



Richmond Hill Reflections

“Waiting at the Tomb” (Preached by Rev. James Ravenscroft)

April 12, 2020; Easter Sunday

Reading: John 20:1-18

Out of the mouths of babes. Isn't that what they say? And of teens and adults. Their reflections were really moving. Well done everyone and the parents who filmed them. One thing that struck me is how for the most part they had a muted energy. Understandable. This is a muted time for all of us. As Glen observed on Friday, this is the first time in thirty years I hadn't been in church that day. Being here right now feels really different too. Like each of you I'm sure, I want Easter to be how it usually feels, seeing everyone in person, asking kids what the Easter bunny brought, hearing a joy in the air that's only partially fuelled by chocolate. But that's not how it can be. By necessity this Easter is more reflective than we're used to.

It's no wonder. How do you celebrate with joy during a global crisis? There's a lesson here for me. I'm often tempted to go quickly from cross to empty tomb, but the lockdown won't let me. I need to sit with the feelings of loss that would have been the experience of Mary Magdalene and the other disciples. It isn't easy. We hear it in how Peter and the other disciple go to the tomb but leave right away. We don't want to linger either. We see this in how some react to the pandemic - needing fines to stop gathering in groups, blaming various organizations, holding wealth for self-protection – ways to rush from the tomb, block the crisis from deeply touching one's heart.

Yet what do we hear in the second half of the story? I was struck by Mary's raw grief. As I stand with her at the tomb, I feel confused, even angry, my need to cry over my friend's body blocked. No wonder she can't recognize Jesus. Yet there he is, in her confusion, fear, grief. This is where she experiences resurrection, lingering at the tomb. She hears her name. Recognizes the familiar timbre of compassion. Transformed in a moment of loving connection, she goes to tell the others.

The profound but unsettling message of Easter is how resurrection comes, transformation comes as we sit with grief, face the tomb. There we aren't far from the cross. Dietrich Bonhoeffer writes that resurrection only happens through the cross. We may want Jesus gloriously transported from earth to heaven but instead he is joined to our pain and we to his. And in that we're joined to one another's. That is real grace, drawing us out of ourselves into union, solidarity, genuine love that gives

everything for others. Not Jesus dying in our place. Jesus showing us what love looks like, death accepted, even for strangers as Dominick said. This love is revealed by so many right now, by medical professionals, by frontline workers, by grocery clerks, by all of us in so many ways.

This is what Easter is about. We let go of ourselves and rise into new life in Christ. Each, living out Christ's loving presence in their lives. As I shared earlier, we've been reflecting all Lent on the gift of water. A symbol of grace, gift of divine life in all of us, giving strength, transforming fear into courage, enabling us to step forward in service despite the cost. We affirm this in baptism, reaffirm it each time we share communion, even virtually. We're joined to Christ, united in G-d and with each other, a union that deepens in this time as we sit at the tomb. We may feel like we just can't go on, but then we experience a capacity from beyond ourselves to keep going, to keep living, to keep loving. Connor summed it up when he said Easter is about support and friendship, that support and friendship are always important. We see this Easter lived out as people stay connected, look out for each other, pick up someone's groceries, make face masks, or as my young cousins are doing in the UK, sewing scrubs, even pooling resources, those who have sharing with those who don't. It is what we read in Acts when they shared what they owned so everyone had enough. In all this we're reminded that death and fear are never the end. Love and life have the last word.

Now this isn't immediate, even if we want it to be. Too often we literalize the three days from cross to empty tomb, but in three days, the disciples would barely sink into grief before coming out on the other side. We need to know that three means wholeness, completeness. It speaks less about length of time than the nature of the experience. The disciples encounter Jesus as Risen, having passed through death, now one with G-d and inviting them to the same depth of union here and now. I wonder if that happened slowly. Luke writes that they had forty days of Easter. Perhaps that means the Christ was there for as long as it took for their hearts to be transformed.

That comforts me. What we're going through is difficult, but over time something transformative is happening. As Paula shared, Easter is about hope, not my need for joy. I recently received a poem that evokes this. Written during the great cholera epidemic, it names how people stayed home and learned new ways of being, and new ways of thinking. Here are the last lines: "*And when the danger passed, and the people joined together again, they grieved their losses, and made new choices, and dreamed new images, and created new ways to live and heal the earth fully, as they had been healed.*" That's resurrection. That's Easter. That's my prayer for us all. May it be so.