
Living Resurrection
Sydenham-Heritage United Church
April 12, 2020
by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

Based on John 20:1-18

Christ is risen! Christ is risen indeed!! What more is there to say on Easter Sunday. Just believe and be saved, right? Well, maybe. But there are 2 problems with that. One problem is that if I don't preach, I don't get paid. But more importantly - actually much more importantly - resurrection is great, but it is not the end of the story. The story continues after resurrection. How do I know that? Because Jesus said so. Whoa! You don't remember Jesus saying that? Does Rev. Paul have a newer version of the New Testament than we do? Well of course I do - but that's not important right now.

What is important is that Jesus said some amazing things during his public ministry. Amazing things that - I would argue - we do not completely understand. That is of course what made the words so amazing. One of my favourites is "love your enemies". I love those words because a literal reading just gives you nonsense - because by definition an enemy is someone you do not love - while a deeper reading of "love your enemies" gives lots of scope for reflection and personal transformation.

We just read another example of the amazing words of Jesus, and yet in the context of the story, you might have not noticed those words. The words are almost a segue. And yet, the words are important. Did you miss them? Here they are again: Right after Mary recognizes the risen Jesus, Jesus says to Mary, "Do not hold on to me". It's sort of an odd thing to say, isn't it. Mary has been weeping because she has been concerned about Jesus, and yet, once she finds Jesus, he tells her to not hold on to him. Mary very naturally wants to hold on to Jesus, and Jesus resists.

To me, those are amazing words. Because those words "do not hold on to me" announce that everything has changed for Jesus and his flock. Jesus may have been back from the dead - but that did not mean that things were back to normal. Mary wanted to go back to the "good old days" now that Jesus was alive again, but Jesus told his flock to move forward. And please don't hear that as a criticism of Mary. Mary is exhibiting basic

human behaviour, familiar to all of us. It is completely natural for Mary to want to hold on to the past - a past she had given up on because of the death of Jesus. And now that Jesus was back from the dead, of course Mary wanted everything to go back to normal.

Do you remember the 1973 movie “Jesus Christ Superstar”? Do you remember the scene after Jesus was taken away by the romans. The disciples are licking their collective wounds, and then Mary and Peter put into song the words that all the disciples are feeling. They are singing to Jesus who appears in the scene, but very far away, and who actually turns and walks away at the end of the song. The song starts like this:

MARY: I've been living to see you. Dying to see you, but it shouldn't be like this. This was unexpected. What do I do now? Could we start again please? I'd been very hopeful so far. Now for the first time I think we're going wrong. Hurry up and tell me this is just a dream. Could we start again please?

PETER: I think you've made your point now. You've even gone a bit too far to get the message home. Before it gets too frightening we ought to call a halt. So, could we start again please?

Well, that's human nature for you. The disciples want to go back in time, to relive the parts of Jesus's ministry that were pleasant and comfortable. But Jesus says, “Do not hold on to me”. The disciples wanted to imagine that the resurrection erased the crucifixion, that they could simply rewind the tapes 1 week and go back to a time before they were afraid. But resurrection did not erase crucifixion. There was no going back. There is only going forward.

The invitation from Jesus at resurrection rings in our own ears too - “Do not hold on to me”. We are invited to NOT hold onto our past. Not because our past was bad - not because our past was not worthwhile, but more simply, because the future, and new life lies ahead. Resurrection is not about returning to an old life. Resurrection is about finding new life. Resurrection is always about new life, not simply preserving our past. “Do not hold on to me” is an invitation into new life and new relationships. In our own lives, the life of this congregation, and in the life of our wider community.

How often do we try to go back and relive our own past when the spirit is calling us forward into new life? Even as a congregation, it's very natural to want to go back in

time, perhaps to a time when our membership and our finances were a bit less fragile. Perhaps to a time with a well-loved minister. Perhaps to a time when members of our own families worshiped right beside us. Perhaps to a time when loved friends were still with us. Perhaps to a time when our Church had real political and social clout. Perhaps to a time when we felt more vibrant. Perhaps to a time when we thought we were in control of things. Feeling a call back to a pleasant part of our past is part of the human condition.

It's very natural to yearn for the past. So if you tend to do that from time to time, don't worry about it. But Jesus's words, "do not hold on to me" call us into our future, because that is where we are going to live. In fact, it is where we already live. Like the bumper sticker says, "The future does not begin tomorrow. It begins today."

The invitation to new life is an invitation into our future. It sounds almost humorous saying that out loud actually. Because this year - 2020 - has been a massive year of change, don't you think? Marjorie and I moved here in 2020, and I can honestly tell you that we have been in a state of change every since. And with the COVID-19 pandemic, very few people are living the lives we were living 6 months ago. I'm going to guess that nobody participating in our worship today would have imagined 6 months ago that Sydenham-Heritage UC would be living substantially as an online and telephone-based church, and thriving pretty well too. You just don't know how flexible you are until you flex.

Not that it's been easy of course. Many of us are very disappointed that family gatherings are not happening in the ways we want them too. But we are learning to connect in new ways. I keep hearing about families who are sharing Easter Dinner using Zoom, or FaceTime, or some other technology. We are learning - as a community - to share coffee over Zoom, and that's a gift for all who participate. And I keep hearing stories about people connecting with friends and family they rarely saw before, because now distance is no longer a barrier.

Crucifixion, like COVID-19 was a crisis. Easter, and the life we are now living is resurrection.

Easter Sunday is not really an opportunity to fixate on exactly what may or may not have happened 2000 years ago. Easter Sunday is an invitation to live into resurrection

right now, with new opportunities and new relationships. Do I know what that future will look like here? No. But I do know who we will discover that future with - all of us - and others in our community, including others we have not met yet. Remember that old saying, “a stranger is just a friend you haven’t met yet”? Perhaps that can be our slogan for 2020. And I know one more thing. I know that the future that we are invited into is nothing less than a resurrection! Why settle for anything less than resurrection on Easter Sunday?

There is one other aspect to this story that we need to discuss. The story starts before we even get to the story. I mean, there is an off-stage maneuver that sets up the reading from John. When Mary arrived at the tomb, the stone that covered the opening of the tomb had been rolled away. The stone had already been rolled away. Who did that? We are not told. But we do know that if the stone had remained in place, the story could not have come out the way it did. The stone had to be rolled away in order for there to be a resurrection.

So the natural question we can ask ourselves is - what stones do we ourselves need to roll away in order to allow our own resurrection? What barriers do we see in our own lives that prevent us from finding new life? What stones keep us captive in our own tombs? What stones do we ourselves have to roll away in order to become free?

If you participated in our Good Friday service, you were invited to to forgive someone during the service. The intention behind that was to prepare for the joy of Easter by an act of forgiveness. Remember that forgiveness is unlocking a door to set someone free - and realizing that you yourself were the prisoner. Now that it is Easter, I can reveal to you the motivation behind that exercise on Good Friday. The motivation is simple. Forgiving others is one way in which we can “roll the stones away”. Forgiving others is one way in which we can open ourselves and find our own freedom. Forgiving others is one way in which we can enable our own resurrection. If you missed our Good Friday service, feel free to forgive someone this week. It may even lead to resurrection.

[what stones in your own life do you need to roll away in order for you to live a resurrection life?]

[Jesus said “do not hold on to me”. What do you need to let go of yourself?]

I titled this reflection “Living Resurrection”. Did you think that the word “living” was an adjective, or a verb? Did you think you were being invited into a conversation about a particular type of resurrection? Or did you think you were being invited into a conversation about how to live? Is “living” an adjective, or a verb in the context of “Living Resurrection”? Hint: Go with the verb. With Rev. Paul, always go with the verb. Resurrection is not a historical data point. Resurrection is a way to live your life today.

Faith is not about holding on to the past or believing a bunch of impossible things. Faith is about embracing hope, and a new future, with the spirit of Jesus as our guide. We are not alone. Christ is risen! Christ is risen indeed! Thanks be to God!

Amen.