

Faith Reflections – Easter Day 2020

In our Holy Week journey this year we've been following Gospel of John, beginning last Sunday with the story of Jesus' palm processional parade into Jerusalem, then moving to Maundy Thursday with Jesus' washing of the disciples' feet at the Last Supper and giving them the commandment to love one another, then onto Good Friday, where we read the story of the Passion, in which Jesus is betrayed and arrested, put on trial by the Jewish and Roman authorities, denied by Peter, sentenced to death and crucified, then laid in a tomb. It's a long, emotional journey, one that takes us on a whole roller-coaster of feelings. Today we come to the final part of that journey – the beautiful and tender story of Mary Magdalene making her way to Jesus' tomb early in the morning. What was Mary thinking about on that walk to the tomb that day, in as much pain as she possibly could be after losing Jesus, her mentor, guide, Lord and friend? Perhaps she was still picturing the agonizing sight of Jesus being crucified as she stood there at the foot of the cross, watching and waiting. Perhaps she was thinking of all the moments they had shared together, of the conversations, learning, laughter and tears they had known. Perhaps she was thinking of the incredible love he showed to everyone, a love that was so deep, unconditional and accepting. Whatever it was, Mary's grief and pain would have been very real. But when she arrives at the tomb and finds the stone rolled away she is stunned, her shock and disbelief leading to a series of dramatic events: running to tell the disciples what has happened, going back to the tomb and standing outside it weeping, seeing someone in the tomb asking her why she was crying, then hearing a voice behind her and turning around, thinking it was the gardener, only to recognize Jesus as soon as he calls her name and realizing he is risen. Mary, a woman, becomes the first witness to the resurrection: a moment of profound joy and hope.

Of course, the Easter story is all about hope. Hope that death is not the end, that sadness and grief are not the end, hope that life and love will eventually triumph. It's not easy to be talking about hope right now in the midst of a global pandemic. Every day as we watch or listen to the news we hear of the devastating impact COVID-19 is having on so many people in our world. The statistics of those who have or who will contract the disease, the grief of those who have lost loved ones, and the economic impact of all of this is staggering. We know that it's likely to be months, possibly over a year before anything even remotely resembling the "old normal" comes as we deal with this health crisis. Although we in Manitoba aren't experiencing the pandemic as

dramatically as some other places are, we know there is a lot of pain and despair in many places. As Christians we're called to love our neighbour wherever they are, including those we can't see, so we care deeply for everyone who is affected by this pandemic in any way.

As Christians we are also people of hope: hope that doesn't soft-pedal or minimize the reality of what is happening, but hope that is realistic, grounded in truth. Cultivating such hope is a practice we all can do. This past week I was part of a Zoom conference call with a number of colleagues in which we talked about this. During the conference call we watched a video called "How does Hope say hello in times like these?" The video presenter was a counsellor and former minister living in Calgary, who invited us to reflect on where we see signs of hope around us now. At one point we divided into small groups and discussed the question "How is hope saying hello to you now?" The answers were amazing, and there were many of them. Some people found hope in music, in laughter, in the creative ways people are coping with being in this time, in how politicians are putting aside differences and working together. Others found hope in all those who are working so hard to figure out how to address issues in the pandemic, such as the need for more ventilators which is something a member of our church family, Earl Gardiner's company is involved in. Still others found hope how in the midst of what is happening the Earth is getting a much-needed break: emissions levels are significantly down, the air is cleaner, pollution and other negative environmental factors are greatly reduced. What signs of hope do you see in this midst of this unusual time we are in? How is hope saying hello to you in your own life?

A few weeks ago someone in our church family, Cathy Sandercock, gave me a beautiful gift. It's a piece of art created by a local artist of a cross made out of sticks with a path of small stones leading to an image of a tomb made of larger stones, with a large one rolled away, showing emptiness inside. It's an image of Easter – reminding us that while the story that is so central to our faith begins with death and despair on a cross, it leads to hope, new life and resurrection in an empty tomb. That is the hope we celebrate today. That is the good news that fills us with such joy. That is the message we are called to take out into the world in a time where now more than ever, hope matters. May God enable all of us to know such hope, faith and joy and to share those gifts with all those whose lives we touch. For we are an Easter people, and Alleluia is our song! Thanks be to God. Amen.