



Richmond Hill Reflections

“Embodying Easter” (Preached by Rev. James Ravenscroft)

May 5, 2019; Third Sunday in Easter

Reading: Luke 24:36-48; Excerpt from Sarah Eliza Rowntree in *The British Friend*, Vol. 1, no. 1, 1892, p.15

When many of us think about Easter we end up with a common story. Some women followers of Jesus come to the tomb and, discovering it empty, are told he's risen. Yet each gospel writer has different details, different additional stories. John has one of Mary Magdalene thinking Jesus is the gardener, and another with Thomas not being there when Jesus first appeared. Mark has the women run away in fear and not tell anyone what happened. Luke has unique stories, like last week's meeting between Jesus and two disciples on the way to Emmaus. Today's account is like John's (the one without Thomas), but Luke adds the curious detail of Jesus eating a piece of fish, though he is risen and able to appear out of nowhere. It's odd, yet similar to Jesus telling Thomas to touch the nail marks. There is a physicality to these stories that is significant.

So, what's the focus on the body about? Even though stressed by some Christians as proof that Easter's a miracle, this detail, along with the empty tomb, strikes me as less about the what of resurrection as the why. It was a common belief among Jews of the time that when G-d brought about the re-creation of heaven and earth there'd be a general resurrection of everyone that had died. Essential to this teaching is the conviction that soul and body aren't separate. The idea the soul is caged in an imperfect body is a Greco-Roman view. The Jewish view is body and soul are indivisible. The body expresses the soul which animates the body, both making the fullness of who you are. A ghost is not really you. Hence the reaction to Jesus' appearance and Jesus asking for something to eat. In emphasizing him appearing physically not just spiritually, Luke's saying the resurrection at the end of the age has happened. If this is the case, then the expected re-creation is happening too. The reign of G-d Jesus taught them about is unfolding around them.

This is why the tomb's empty. This is less a miraculous happening as a revelation that the new age is upon us. It also points to the nature of this new age. Tombs are the place of the dead. But Jesus is the Living One. He is not about what deadens the heart but everything that helps us and the world to flourish. As Sara Eliza Rowntree expressed so well, we are his hands, voice, heart. Jesus commissions the disciples to take up his ministry, In the name of the *Shalom* with which he greeted the disciples, they were to invite people to a change of heart and healing of relationships. We see this in the first decades. A hallmark of the early church as described in Acts is how they looked after each other by sharing everything in common. We often think this is a pipe-dream, but in visibly living out social inclusion and redistributive justice, they embodied resurrection, revealing G-d's reign as here and now. This is why Luke emphasizes eating in encounters with the Risen Christ. The experience of resurrection is revealed in their being a community together.

This was also a form of activism. In coming together as both wealthy and poor, slaves and free, they offered an alternative to the divisive violence that made possible a system where the top 1%

controlled 14% of the wealth. As staggering as that is, today the top 1% control 39.5% of wealth globally. I wonder what would have happened if we'd kept our "Easter is right now" activism? Would the wealth gap have decreased? We'll never know. As later leaders aligned themselves with the same empire that killed Jesus, G-d's reign was put back into the future as the church shored up the power of kings and peddled access to heaven. No wonder that as authority is increasingly questioned, Christianity is also being displaced from the centre.

As disorienting as this is for so many of us, I don't see this de-centering as a bad thing. I see an opportunity to get back to what we were first about, embodying Easter by erasing divisions and creating communities where everyone had a voice, focused on what helps people to flourish in a world that seems more beholden to the powers of division and death. One of the gifts of the early church was its lack of power. Jesus used the image of something small that grows to describe the reign of G-d – a mustard seed, yeast. As we grew in influence and authority, we got caught up in our success, but the image of being small is about being a leavening agent, helping nurture a changed world through changed hearts and healed relationships. We need to be focused on this now more than ever as we face a crisis not just for humans but for other creatures too.

Fortunately, we have a legacy that will help us respond to the crisis. As I look around, I see an expression of the power the church once had. Yet I believe it can embody who we're called to be. Though we live in uncertain times where people look for someone to blame, hence the rash of violence lately, in sharing space with groups, especially new Canadians and others, we create points of intersection. Here we can break through silos and make room for conversation and friendship. Being hosts is a significant ministry, and in keeping with our Methodist heritage of fostering connexion. Hosting is also a response to growing inequality as budget cuts further hurt the vulnerable. While we've focused on helping through initiatives like Breakfast Club, Hearts and Hands for Africa, Krasman Lunches, we can extend that by sharing space with not-for profit groups. We've been responding to climate change, especially hosting forums and exploring the viability of a geo-thermal system. While focusing efforts on individually lowering our impact is important, opening our doors to others also lowers emissions as it lessens the need for new facilities to be built. In so many ways our adopted vision of being a centre for community is a profound way for us to be leaven for a changed world as we embody the resurrection as church.

On this Anniversary Sunday we give thanks for that gift, both in the legacy we've received and who we are called to be. No longer in the centre of the fray, we are called to be leaven again, embodying Easter right now, not in some future heaven. As a community of faith, may we continue to draw on Christ's presence as we nurture life, love and peace in all that we do. Amen.