



Seacliff Uniting Church
Online Worship & Electronic Resources
Number 1 March 29th 2020



Celebration of Worship
Seacliff UC-Lent 5 29th March 2020

GATHERING

CALL TO WORSHIP

In this season of Lent,
We remember the steps that led Christ to the cross:

In this season of Lent,
we strive to follow Christ's example:
To embrace trust in God and love for humanity.

As we may make our journey, let us worship God.

PRAYER OF THANKSGIVING & CONFESSION

Thanksgiving

We thank you that you can be:

In our waking and rising
In our eating and drinking
In our walking and journeying
In our working and serving
In our rejoicing and sorrowing
In our resting and sleeping

We thank you that we have a safe environment, a peaceful country, the plenty that results from a wealthy society.

Especially we thank you that we can worship in safety and freedom.

Confession and Forgiveness

(First a moment or two of quiet where we might make our silent confession to God)

Look upon us, O Lord, let all our darkest and unworthy thoughts vanish before you.
Instead, fill us with love and compassion: open us to your love.

All our desires are known to you, we ask your blessing so that we will become witnesses to your glory.

As your family we gather here today not because we have to, but because we want to. We are here to offer you our worship, our prayers and our lives in service to you and to our neighbour.

ENCOUNTERING

Bible Reading: John 11:1-45

Prayer for Illumination

Prepare our hearts, O Lord, to receive your word.
Silence in us any voice but your own,
that hearing, we may also obey your will;
through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen

Message: “Love Brings Life”

Next Thursday is a special anniversary for me. It will be the 38th anniversary of my ordination. As such it is a time of reflection; on what I’ve done, what I could have done better, what like to still do. I’ve always considered that I’ve been in a privileged position. Not a position of privilege, but a privileged position. That is so because I am with people in the most significant times of their lives: highs and lows, ups and downs, joys and sorrows.

Over the 38 years, in that privileged position, I have conducted a few of hundred funerals.

In just about all of the funerals I have conducted, if not all of them, I have used the words from today’s Gospel reading, the words of Jesus; *“I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live.”* Through the centuries, people have clung to these words of Jesus like few other of his sayings. The image of Jesus with the two grieving sisters weeping at the tomb of their brother has offered comfort and hope unmatched by other resources.

The story of the raising of Lazarus begins when word is sent to Jesus that his friend is ill. Now, Lazarus and his sisters lived in Bethany, a village very near Jerusalem. Just prior to receiving the news of Lazarus’ illness, Jesus has had to escape Jerusalem when some of the citizens of that city wanted to stone him. This means that for Jesus to respond to the message of Lazarus’ illness he would have to go back into enemy territory; back to where his would be murderers await. The terrified disciples try and talk Jesus out of going. Still, Jesus persists (after all, he’s ‘our friend’ he reminds them) and when the disciples see he is determined to go, Thomas, with a sudden rush of blood to the head and with all the bravado he can muster says, *“Let us also go that we may die with him.”* However that is the last we see of the disciples in this story. Did they go? Did they hide? We don’t know.

The image we’re given, though, seems to be of Jesus making his way back to Bethany alone there to face his would be executioners. When he arrives he’s greeted with the news that Lazarus has been dead for four days. Why do we need to know this? Well, there was a belief that a person’s soul departed the body after three days. The eternal part of a person stuck around for a few days but then departed. Conceivably,

someone could then be raised after two days, but after three, forget it! Lazarus has been dead four days. All there is left is a decaying body. It's too late. There's nothing to be done.

The hopelessness of the situation leads Lazarus' sisters, Mary and Martha, to cry in despair, "*Lord, if you had been here my brother would not have died.*" We too know that same pain, that same anguish. We know what it is to stand before death and despair feeling powerless. But Jesus looks at us, as he looked at Martha and Mary, and utter words that refuse to believe that death has the final say. "*I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live...*" These are words of defiance. You see, Jesus hates death. All through John's Gospel we have been shown a Jesus who is all about life. At the very beginning we read that, "*What has come into being in him was life*". In the encounter with Nicodemus we read, whoever believes in him will have eternal life. Later in the Gospel we have, in effect, Jesus' own mission statement: "*I have come that they may have life, and have it abundantly.*" Jesus was all about life. He hated death.

So when he sees Mary and the others weeping we are told he was '*greatly disturbed in spirit.*' Those words really are too soft. In the Greek it reads, *he was enraged.* The mourners, naturally were overcome by the culture of death. It's understandable in this time of sorrow. They were operating on the assumption that death had the final word. They believed in death, nobody believed in life. How does this make you feel Jesus? Jesus has given life to everyone; he came with the gift of life; he offers new life for everybody; he stands with the God of life; but in this moment, people can only see death.

But Jesus is not about to let death have the last word, so defiantly he marches towards the tomb of his friend Lazarus. He goes to confront death head on, meet in on its own turf to proclaim the death of death itself. John Donne, the English poet, has a line in his poem, Death Be Not Proud which reflects this reality:

*One short sleep past, we wake eternally,
And death shall be no more; Death, thou shalt die.*

Jesus, the Resurrection and the Life, proclaims the death of death. We will all die, but death will not have the final word.

So at the tomb, Jesus the one who is all about life, gives three commands.

The first is, "*Take away the stone.*" Always practical Martha objects, reminding Jesus that Lazarus has been dead for four days. Think of the stench Jesus! Lazarus is gone. Death has won the day Jesus. Don't make us face this.

This is the voice of total despair. This is the voice that says when you are dead, you are dead. It's the voice that has no sense of hope. Jesus insists, we cannot afford the luxury of despair. Take away the stone. Don't let death have the final say!

The second command Jesus gives is to his friend, "*Lazarus, come out.*" Here I think Lazarus represents each of us, all humanity. They are words to us when we too have given in to the voice of despair, when we have allowed death to sap the last shred of life out of us. I'm not talking here about physical death, but rather the power death has to rob us of the full life Jesus came to bring. Leave your tombs Jesus shouts. Come out, live again, don't die until you are really dead. Someone wrote that in our day we are living in the time of Thanatos, Thanatos being death. They were saying that although we are alive we are not really living. The novelist Susan Ertz observed, "*Millions long for immortality who don't know what to do on a rainy Sunday afternoon.*"

Jesus hates death, so he says, come out, come out of your tombs and live. What is your tomb? What holds you in a death like grip? What prevents you from being fully alive?

Which leads to Jesus' third command; "*Unbind him, and let him go.*" This, I find, to be a very powerful image. Lazarus has emerged from the tomb but is still wrapped in the grave cloths. Jesus addressing those gathered, Mary, Martha, the townspeople, and says to Lazarus' community, you release him.

And I think that is the mission Jesus has given us. We are to unbind humanity from the cloths of death and set it free to live. Our role is to help one another out of the ties that ensnare us in the culture of death and liberate all to life. There is a profound truth in this statement of Jesus, and it is that we have the power to enslave people in death or to liberate them to life. I'm not talking about some occultish or mystical type power, but simply that, by the way we engage with people, we can drive them deeper into death or liberate them to life. There is a way of living in our world which amounts to living in the land of death. People are trapped in the death of self-doubt, social isolation, anxiety, fear, despair, marginalization and oppression. We trap people in that death when we act in ways that reinforce their situation. The ways of negativity, judgementalism, condemnation are death reinforcing ways. We free people to life when we take the time to gently, gradually unbind them through love, openness, acceptance and compassion.

Jesus, the resurrection and the life, calls people from their tombs of death. He calls us to set them free.

The voice of Jesus calls out across the centuries.

-Take away the stone.

-Come out of your tombs.

-Unbind the dead and set them free.

That's what Jesus wants to do; love us into life! And that's what Jesus wants us to do; love others into life.

Lenten Candle Liturgy

As we come to the fifth Sunday of Lent,
drawing ever closer to the events of Good Friday and Easter,
events that remember the death of Jesus and his rising to new life,
we are reminded that God is a God whose love
gives life and brings life out of death.

*God continually reaches out to us,
and supremely in Jesus
has drawn near to us and shown us the way to life.*

But we have been slow learners,
failing to pick up on the hints of love with which God graces us.
We prefer instead to tread well-worn and familiar paths,
even though they lead us away from God and away from life.
(Extinguish candle)

Let us pray.

*Most holy and most loving God,
by your Spirit unclutter our hearts and minds this day
and enable us to draw closer to you through Jesus.
Reflecting on his glory,
may we glorify you in this worship
and be better resourced to glorify you
in the common daily-ness of this new week.
In his name and to your praise.
Amen*

RESPONDING

Prayers of the People

God of love, source of life;
in the confidence that nothing can separate us from your love,
we pray for ourselves and for others.

Lord,
let your wholeness and salvation
embrace the living who under the valley of the shadow of death,
and embrace the dead who are gloriously alive in you.

Be close we pray to your children for whom death is very close.
By their simple but strong faith in you may they experience peace
at the time of their departing.
Comfort God those who are caught in the painfulness of new grief.
Enable them to weep well, free from bitterness or despair.

Be the strength for all those who care for the dying:
in hospitals or at home,
in hospice or battlefield.

Be the wisdom of those who fight against untimely death.
Those who spend their days seeking for the elimination of
cancer, covid-19, many diseases,
those who seek to reduce the carnage on our roads,
those who seek to bring peace to the killing fields of war.

God be close to us all;
through your tireless Spirit,
bring real life to our weary bodies, tired minds and
sagging spirits.

In the Spirit of Christ we would pray and live, as in Christ's name we pray:

*Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come,
your will be done,
on earth as in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread.
Forgive us our sins
as we forgive those who sin against us.
Save us from the time of trial
and deliver us from evil.
For the kingdom, the power and the glory are yours
now and forever.
Amen*

AMEN

JOURNEYING

Blessing

Go now with the strength God gives.

Go quietly,

 go lightly,

 go gently,

go in love.

And the Spirit go with you.

Amen.

May the breath of God give you life,

May the compassion of Jesus Christ shape your life,

May the power of the Holy Spirit stimulate your life.

(Thank you to Geoff Lister who was to be worship leader today for the Call to Worship and opening prayers.)

For Reflection

- a) What drew your attention most in this very detailed account? Why?
- b) What is the central and most important point of the whole narrative? Why?
- c) What was the attitude of the disciples? What did they say and do?
- d) What was the attitude of Martha and Mary? What did they say and do?
- e) What was the attitude of the Jews? What did they say, do and plan?
- f) With whom can you identify yourself most: the disciples, the sisters, the Jews, or none of these?
- g) Have you ever experienced times when despair and hope, life and death got confused in your thought? In times such as these, what kept up your faith?
- h) How does Lazarus rise to life today? How does resurrection take place today, giving new life to us and others?

(These questions are from the Carmelite Australia website <https://www.carmelites.org.au/lectiodivina>)

To Ponder

"If you live in the dark a long time and the sun comes out, you do not cross into it whistling. There's an initial uprush of relief at first, then-- for me, anyway--a profound dislocation. My old assumptions about how the world works are buried, yet my new ones aren't yet operational. There's been a death of sorts, but without a few days in hell, no resurrection is possible."

Mary Karr, 21st century

Arthur Schopenhauer, 19th century

"Every parting gives a foretaste of death; every coming together again a foretaste of the resurrection."

Aberjhani, The River of Winged Dreams, 21st century

"Hearts rebuilt from hope resurrect dreams killed by hate."

Fyodor Dostoyevsky, 19th century

"Life [had] replaced logic."

Dennis Hopper, 20th century

"In a world where the dead have returned to life, the word 'trouble' loses much of its meaning."

Jorge Luis Borges, 20th century

"It must be that I am not made to be a dead man, but these places and this discussion seem like a dream, and not a dream dreamed by me but by someone else still to be born."

Voltaire, 18th century

"It is not more surprising to be born twice than once; everything in nature is resurrection."

Eugene H. Peterson, 21st century

"It is not easy to convey a sense of wonder, let alone resurrection wonder, to another. It's the very nature of wonder to catch us off guard, to circumvent expectations and assumptions. Wonder can't be packaged, and it can't be worked up. It requires some sense of being there and some sense of engagement."

(These reflections are from the United Church of Christ https://www.ucc.org/worship_worship-ways)