

ORDER OF SERVICE FOR SUNDAY, APRIL 19, 2020
SECOND SUNDAY OF EASTER / EARTH SUNDAY

BEFORE WE WORSHIP, WE REFLECT...

Today's passages concern the witness of people who experienced the lifechanging power of the resurrection. Some witness to their encounter with the risen Christ. Others witness to their experience of the Holy Spirit which they believed was the same spirit that empowered Jesus and is now active within their own lives. Details differ, but all the narratives tell that something incredibly powerful was experienced by the disciples. Their transformed lives became a living witness to the reality of the risen Christ.

In today's gospel the risen Christ appears to the disciples and offers them the gift of peace. Even amid doubts and questions, we experience the resurrection in our Sunday gathering around word and meal, and in our everyday lives. Throughout the coming Sundays of Easter the first two readings will be from the Acts of the Apostles and the first letter of Peter. Even as the early Christians proclaimed the resurrection, we rejoice in the new birth and living hope we receive in baptism.

Alleluia! Christ is risen! Christ is risen indeed. Alleluia!

CALL TO WORSHIP

The disciples were hiding in fear, and Jesus came and breathed on them saying, "Receive the Holy Spirit."

Jesus interrupts us, too, and challenges us to receive God's Spirit.

We are Easter people!

We follow the risen Christ, and are filled with God's Spirit.

Throughout our lives, as we follow Jesus, our faith grows, and we are strengthened.

And so, we come to worship as Easter people!

CENTERING PRAYER

Holy One, in this ongoing Easter season We are constantly amazed at the life you offer not only to us but to all of Creation. Open us to the exciting possibilities that lie before us as Easter people. Amen.

OUR GIFTS FOR MISSION & SERVICE SUPPORT PROGRAMS THAT INTEGRATE CHILDREN WITH SPECIAL NEEDS AND CHILDREN OF DIFFERENT BACKGROUNDS.

Our gifts for Mission & Service support inner-city programs for children, like Camp Cosmos run by Montreal City Mission.

An 11-year-old girl has new respect for her 9-year-old brother with special needs thanks to the environmental summer day camp.

Eden Haber, Assistant Director of Camp Cosmos, learned about the experience from their mother. Before the camp, the girl felt ashamed of her brother, says Eden. At the camp

she was able to see how he interacted with other campers and how they enjoyed being with him, and her attitude changed. “She came out of the camp saying she was proud to have him as her brother.”

This is just one example of how Camp Cosmos brings together children: those with special needs and those without; kids who have lived in Canada their whole lives and refugees who arrived a month ago; children from different economic backgrounds, cultures, and faiths. “It’s a good opportunity for kids to integrate with other kids,” says Eden.

An environmental focus is fundamental. It’s reflected practically, as the camp tries to achieve zero waste through recycling and composting. “These kids are growing up downtown and don’t have a tangible connection with the environment,” says Eden. The camp provides that. Campers learn through ecological games, organic gardening, outings in nature, and visits to local farms.

Montreal City Mission, through Camp Cosmos, offers children and youth an appreciation of nature and a place to learn leadership skills that will help them become caring adults working for a better world.

Mission & Service is the heart and soul of The United Church of Canada. If you already give, thank you so much. If you have not given, please join me in making Mission & Service giving a regular part of your life of faith. Loving our neighbour is at the heart of our Mission & Service.

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION

Almighty God, through your only Son you overcame death and opened to us the light of eternity. Enlighten our minds and kindle our hearts with the presence of your Spirit, that we may hear your words of comfort and challenge in the reading of the scriptures, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

~from a collection of prayers posted on the Worship@North website. <https://northchurchindy.wordpress.com/>

READINGS AND PSALM

Acts 2:14a, 22-32

After the Holy Spirit comes to the apostles on Pentecost, Peter preaches the gospel to the gathered crowd. He tells them that Jesus, who obediently went to his death according to God’s plan, was raised from the dead by God. Finally, he appeals to scripture, quoting Psalm 16:8-11, to show that Jesus is the Messiah: though crucified, the risen Jesus is now enthroned.

^{14a}Peter, standing with the eleven, raised his voice and addressed [the crowd], ²²“You that are Israelites, listen to what I have to say: Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with deeds of power, wonders, and signs that God did through him among you, as you yourselves know—²³this man, handed over to you according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by

the hands of those outside the law. ²⁴But God raised him up, having freed him from death, because it was impossible for him to be held in its power. ²⁵For David says concerning him,

'I saw the Lord always before me,
for he is at my right hand so that I will not be shaken;

²⁶therefore my heart was glad, and my tongue rejoiced;
moreover my flesh will live in hope.

²⁷For you will not abandon my soul to Hades,
or let your Holy One experience corruption.

²⁸You have made known to me the ways of life;
you will make me full of gladness with your presence.'

²⁹"Fellow Israelites, I may say to you confidently of our ancestor David that he both died and was buried, and his tomb is with us to this day. ³⁰Since he was a prophet, he knew that God had sworn with an oath to him that he would put one of his descendants on his throne. ³¹Foreseeing this, David spoke of the resurrection of the Messiah, saying,

'He was not abandoned to Hades,
nor did his flesh experience corruption.'

³²This Jesus God raised up, and of that all of us are witnesses."

Psalm 16

In your presence there is fullness of joy. (Ps. 16:11)

¹Protect me, O God, for I take refuge in you;

I have said to the LORD, "You are my Lord, my good above all other."

²**All my delight is in the godly that are in the land,
upon those who are noble among the people.**

³But those who run after other gods
shall have their troubles multiplied.

⁴**I will not pour out drink offerings to such gods,
never take their names upon my lips.**

⁵O LORD, you are my portion and my cup;
it is you who uphold my lot.

⁶**My boundaries enclose a pleasant land;
indeed, I have a rich inheritance.**

⁷I will bless the LORD who gives me counsel;
my heart teaches me night after night.

⁸**I have set the LORD always before me;
because God is at my right hand, I shall not be shaken.**

⁹My heart, therefore, is glad, and my spirit rejoices;
my body also shall rest in hope.

¹⁰**For you will not abandon me to the grave,
nor let your holy one see the pit.**

¹¹You will show me the path of life;

in your presence there is fullness of joy, and in your right hand are pleasures forevermore.

1 Peter 1:3-9

This epistle was written to encourage Christians experiencing hardships and suffering because of their faith in Christ. The letter opens by blessing God for the living hope we have through Christ's resurrection even amid difficult circumstances and surroundings.

³Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! By his great mercy he has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, ⁴and into an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, ⁵who are being protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. ⁶In this you rejoice, even if now for a little while you have had to suffer various trials, ⁷so that the genuineness of your faith—being more precious than gold that, though perishable, is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed. ⁸Although you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and rejoice with an indescribable and glorious joy, ⁹for you are receiving the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls.

John 20:19-31

The risen Jesus appears to his disciples, offering them a benediction, a commission, and the gift of the Holy Spirit. But one of their number is missing, and his unbelief prompts another visit from the Lord.

¹⁹When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." ²⁰After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. ²¹Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." ²²When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. ²³If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained."

²⁴But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. ²⁵So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord." But he said to them, "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe."

²⁶A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." ²⁷Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe." ²⁸Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!" ²⁹Jesus said to him, "Have you believed

because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.”

³⁰Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. ³¹But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.

SERMON

The opposite of faith is not doubt, it is fear.

Thomas is emotionally torn apart with grief. He abandoned his Rabbi in his hour of need; he did not have the courage to show up for Jesus' crucifixion and he was not around to see where Jesus was laid to rest. Now the Jewish religious authorities are rumored to be on the lookout for Thomas and the other disciples who, by the way, have literally locked themselves inside a building in fear. Thomas is on his way to the meeting place afraid for his life.

Doubting Thomas? No. Scared Thomas. Very, very scared.

If Thomas accepts what the others tell him about Jesus having just left the building – alive – then he will suddenly have to change his whole belief system, his understanding of the world and how Yahweh interacts with that world. If Thomas takes the risk and believes the experience of his friends, “normal” loses all meaning and a new reality that defies all logic will need to be embraced. The dead no longer stay dead, a relationship with God suddenly becomes intensely personal and a supernatural power guides the heart and mind. And that, people, is not even close to the fear Thomas faces at seeing alive the one he loved and abandoned to a cruel death – especially after promising that he would never leave Jesus' side.

Doubting Thomas? No. Scared Thomas. Scared and ashamed.

Thomas wants proof. This is not an unreasonable request. Thomas is the outsider – he missed the punch line! He was absent when Jesus appeared. The news is too good to be true and that is all the more reason to fear the reality! By asking for proof, Thomas is attempting to hold on to his reality and keep some control. The pain of losing Jesus makes Thomas all the more fearful of accepting the truth. Better to not hope too much in order to avoid the pain of disappointment and further grief. Thomas is so afraid to risk believing the miracle that he is blinded to the joy and wonder of his friends! The reaction of the others to having seen Jesus alive would be enough to remove any doubt, don't you think? Such joy could be not be an act. Academy Award winners the disciples were not!

So, why the need for proof? Is Thomas really doubting or is he scared to face his failure?

Notice that Jesus does not ridicule Thomas regarding his request for proof. Jesus does tell Thomas to cease doubting and believe. “*Ah ha!*” you say! “*See, he is 'Doubting Thomas!'*” Perhaps. Try this interpretation of the situation on for size...

As an actor, one always looks for the strongest motivation in any scene. As a human being, how does one cover up one's fear? Often anger or bravado is the means to hide the fear one feels. So, which is the stronger motivation? Ignoring the joy of the disciples and spouting one's disbelief that "Jesus was here", or realizing that the amazement of one's friends is genuine and being terrified of Jesus' response to a broken promise? What if Jesus does not forgive the betrayal? What if Jesus stops loving Thomas?

Now, suppose that Jesus is aware of the emotional battle going on inside of Thomas. Jesus knows the fear and the means Thomas is using to hide it. What if Jesus' words are meant to address the fear Thomas has of losing Jesus' love instead of the doubt he so loudly announces? What if Jesus is saying to Thomas, "Do not doubt my love, Thomas. Believe in my love! Do you feel relief because we are face to face and I do not reject you? Blessed are those who believe in my love and trust it without my having to say it face to face." What if Thomas' exclamation of, "My Lord and my God!" is not just a statement of belief but of thanks? By not rejecting Thomas, by allowing the request to touch the wounds be fulfilled, Jesus is letting Thomas know that he is loved and forgiven.

Bottom line – it doesn't matter whether Thomas was doubting or scared. What matters is that Jesus is alive; Thomas believed; the Holy Spirit was given and the body of Christ, the Church, is still here today.

To believe in Christ, to follow where he leads takes courage, it takes trust and it involves risk. Thomas learned that. I close with a poem that captures the heart of living a life in Christ:

To laugh is to risk appearing the fool.

To weep is to risk appearing sentimental.

To reach out to another is to risk involvement.

To expose your feelings is to risk exposing your true self.

To place your ideas and dreams before the crowd is to risk their loss.

To love is to risk not being loved in return.

To live is to risk dying.

To hope is to risk despair.

To try is to risk failure.

But risks must be taken because the greatest hazard in life is to risk nothing.

The person who risks nothing does nothing, has nothing, is nothing.

They may avoid suffering and sorrow,

But they simply cannot learn, feel, change, grow, love or live.

Chained by their certitudes, they are a slave.

They have forfeited freedom.

Only a person who risks is free.

Amen.

PRAYERS OF INTERCESSION

Uplifted by the promised hope of healing and resurrection, we join the people of God in all times and places in praying for the church, the world, and all who are in need.

Open the doors we close, O God, when we fear those who worship you in different ways. Guide us to unity and harmony so that we may come to respect and cherish our commonalities. Lord, in your mercy, hear our prayer.

Open the paths we ignore, O God, when we prioritize financial gain and convenience over listening to the groaning of the earth. Inspire all to care for the world you have made so that living things might thrive. Lord, in your mercy, hear our prayer.

Open the rooms we lock, O God, to those who live without a homeland or place of safety. We pray that generous nations offer refuge and peace for all. Lord, in your mercy, hear our prayer.

Open the hearts we close, O God, to the cries of those in pain. We pray for those isolated physically or emotionally during this pandemic; through incarceration, addiction, mental illness, chronic suffering, grief, and all in need. We bring before you our family members, friends and community members who are in need of your peace and healing hand at this time: Rita Covernton; Mike Froese; Brooke Alexiuk; Abbie; Tracy Skoglund; Carolyn & Douglas; Don; Amber; Nicole; Gordon Dreger; Scott Brown; Diane Dreger; the family of Annie Grossman; Elizabeth & David. Lord, in your mercy, hear our prayer.

Open the ways of love, O God, in the pursuit of peace throughout the world, and bless the efforts of missionaries, healthcare professionals, activists for women and children, and relief workers, especially those who find themselves in harm's way during this pandemic. Keep them and their families safe as they put the needs of others before themselves. Lord, in your mercy, hear our prayer.

Open the way to eternal life, O God, as we remember those who have died in faith, especially Annie Grossman and Eleanor Wilkinson. Free us from the fear of death, that we embrace the peace you have promised. Lord, in your mercy, hear our prayer.

With bold confidence in your love, almighty God, we place all for whom we pray into your eternal care; through Christ our Lord. Amen.

THE LORD'S PRAYER

BENEDICTION

May the One who brought forth Jesus from the dead raise you to new life, fill you with hope, and turn your mourning into dancing.

May the blessing of God – Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer of all life – be with us now, and always. Amen.

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