

Acts 2:14a,22-32, Psalm 16, 1 Peter 1:3-9, John 20:19-31

## **INTRO**

Welcome once again to our Sunday morning recordings. Today is the 2nd Sunday of the Easter season, a season which runs for 50 days until the day of Pentecost. It's a season in which we park ourselves in the realities of the resurrection of Jesus, reflecting on the implications of this event for our lives of faith. There's a sense in which every Sunday is like a little Easter — a celebration of the resurrection, but here in the Easter season we *bask* in the new life & resurrection promised to God's people. We zero in on it unlike at any other time of the year. And it's fitting for us in the Northern Hemisphere that Easter always lines up with spring — an annual reminder of resurrection as we watch the world thaw & plants sprout & grow.

But to be honest, this Easter doesn't feel like other Easters. Things haven't really been easy this Easter. Here we're in a season of celebration & at the same time it feels like the world is crumbling all around us. Everything's been shut down — we see images of the streets of New York City looking like an apocalyptic ghost town. People are losing their jobs, people are alone, unable to see their family or friends. Families meanwhile, are *not* alone, but locked in together trying to fight the monotony of work & school day after day. To me it feels like the days have blended together — I feel a little like Bill Murray in the movie *Groundhog Day*. This is the world we live in during this Easter season? It's very surreal!

I hope that if nothing else we are able to connect with one or two other people, to be open & honest about how we're doing — to support one another & to pray for each other. And I probably need not say this, because you are already listening to this — but don't underestimate just how important a regular rhythm of checking in to some form of worship service is, of praying, of listening to messages — because we all need to hear the promises of the gospel that are given to us — we all need to be reminded of who God is, and what he's done for us. So my hope is that this recording and the others that will follow in the weeks to come will accomplish that for you — that they will be an encouragement to you in your daily life & in your life of faith.

As always, I'll invite you to pause & to take the time to read the scripture lessons for today: Acts 2:14a, 22-32 (which is Peter preaching to the crowds on the day of Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit descends on the disciples as tongues of fire & they all start speaking in tongues), Psalm 16, 1 Peter 1:3-9 (which is Peter speaking about the resurrection again, this time years later to a church community), & then the gospel lesson for today, John 20:19-31. So go ahead & read those passages, & then feel free to continue this message.

### **FAVOURITES**

Well, I'll let you in on a little tidbit about myself: This story of Jesus appearing to the disciples who have barricaded themselves up in a room hiding in fear, is one of my favourite passages. Four years ago this summer we had a big church service here at St. Peter — it was my ordination service. I don't know if many of you remember it if you were there — it was a packed house, with people crammed into every pew & wedged in up in the balcony. There were a dozen or so pastors all in their albs — their robes & red stoles, and the bishop was here to officiate at the ordination. We had friends & family from all over the province here, & it was a great, encouraging day for me.

And leading up to the service, I was given the task of picking the hymns & the Scripture passage for Bishop John to preach from. So I chose some of my favourite hymns: *Beautiful Saviour, This Is My Father's World, Praise to the Lord the Almighty*. And for the gospel reading, I chose this passage that we've read today — the story of Jesus appearing to his disciples in the locked room, saying to them,

*"Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you." —vs. 21*

And then Jesus breathes on them his Holy Spirit, & sends them to announce the message of forgiveness to the world. Some of the reasons I've always loved this passage is that Jesus appears to his followers even though they are afraid, & he doesn't scold them or berate them, but gives them the Holy Spirit & sends them out in mission *as the Father sent him* — that is, incarnationally into the world — in the flesh. It's a great passage, and one of my favourites — there's lots to unpack here, and there's a lot of drama & tension in the air.

### ***HOW DID WE EVER END UP HERE?***

Have you ever had a moment where you seemed to snap awake, & you've wondered, "How did I ever end up here?" I'll confess that's happened to me a number of times in the 4 years since my ordination service. I've stopped myself & wondered, "How on earth did I ever end up as a pastor — as the pastor of a church? Real people who call me their pastor!" It's been an incredible privilege & gift, but also very humbling & frightening!

Have you ever had a moment like that — when you've wondered, "What's going on, how did I get in this position?" The disciples were thinking that on this day — and not in an encouraging or excited sort of way. They were wondering what on earth had just happened. They had just celebrated the Passover with Jesus, he had been taken away from them, tortured & killed, they all fled & abandoned him as he was left to hang & die. And then this report from some of the women amongst them that Jesus had risen from the dead & appeared to them! And still, that very evening of that first Easter Sunday they were hiding in fear trying to make sense of it all.

"How did I ever end up in this situation?" You've probably had that thought run through your head in the last couple of weeks. What is going on? How did we ever end up here? I caught myself watching the garbage truck this week like a little puppy dog at the front window, excited because something — anything was happening! What is going on?

### ***RESPONSES TO HARDSHIP***

One of the common refrains going around now is to "stay positive", or "think positive"

Now it's true that we still have much to be thankful for & to be positive about, but there's something fundamentally absurd about pretending to be positive when we've all gone through loss. What we need is the space to give voice to our loss — we need the space for lament.

Kate Bowler is a professor of Christian history at Duke Divinity School — she's done a lot of work researching the prosperity gospel in North America — which is rooted in the false idea that if we simply have enough faith our problems will go away, & we can live healthy, wealthy, victorious Christian lives. She did an interview for *The New York Times* this week about the current pandemic. In part of the interview, the interviewer asked her,

“Q. What do you make of the idea that we should all just ‘stay positive’ through this?”

A. The idea that we’re all supposed to be positive all the time has become an American obsession. It gives us momentum and purpose to feel like the best is yet to come. But the problem is when it becomes a kind of poison, in which it expects that people who are suffering — which is pretty much everyone right now — are somehow always supposed to find the silver lining or not speak realistically about their circumstances.

The main problem is that it adds shame to suffering, by just requiring everyone to be prescriptively joyful. If I see one more millionaire on Instagram yell that she is choosing joy, while selling journals in which stay-at-home moms are supposed to write joy mantras, I am going to lose my mind!” —Kate Bowler, <https://mbird.com/2020/04/another-week-ends-christ-the-physician-lincolns-grace-music-for-hope-personal-annihilation-and-night-of-the-living-karens/>, accessed April 17, 2020.

We are going through something right now, and need to be given the space to lament all that we’ve lost.

But things don’t end in lament for us — lament isn’t the end-game, faith is, resurrection is. This is what the biblical story tells us — the resurrection story — that God is not absent, that he does speak into our lament. He speaks words of hope & promise & commission. He reveals himself to Thomas & the disciples in the numbness of their loss & says, “Peace be with you. Look, it’s really me. See the scars in my hands. See the hole in my side. I’m back, & I’m alive.” He acknowledges their lamenting, & doesn’t shame them for it. But he doesn’t leave them there either — he reveals himself to them in his resurrected self, gives them the Holy Spirit, & commissions them to share the message of the forgiveness of sins with the world around them.

### ***DOUBT & DEAD ENDS***

So whenever we go through hardship of various kinds, or loss of one sort or another, we need not pretend like things are all rosy. We can, and we should acknowledge when we’ve hit a dead end. What are the dead ends of your life?

For the disciples, they had seemingly reached a dead end — but dead ends are precisely where Jesus shows up. Sometimes when we go through things, we never really expect God to show up, until he does. So look at his wounds — the proof of his sacrificial death on our behalf — the scars that show us the depth of his love for us, and that remind us that our sins are forgiven and we are given new life in his name. That’s what helps to get us through seasons of loss & lament. Jesus says,

*“Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.” —vs. 29*

Like Peter says when he stands up on the day of Pentecost & preaches to the crowds, we know that we will not be abandoned to Hades — or to death — because Jesus was not abandoned to Hades. Resurrection is now our story too.

And so Peter encourages us,

*“In this you rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials... Though you have not seen him, you love him. Though you do not now see him, you believe in him and rejoice with joy that is inexpressible and filled with glory, obtaining the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls.” —1 Peter 1:6, 8-9*

So whether we are surprised to find ourselves in some dead end circumstance that we didn’t expect — or whether we find ourselves waking up to the same monotonous reality day after day after day — death isn’t the end of our story. Jesus steps into our dead ends & breathes new life into us & the gift of the Holy Spirit, he calls us to share the gospel with others, & he gives us the promise of resurrection.