

Today, I very much want to give you a rousing theologically-sound neatly-packaged incontrovertible Easter sermon, full of everything that you *want* and *need* to hear.

OK, so here we go... ☺

For the full on believers or re-believers who've never lost or who have re-discovered their orthodoxy: I affirm the bodily resurrection of the crucified Jesus.

For the post-moderns, post-Christians and others who post, and tweet: I affirm a resurrection power that uses different kinds of language, the language of metaphor and story and relationship.

For those who are suffering literal or emotional winters that have gone on for way too long: I affirm that Spring and restoration surely come from hope – or as they say, “it gets better.”

For those of a political and ecological bent: I affirm that the powers of violence and darkness and decay can be and have been and will continue to be turned around and overthrown.

For the agnostics: I affirm that, given the empty tomb, the facts do not always tell us everything there is to know.

For the mystics: I affirm that God's Spirit transcends our earthly limits in mysterious and transformative ways.

As someone who fits many if not all of those categories, when I say Christ is alive, I affirm all these things. Alleluia.

Today, I very much wanted to give you a rousing theologically-sound neatly-packaged incontrovertible Easter sermon, full of everything you want and need to hear.

But alas, I must tell you that God, in God's infinite wisdom, led me to come to you under the influence of many prayers, especially one by Brian McLaren for Easter preachers¹, here's part of it, he prays:

Give [preachers] the wisdom to know that sincere humility and awe
Surpass all homiletic flourish
On this day of mysterious hope beyond all words.
Make them less conscious of their responsibility to preach,
And more confident of the Risen Christ
Whose presence trumps all efforts to proclaim it.

I say amen to that.

¹ <http://brianmclaren.net/archives/blog/a-prayer-for-pastors-on-easter.html>

I feel that I could end this sermon right here (Feel free to walk out if you've heard enough); but then I wouldn't get to tell you about the woman at the well, a pile of manure, Apo Island, and about Nicodemus and the beloved disciple at the tomb.

Let's start with the Samaritan woman.

After years of reading her story in John 4, this year I heard it differently. Maybe it was because we've been talking about stories of encounter during Lent, or maybe it's just one of those cases of something becoming new again.

Here she is starting a conversation with Jesus about water, which seems to be fairly trivial. At some point she recognizes it's a bit more complicated and that she's actually talking to a Jewish prophet – probably because of that little trick he does of telling people about their personal lives – and her first instinct, her *first* instinct on realizing this, is to sort out the big theological question that plagues her as a Samaritan: where is the true place of worship? It's not a bad question, or a bad answer that Jesus gives. He tells her it's all about worshipping in Spirit, but it totally misses the point.)

Jesus is reaching out to her, looking for relationship – a deep spiritual connection over a nice drink of water, and her first reaction is to go off on some tangent about religious interpretations. At one point he says, "Woman, if you only knew who you were talking to!" Jesus was calling her to meaningful encounter and she barely recognized it at first. And that was my "aha moment."

Now, as you know, I love theology and pondering theological questions – I have a degree in it -- and I think it is absolutely important. But this time, the story made me wonder how many times I've missed really meeting Jesus, listening what the story has to say on its own terms because I get so caught up on processing religious concepts. I seemed to be hearing that sometimes – sometimes – it can be helpful to park our rational approaches, our debates and to learn things in a different way, through genuine encounter, by worshipping in Spirit, as Jesus would have said.

So I'm issuing you an invitation on Easter morning (a tough theological concept): **let's suspend our valid arguments (about how atonement works, about how Easter is to be understood contextually) – even if for a moment – and open ourselves to encountering God's Spirit speaking to us through the Easter story in ways we might not expect.** I'm going to propose a few ideas.

I love listening to CBC radio's gardening call-in show, and I sometimes even fanaticize about being a gardener, though verily I tell you that I am not.

This week a woman called in about a rose bush. She lives some place where they don't grow very well, she had rescued this poor plant in the Fall and for whatever reason decided to bury it in a huge hill of manure. Her gardening dilemma was that, despite all the snow still on the ground, the bush in the manure pile had begun to sprout and she didn't know what to do about it.

I don't know what else to say except to tell you that I immediately knew that this was about Easter.

It's a simple truism – but still true – that all those stinking things that pile up in our lives can serve to nurture new growth – when given enough time and proper environmental conditions. The woman did not know what would happen to the plant, she could only hope that a plant that was destined for the trash heap would flourish from a manure heap.

The gardening expert told her that it had been a bit of a gamble. But the right amount of warmth, depth, exposure to the sun, and of course her choice to hope, had made it possible to flourish. (OK, he didn't say "choice to hope," that's me turning it into a sermon illustration.)

You see, we can have hope because though death seems so final, when it comes to God's or, if you'd prefer, to Gaia's way of doing things, the power of life is even more relentless.

Here's what I'd like you to consider with this somewhat unsophisticated example: **Now that it is Spring – we hope it is Spring – every time you notice the buds, or the flowers or the mud or the smells, take time to use it as a conscious reminder to yourself of the unrelenting power of life and hope for transformation that God has placed into the very nature of things.**

At the Good Friday service, as we listened to the story of Jesus' death, we also saw pictures of mourning for the Earth. Spring this year isn't only a reminder of new life, but also of a winter that was probably more severe because of climate change.

I don't know about you, but this is one area where I find it hard to hope in the resurrection. The manure pile of environmental degradation just seems too large. So for Easter I went searching for stories of environmental hope.

I found stop motion photography on regeneration after a forest fire² (it took 2 months), data on how the hole in the ozone layer has decreased once CFC's have been banned³, and a story about Apo Island (see video)⁴ in the Philippines. [After the sermon, Joanne Moyer reminded me of this video about wolves as well]⁵

Basically, in this island, destructive fishing practices had led to an almost complete depletion of fish, and then to desperation, which led to further destructive fishing practices. It was a vicious cycle of violence leading to the death of fishing villages. (The keen observer might already see a Good Friday theme emerging.)

Then, a marine biologist called Angel (I kid you not, that is his name) dared to hope and convinced the islanders to create a marine safe space, a sanctuary – yes, that word is also not a coincidence in this sermon ☺ – where no fishing, destructive or otherwise, was allowed. Long story short, in the course of time, in-the-course-of-time, they've managed to restore fishing and recover sustainable fishing practices. But it took hope, it took time, it took community, it took hard work and it took abandoning destructive practices to create the conditions for life's regenerating power to re-emerge on its own terms.

It seems to me that Christianity as a religion is also an environment that has been contaminated and distorted by violence through the history of Christendom and through belligerent

² https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cMUnFyz_8mM

³ <http://www.livescience.com/27049-ozone-hole-shrinks-record-low.html>

⁴ <http://ecotippingpoints.org/video/apo-island/index.html>

⁵ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ysa50BhXz-Q>

Fundamentalism. Some suggest that it may just need to die and be reborn and be regenerated by the Spirit. Like Apo Island we may need to expand the sanctuaries where violence (literal or dogmatic) is not permitted, until a new and sustainable and balanced faith ecosystem can emerge. One that looks a lot more like the Risen Christ.

During Lent we also examined the encounter between Nicodemus and Jesus, the passage that gives us the image of being born again, or regenerated, as the Anabaptists liked to say. (I commend to you a sermon preached by Marilyn on March 16th, btw)

I was recently introduced to a Jewish American woman who, on learning that I was a Christian minister, asked me with some degree of fear “You’re not one of those “born again” Christians, are you?” (You can ask me later what I said.) I had to wonder how the beautiful mystical conversation Jesus had with Nicodemus about a second birth had evolved into such a fearsome thing.

Have we as Christians somehow lost the point that it is the Spirit who births us into the kingdom of God?

I ask you this Easter, what in our experience of the divine needs to be reborn or come back to life? (Pause)

By now you’ve noticed that I didn’t spend too much time on John 20, don’t worry, I’m not going to start now. You’ve heard the story, you know the spoiler alert – he is risen!

In all the Gospels, Easter morning leads to the question: “Where is the Lord?” Nowhere are we told that the disciples automatically got it in that very moment that Jesus was alive. Sure John says that the beloved disciple enters the tomb, sees and believes, but in the next sentence it says that he didn’t understand that Jesus had risen. Jesus’ friends all needed time to put two and two together: Jesus’ teaching about his death, rolled away stones, empty grave, folded cloths, mysterious gardeners, angels, live appearances, hands in wounds.

Easter is a dawn of insight as well as narrative timing.

I’ve come to understand that the beloved disciple’s belief in this case was not unwavering certainty of the resurrection, but closer to what I think of as trust and allegiance, or as one author put it, an “active spiritual state of adherence to Jesus the revealer and a readiness for whatever he will do.”⁶

This Easter, I pray that we might encounter and allow ourselves to be renewed by this Spirit of this Risen Christ; a Spirit that is like the wind, blowing where it chooses, being heard and felt, but certainly not controlled by us.

And I finish with another portion of Brian McLaren’s prayer that helps affirm our Easter hope:

Death is not the last word.
Violence is not the last word.
Hate is not the last word.
Money is not the last word.

⁶ Sandra Schneiders, *Written that you may Believe*

Intimidation is not the last word.
Political power is not the last word.
Condemnation is not the last word.
Betrayal and failure are not the last word.
No: each of them are left like rags in a tomb,
And from that tomb,
Arises Christ,
Alive.