

Runnymede United Church  
EASTER SUNDAY, APRIL 4, 2010  
JOHN 20: 1-18  
Living 'Hallelujah'

An American friend sent an email this week, showing that her government, at some bureaucratic, if not theological, level, believes in resurrection: In Greenville, SC, Social Services wrote to a welfare recipient: 'Your food stamps will be stopped, effective immediately, because we've received notice that you passed away. May God bless you. You may reapply if there is a change in your circumstances.'

I'd love to read something similar from the Canadian government!

A joke, on Easter morning? In Orthodox tradition, today is the day to tell jokes, as a way of affirming that at Easter, God has the last laugh.

What do you associate with Easter? On a blog this week, people mentioned egg hunts, crocuses, chocolate, brunch, butterflies, worship, 'The Hallelujah Chorus'. No one mentioned 'resurrection'. What makes this holiday a holy day?

Easter people dare to imagine life that moves from wrenching anguish to splendid joy. Easter people dare to imagine living 'Hallelujah' as reality, like a sanctuary in which children's laughter rings where the poignant story of Friday's crucifixion still pulses. Easter people dare to imagine resurrection.

Two thousand years ago, in Palestine, these days must have seemed monstrous beyond imagining. The power of Jesus' presence became palpable in the palms. Then came the week we call 'holy': palm branches turn to nails; a crown spins into a cross. Finally, some walk, weeping, to a tomb, to arrange a crushed corpse in linen and spice, and depart for Sabbath rest.

Early on the first day of the week, in the glooming shadows before dawn brushes away night, Mary of Magdala appears, seeking relief from heartbreak, and stares, dread swelling. The stone safeguarding the vault has been removed, leaving a forbidding hole. She doesn't think of resurrection. Rather, fearing desecration piled on death, she runs to disciples: 'They've taken him out of the tomb; we don't know where to find him.' Two disciples race to peer inside, and, finding only linen wrappings lying there, return home.

What else, faced with such surprise, shocked into faith, but unable to understand?

But Mary remained, weeping. Hadn't they tortured him enough? Even angels could not comfort her: 'Why are you weeping?'

Who has not stood with Mary, grieving, before a tomb of shattered love or deep dread? Who has not wept, through the night, in pain beyond endurance, for what might have been?

'Why are you weeping?' As we weep, can we know Jesus stands beside us? Mary turns to a shadowy form: it is not easy to recognize God, in the time before dawn, when your heart breaks and your eyes spill with tears.

'Why are you weeping?' Who is this? The gardener! 'If it was you, Sir, who removed him, tell me...'

Silence. Then Easter dawns in the gardener's death-demolishing 'Mary'. One word. A universe of meaning.

Was it a surge of light? Her eyes cleared. As his love for every weeping woman, every sobbing child, every tormented person shone upon his face, she knew him: 'Rabboni'

That is where we begin 'living Hallelujah': not in the tomb, with scattered clothes and guardian angels, but in encounters with one living among us as the Risen Christ. 'Go. Tell my followers I am alive...'

Easter continues. Mary goes and tells. The gospels and Paul record that not only Mary, but others, travelled to the tomb, met shining messengers, came face to face with the risen Christ, and rushed, breathless and bewildered, with the news: 'Life bursts through death! Hallelujah.'

What really happened? What do our 'Hallelujahs' mean? Let us admit mystery. At Easter, faith bursts the bounds of rationality. It's not crucifixion: we know our crosses, some, all too well. It's not death: we know that death is here and now, on the horizon, in the headlines. But resurrection? Is that far-fetched, or what? In an increasingly secular world, some approach today with a substantial measure of scepticism, preferring to think in terms of spring and new life, not an empty tomb, a miracle of life renewed.

But, whatever our questions, something happened. In the end that is our answer for those who ask 'How can I believe?' Something happened to change the lives of a group of fishing folk, tax collectors, outcasts, a company of men and women without power or influence, who suddenly testified to the miracle of God and the wonder of life, even as they faced death. Something happened that made them remarkably - rapidly - influential in human history.

'What language shall I borrow' we sang, on Good Friday. What words can we use to describe this miracle, this resurrection? Handel found words in Revelation, setting them to music that explodes with wonder. 'Hallelujah' is a Hebrew word meaning 'Praise God!' The writer of Revelation used that language to offer hope to people facing death and persecution for their faith: vivid, powerful language, fit for Colosseum and cross. It needed to be, to reduce the intolerable reality early Christians faced. If it sustained them, it can sustain us, both as individuals and as the Church, no matter how intolerable reality may become. That is what 'Hallelujah' means, what Easter promises. Can you live it? Can I?

This Easter, the church faces great challenges. In the last ten years I was much involved in developing and implementing what The United Church and other denominations call 'Sexual Abuse Policies'. They have been part of our religious life since the 70's and are a basic doctrine of the faith that tells us that God expects us to protect the most vulnerable among us. I know that my Catholic brothers and sisters believe that, too. But we must all continue to work to make God's expectation real in our faith. May we all find ways to make that happen.

'Living Hallelujah' means professing that with God, anything is possible. This is the day to proclaim: 'Something happened, something with startling power to embrace and change a scattered band of followers until they made a huge difference.' The tomb was not the end of the story. What actually happened in the tomb that first Easter morning is God's mystery, less important to us than what happened to those who came to the tomb and went from it into the rest of their lives, to dare living 'Hallelujah'. To them, Jesus brought life, sustaining them through secret gatherings, in dark prisons, and dread-filled places of dying, in a way never before experienced.

'Why are you weeping?'

Weep, but live Hallelujah, for Easter is more about what we can imagine than what we know. We know that life is painful, fraught with brokenness. We know that death is real, injustice continues, the vulnerable are exploited, threats to God's world persist. But Easter is the day to believe that death can be defeated, things can change. 'A new heaven... a new earth!'

Jesus came to a world brimming with terror and tears to show that death and evil do not have the final word: 'We are not alone' because we never know where the living Christ will turn up next – in a garden, as we walk and worry, at the bedside of one who is dying.

Resurrection is more than something that happened 2,000 years ago.

And that is no joke.

Let this be a day when you dare to love, dare to wonder, dare to believe that babies will be born into a world with enough for all, dare to imagine that peace can be carved out of war, dare to care for God's world and to protect its most vulnerable ones. Dare to be amazed by God's presence and power to create hope out of despair and dare to sing, 'The strife is o'er... Hallelujah.'

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