition has it that all were martyred except John who died of old age.

PART TWO

The essence of what I think Thomas Wright is saying is as follows.

- *Hebrew Scriptures or the Old Testament is announcing that a Messiah is coming. I won’t go into detail here and list these, but the movement Jews for Jesus lists 40 Messianic prophecies. <https://jewsforjesus.org/answers/top-40-most-helpful-messianic-prophecies>*

- *Jesus came and showed us a completely new way to understand Jewish prophecies. Not only how to understand them but how to live a life of Good News. Jesus was neither a snowflake nor a warmonger – he is what Mennonites another other denominations refer to as “The Third Way.”*
- *Jesus was resurrected from the dead and because of that everything is different. Our world has been radically changed. Jesus has shown us he has victory over the bonds of death and destruction. And because he has, we – in time - will too.*
- *And we live in a hopeful waiting period for the completion of God’s intent. A New Heaven and a New Earth. Without Jesus’s bodily resurrection and promises, there is little hope for the redemption of this world.*

The apostle Paul preaches this same message.

- *The scriptures tell us of the coming of God’s Messiah.*
- *Something has happened that has changed the world – Jesus’s life, teachings, miracles, and bodily resurrection.*
- *The world is now a different reality, and by becoming Christians we can become part of it.*
- *And God will in time set this world right. This world and all we broken beings will be restored. N T Wright asserts that Heaven isn’t a place where souls go when we die. Jesus promised that in the future, heaven will come to earth.*

By the way, John Rempel cautioned me to assure people that from the moment of their death until this New Creation, we will be held in God’s loving embrace.

In short - Jesus is the Good News in person.

In this meantime – this time right now – we live lives of love and service, empowered by the power of the Spirit and this Great Hope.

Do I live out this vision everyday? No I do not. I have days when I feel awful and I say nasty things and I treat people like objects and I am jealous of material assets. But I know that this is not the me God intends.

And at this point my hubs might say – not on one of my nasty days - “So how is this any different from – let’s say – the theology of C S Lewis?” And I’d have to say, “I don’t know. I’m so not a theologian.”

But I know it is different from the theology of my childhood that says if you believe in Jesus, when you die, you will go to heaven – which is a completely different place than earth. It makes earthly life seem so unimportant.

And I know it's different from the understanding that Jesus was a simply a good man killed by an unjust system. And we follow him by opposing unjust systems. This is depressing because there is seemingly no end to injustice.

And what I believe Wright is saying is that, because of Jesus, we can work with God in bringing in the Kingdom to come and be hopeful when things appear hopeless.

Here is a quote from Wright that I love:

“Jesus's resurrection is the beginning of God's new project - not to snatch people away from earth to heaven but to colonize earth with the life of heaven. That, after all, is what the Lord's Prayer is about.”

PART THREE AND FINALLY... (And really short!)

The last chapter of Simply Good News is about prayer - about praying the Good News. And I'll leave this for another time – because I'm already over my word limit – and for another speaker – because The Lords Prayer is not my specialty.

But I will take a few words and tell you about a project I would like to see, to be part of. An Intentional Care Team as part of our People Care Network. I am very impressed by the dedication of my Intentional Care Team friends at Good Shepherd in Arizona

In AZ, Prayer concerns – the name of the person and their challenge – is brought to either of the two ministers – Randy or Rebecca - and is brought to the attention of the leader of the Intentional Care Team, Linda.

If it is highly confidential, it stays with the two pastors. But to be honest, that is so rare. Most folks love to be prayed for. And every Wednesday, some liturgical prayers are sent by email and the names and concerns of people are listed as requested. Similar to what happens here and what I'm so grateful for.

But our little group... the Intentional Care Team ... we meet monthly, and we review each person who has expressed a concern to make sure they get a card and/or a phone call and/or a visit. And if there is a material need – how this can be met. And we pray over every name.

You may be thinking, “Oh but Good Shepherd is a much larger and younger and richer congregation than Grace!” There are more people but we're mostly seniors. And there is no spare money – it goes to missions.

And here is something to really challenge us. All Peoples United Church in Sudbury does this very thing with their very tiny and venerable United Church women's group. Prayer, cards, phone calls - easy to do and really cheap. Casseroles not so much, but when covid lifts I'd be happy to deliver flowers or good eats. Thursday afternoons in Sudbury, this is what my 90 year old+ ministry partner and I did.

I want to end with a quote from Talitha Arnold, a United Church of Christ pastor in New Mexico. She wrote a devotional called "Being the Body" and her Biblical text was ... There was not a needy person among them. - Acts 4:34a (NRSV)

And I must confess, that I have not given up all my possessions. Not by a longshot. But I do believe in worthily supporting the work of the church and of Mennonite Central Committee.

Pastor Talitha writes that this verse is a community testimony:
How the first Christians gave up their possessions, just as Jesus had given up his life for others. How they made sure no one was in need, just as he ensured 5000 hungry people were fed, sick people healed, troubled people comforted and loved.

The new Christian community wasn't focused on [continuing to see] the Risen Body, but on being the Risen Body, doing what he had done. They didn't just proclaim God's resurrection power. They became that power by offering new life to others.

Talitha continues:
Our world needs that resurrection power now more than ever. It also needs the church—my church, your church, all churches—to be an Easter people by giving of ourselves and our possessions. The first Christians knew they were living into God's new life when no one was in need. That was their plumbline for being the Risen Body of the Risen Christ.

It's our plumbline, too.

Help us, God, to be Resurrection people for the sake of all your people. Amen.

Hymn of Response: "The Risen Christ" [VT #345]

*The risen Christ, who walks on wounded feet
from garden tomb through darkened city street,
unlocks the door of grief, despair and fear,
and speaks a word of peace to all who hear.*

*The risen Christ, who stands with wounded side,
breathes out his Spirit on them to abide
whose faith still wavers, who dare not believe,
new grace, new strength, new purpose they receive.*

*The risen Christ, who breaks with wounded hand
the bread for those who fail to understand,
reveals himself, despite their ling'ring tears,
enflames their hearts, then quickly disappears.*

*May we, Christ's body, walk and serve and stand
with the oppressed in this and every land,
till all are blessed and can a blessing be,
restored in Christ to true humanity.*

Benediction:

[Sing the Story #188]

May the God who shakes heaven and earth, whom death could not contain, who lives to disturb and heal us, touch us with the blessing of power to go forth and proclaim the good news of love that is springing up in the name of Jesus. AMEN

Sending Hymn:

“Now the Green Blade Rises”

[VT #353]

*Now the green blade rises from the buried grain,
wheat that in the dark earth many days has lain;
love lives again, that with the dead has been:
love is come again like wheat arising green.*

*In the grave they laid him, love by hatred slain,
thinking he would never wake and live again,
laid in the earth like grain that sleeps unseen;
love is come again like wheat arising green.*

*Forth he came at Easter like the risen grain,
Jesus, who for three days in the grave had lain;
raised from the dead, the living Christ is seen;
love is come again like wheat arising green.*

*When our hearts are wintery, grieving, or in pain,
Jesus' touch can call us back to life again;
fields of our hearts that dead and bare have been:
love is come again like wheat arising green.*