

**Prelude: Annie Schulz****Gathering Thoughts: David Brubacher**

Welcome to this time of worship! Today, as we continue in the season of Eastertide, we also acknowledge Mother's Day. It is the 8<sup>th</sup> Sunday we are not physically gathering to worship at Grace, and perhaps the first Sunday many of us will not be gathering in some way in honour of the mothers in our lives.

COVID-19, the reason we are not gathering, triggers many thoughts and emotions. We long to safely gather and hug those we love. Something in this almost feels dark.

Still, in this Easter Season, we recall that Jesus emerged from the darkness of the tomb to become the light of the world in resurrection power. In our worship today, we will be considering how God comes to us in the dark places of life to offer safety and to shine a light of hope on our paths.

As in previous weeks, the music selected for today is from the public domain. Our musicians are Annie Schulz and Julie Plunkett. Outreach Pastor Doug Schulz will offer a reflection. Our sound technician is Ted Kopp, and I am Pastor David Brubacher, leading the service today. In keeping with the COVID-19 regulations, we are the only people in the sanctuary here at Grace this Thursday morning.

**Call to Worship & Prayer:**

Living God, long ago faithful women proclaimed the good news of Jesus' resurrection, and the world was changed forever. Faithful women, the mothers in our lives, have touched us with life-giving love made known in Jesus. In our worship today, we proclaim, along with the women who found the tomb to be empty, the light that overpowers darkness. Speak into our frail human existence. Touch us with your love, to strengthen our faith and to empower us to be witnesses of Easter hope. AMEN.

Feel free to sing along as Annie and Julie lead us in, "*Sing praise to God who reigns above*," #59 in the Hymnal: A worship book. As we sing, may we sense God near.

**Hymn: "Sing praise to God who reigns above" HWB # 59 - 1,2,3 [Annie Schulz & Julie Plunkett]**

*Sing praise to God who reigns above, the God of all creation,  
the God of pow'r, the God of love, the God of our salvation.  
With healing balm my soul is filled, and ev'ry faithless murmur stilled.  
To God all praise and glory!*

*What in almighty pow'r was made, God's gracious mercy keepth.  
By morning glow or evening shade, God's watchful eye ne'er sleepeth.  
Within the shelter of God's might, lo! all is just, and all is right.  
To God all praise and glory.*

*Our God is never far away, throughout all grief distressing,  
an ever-present help and stay, our peace, and joy, and blessing.  
As with a mother's tender hand, God gently leads the chosen band.  
To God all praise and glory.*

**Scripture: Psalm 31:1-5 NRSV**

In you, O Lord, I seek refuge;  
do not let me ever be put to shame;  
in your righteousness deliver me.  
Incline your ear to me;  
rescue me speedily.  
Be a rock of refuge for me,  
a strong fortress to save me.  
You are indeed my rock and my fortress;  
for your name's sake lead me and guide me,  
take me out of the net that is hidden for me,  
for you are my refuge.  
Into your hand I commit my spirit;  
you have redeemed me, O Lord, faithful God.

**Prayers of the People: David Brubacher**

Holy God, Creator, Saviour and Sustainer, you created the world with beauty that reflects your glory. In the resurrection of Jesus, you are restoring all things to the glory of creation. By faith we confess and believe this is how you are at work in the world. But we also confess our humanity. Our faith often falters, and we fail to see you in our midst. In our weakness, hear our prayer!

As COVID-19 continues to disfigure your good creation, O God, forgive us for those times when we doubt you renewing presence is at work in the world. We want to see big and immediate signs of improvement. But thank you for small signs of your loving presence - an encouraging phone call; an act of kindness; a smile, if only seen virtually. In our flickering hope, hear our prayer!

O God surround us with your comforting and healing presence. You are God of the universe, yet you know us each by name. With such confidence we bring our immediate concerns before

you. We think of those of our Grace family, our biological families and our friends who are dealing with uncertain health, who are anticipating or recovering from surgery, who are undergoing various forms of treatment, who are grieving while in isolation. In a moment of silence, we name those we hold in our prayers. In our trust, hear our prayer!

We also pray for wisdom and protection for leaders and front-line workers. Many find themselves in circumstances they had not anticipated, and certainly, for which they had not signed up. Grant insight and wisdom to our leaders. For the frontline workers, many who are nameless and faceless to us, we pour out our heartfelt gratitude. Protect them and keep them safe. In your mercy, hear our prayer!

Finally, O God, as we have interceded for your healing and guiding hand in the restoration of creation, even so, restore us each. Give us eyes, hearts and minds to see your presence. Walk among us, so that your glory shines upon the shadows in our lives. Empower us to live by the prayer Jesus taught us to pray, saying:

Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil; for thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever and ever. Amen

Please join in whatever way you are comfortable and able as Annie and Julie lead us in singing "In the rifted rock," #526.

**Hymn: "In the rifted rock" HWB # 526 vv. 1,3,4 [Annie Schulz & Julie Plunkett]**

*In the rifted Rock I'm resting, safely sheltered, I abide.  
There no foes nor storms molest me, while within the cleft I hide.  
Now I'm resting, sweetly resting, in the cleft once made for me,  
Jesus, blessed Rock of ages, I will hide myself in thee.*

*Peace which passeth understanding, joy the world can never give,  
now in Jesus, I am finding; in his smiles of love I live.  
Now I'm resting, sweetly resting, in the cleft once made for me,  
Jesus, blessed Rock of ages, I will hide myself in thee.*

*In the rifted Rock I'll hide me, till the storms of life are past,  
all secure in this bless'd refuge, heeding not the fiercest blast.  
Now I'm resting, sweetly resting, in the cleft once made for me,  
Jesus, blessed Rock of ages, I will hide myself in thee.*

**Scripture: John 14:1-7 NRSV**

“Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe[a] in God, believe also in me. 2 In my Father’s house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you?[b] 3 And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also. 4 And you know the way to the place where I am going.”[c] 5 Thomas said to him, “Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?” 6 Jesus said to him, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. 7 If you know me, you will know[d] my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him.”

**Reflection: Doug Schulz “THE REFUGE PLACE”**

On Mother’s Day we may recall how our mother made home a good place to live in, or to come back to when we got older and lived away. Moms are often at the center of “home sweet home”. Offering a sense of safety, and often sustenance as they serve the food we love, moms also encourage development of character, showing us how to be the best person we could be. No mother is perfect; but can you identify some fine attributes of your mother today? What makes you grateful for her help and healing and heart-warming touch in your life?

If only God as our mother would help and heal the world right now in the middle of this global pandemic when we might feel that our home has become our prison! Now, I’ve never been in jail, but in my early 20s I participated in a Manitoba MCC prison visitation program. I remember the startling pattern of parallel bars, the harsh clanging of metal doors, the brightly lit bare grey hallways, and then the plain desk or table where the short visit was permitted, sometimes behind a thick scratched plate of plexiglass. Not a pleasant place.

How wonderful then today to think of the kind of “refuge” that God gives, as the Psalm says, or of that “dwelling place” Jesus promises in the Gospel of John. Whatever we’re feeling about our lives right now, we have a home in God’s heart, in God’s plan, in God’s purpose. That position motivates as much as it comforts. We are still and always free and alive!

No need to deny it, though, if we’re feeling discouraged or perturbed about what’s playing out on Planet Earth’s stage these days, or in our personal situation whatever that might be. The psalmist must have been very disturbed, crying out “Deliver me!”, “Rescue me!”, “Save me!” We know God provided deliverance, rescue and salvation, because the writer goes on to say: “You are indeed my rock and my fortress. You are my refuge.” Earlier we heard that soul-stirring song of God’s provision, “In the rifted rock I’m resting”, a hymn that many of our forebears could identify with from times when they ran in fear from war and persecution. What words of confidence and assurance! “Jesus... I hide myself in thee.”

Think back just now of when you most needed reassurance that you were safe in God’s sheltering care... Perhaps you remember an occasion or period of life that still feels negative

because of hurts you endured, or still makes you feel guilty or shameful for something you did or said. Remember today that God helps us seek forgiveness, reconciliation, new life in relationships. In this season we are reminded that God's nature of Loving Presence is shown in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, by faith in which we find salvation. This provides hope and courage to live positively, to express God's love freely, as best we can - to self, to family, to neighbours near and far, and, as Jesus said, to strangers and even to enemies. As writer Aimee Reid stated this week in *Rejoice* magazine, "If we are willing to [...] expose ourselves to God's cleansing love, negative beliefs will loosen from us and wash away."

No denying that we live in difficult days that we wish God could somehow miraculously sweep away and gone. But why can't we can view this period of isolation and self-protection as a gift, a provision of time to spend in reflection and prayer, so that we fully realize and appreciate the kindness and grace we meet in Jesus? Yes, we are in retreat from the world these days, but we are not in prison. We dwell with God, seeking safety in faith. We confess needs and weaknesses. But we must believe that searching for, and then surrendering to God's comfort and power, is the sure source of the heart's deepest courage. Take a moment to think of the ways in which you can identify some courage within you... And think of ways that you can reach out with care and courage to others... We have creative power at hand, even now!

The Psalmist says, "Into your hand I commit my spirit, O faithful God." I remember the feeling of my mother's hand on my head when I was a small child trying to fall asleep on a long car-ride, or even at a long church service, and she'd stroke my hair so gently, soothingly. And at home, I would be nurtured by her help with my homework that I did at the kitchen table, not to mention the fine food she laid out on that table for me. My mom has been gone for 17 years. I do wish we'd been able to have more agreement and fellowship in the later years of our relationship when her conservatism didn't always accept my more liberal-minded view of the world, but I'm still so grateful for what my mother provided to my heart and mind with her Christian example and encouragements. She gave me many keys with which to unlock doors in the world.

Like a caring mother, God does not lock us away in prison. God's hand opens our hearts and minds to daily resources of freedom and strength. In this way, the life of faith is so powerful. Even our weakness is made strong in God's household! So when the Bible says God is our refuge and that God has a dwelling place for us, we can know we are accompanied in the trials of life through to the end, and beyond! Tough times make us feel imprisoned. But grace, courage, and hope are ours in God as we journey along with Jesus as guide and friend.

Let's turn our attention for a moment to the sad fact that so many people in the world are still on a journey of suffering, with no safe house to be in, no refuge, no dwelling place, quite literally. We live in reasonably comfortable middle class homes and communities where our safety is pretty secure. Millions on this planet live in dangerous situations, and, if not

homeless, are imprisoned by war or injustice, poverty and oppression – the disadvantages of being in the wrong place, having the wrong politics, or ethnicity, or skin colour, and so forth.

When Jesus said that God provides a “dwelling place” he went on to say that his own purpose in the world was to provide “the way, the truth, and the life” so that all people could understand and experience a close relationship with the saving God. Jesus’ life and ministry leading to his death and resurrection demonstrate so completely God’s will that prison walls which isolate people unjustly or separate them unkindly should come down. In Jesus, the dwelling place is a house of many rooms, with open doors of compassion, peace and justice.

So, in this time when we cannot meet as a faith family, we can still imagine and pray for our congregation to be an open house where others can find that “dwelling place” among us or through our expressions of faith into the world. As a church, we support refugees through Mennonite Central Committee, or participate in relief projects such as those of Mennonite Disaster Service. We care about and give to the local Westview Centre for Women. We do believe in reaching out. In extending God’s hand of refuge and care into the world around us.

I believe that whatever happens with this pandemic, however and whenever the situation improves and we can somehow come together again, we will want to participate ever more actively in the refuge-sharing work of God. Those of us who create on-line or audio-recorded services these days at Grace Mennonite Church are staring out at pews where the light of the windows in the walls falls on emptiness and silence. But I find myself thinking, “if those walls could talk, what would they say about our history as a church? And what would they hope for as our future?”

What do you think? How will our church family continue to be a good home for us to worship God and grow faith? And how will we express our good life to those in the world whom we might help with our outstretched hands to provide comfort, rescue and hope?

I know we can hardly wait to come back to each other here at Grace for the joys of being face-to-face. May we also prepare ourselves to make sure our mutual “Welcome home!” echoes forward in ways where our being together is all about provision as given in Jesus, who taught us that, in God, there is to be for everyone equally, a healthy and happy “refuge place”.

**Hymn of Response: “Come ye disconsolate” HWB # 497 all verses [Annie & Julie]**

*Come, ye disconsolate, wherever ye languish,  
come to the mercy seat, fervently kneel.  
Here bring your wounded hearts, here tell your anguish.  
Earth has no sorrows that Heav’n cannot heal.*

*Joy of the desolate, light of the straying,  
hope of the penitent, fadeless and pure!  
Here speaks the Comforter, tenderly saying,  
“Earth has no sorrows that Heav’n cannot cure.”*

*Here see the Bread of life; see waters flowing  
forth from the throne of God, pure from above.  
Come to the feast of love, come, ever knowing  
earth has no sorrows but Heav'n cannot remove.*

**Benediction:**

In worship, O God, you have brought us before the throne of your grace and mercy. As we leave this time of worship, hold us ever close to you, so that when our hearts are troubled, we may know that your love reaches from heaven to touch us in Jesus. May your peace and comfort guide us until we meet again. AMEN.

**Sending Hymn: "Love divine, all loves excelling" HWB # 592, vv. 1 & 4 [Annie & Julie]**

*Love divine, all loves excelling, joy of heav'n, to earth come down,  
fix in us thy humble dwelling, all thy faithful mercies crown.  
Jesus, thou art all compassion, pure, unbounded love thou art.  
Visit us with thy salvation; enter ev'ry trembling heart.*

*Finish, then, thy new creation; pure and spotless let us be.  
Let us see thy great salvation perfectly restored in thee.  
Changed from glory into glory, till in heav'n we take our place,  
till we cast our crowns before thee, lost in wonder, love and praise.*

**Postlude: Annie Schulz**