

SERMON
4-21-19
Our souls cry out

Around Christmas one year at Frazer Mennonite, I remember our then pastor - Jason Kuniholm - sharing a question that pastors sometimes ask themselves when preaching on a well-known passage. "What new can be said about Christmas?" he asked that morning. "You all know this story as well as I do. What can I possibly add?"

I admit that I felt a bit that way while preparing for today. Not all – but some of us - grew up memorizing Bible verses, doing Bible quizzing, and attending and taking turns leading Bible studies. For those with that background, it can be easy to feel like we've heard it all before. And it can be hard to encounter scripture stories in a fresh way.

Another challenge is that those who passed the faith on to us sometimes focused attention on things that weren't interesting or even particularly helpful. They did what Dave likes to call: "putting the emphasis on the wrong *syl-LAB-ble!*"

One Sunday when I was about 9, my junior church teacher asked, "Which is more important – Christmas or Easter?" The answer he wanted was: "Easter – because of Jesus' resurrection." But my fourth-grade sensibilities made me adamantly disagree. "Christmas," I argued, using concrete-sequential logic. "After all, without Christmas, there's no Easter!"

Our souls cry out with whatever we bring with us today

As we've traveled through Lent this year, Susan and Worship Committee have invited us to engage with more interesting questions. Their challenging and helpful prompts were printed in our bulletins:

For those who have been on sometimes decades-long Lenten journeys of picking out the chaff we have been handed in faith and community, we turn this Lent to the wheat. We focus on what we hold on to, rather than what we lay aside. What is the faith we long to say yes to? Who is the God we follow?

We leaned-in and engaged these questions in a number of ways over the last few weeks:

- Artists in the congregation created original pieces around this theme that surrounded us during Sunday worship
- A couple different Lent reflection groups met in the Parrot Gallery during these weeks
- 29 writers shared lectionary text reflections that were sent out to all via email
- A couple of us met to read the Easter texts for today
- And, during Adult Christian Ed last week, a small group met to talk about what Easter means to us

In addition, we gather as individuals who each have our own stories. Our souls cry out with whatever we bring with us this morning.

We may be:

- Rejoicing at the evidence of spring everywhere
- Distracted by dinner plans
- Carrying doubts or skepticism
- Weighed down by grief
- Filled with fear
- Despairing in search of something on which to build our lives
- Surprised by unexpected hope
- Seeking healing
- Desiring growth
- Anticipating something new
- Yearning to encounter the Holy

A cast of characters not unlike us

We come bringing our own mix of recent experiences, trauma histories, passing thoughts, and deep feelings. For various reasons, some of us may be resisting the Easter story; while others may be feeling drawn to move closer. We come as we are and bring what we bring.

What's so interesting to me in the story that Jerry read from Luke is the cast of characters we find there. It's another group of people with their own mix of personal experiences, traumas, thoughts, and feelings. They're also trying to figure out the events of what we now call Holy Week - but they're trying to do it in real time, and they are all over the place.

They're asking the kinds of questions that invite attention: *What just happened? How does this fit with what we thought before? And what in the world might it all mean for us now?*

It seems that Jesus' earliest followers are likely grappling with wheat and chaff questions of their own. What meaning are they to take from Jesus' crucifixion and the reports of his resurrection? Given all they've experienced, witnessed, and heard - what are they going to hold onto? And where do they go together from here?

As we consider their familiar story once again, what wheat might we glean from the account of those who were there? Might the Spirit use their story to grow fresh blades of a living faith in us? To open our eyes anew to God's action in the world through the Bread of Life?

There are two lectionary texts offered for this morning – one from John 20, and the other from Luke 24. Just like two friends who attended the same event and are telling others about it, the writers of these texts have striking differences in their accounts:

- Luke lists a group of women who went there: Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and “the other women”
- John says it was only Mary who went to the tomb that morning
- Luke remembers Peter running to the tomb alone and finding the burial cloths

- John says that it was Peter and the disciple Jesus loved who heard Mary's story of finding the tomb empty and went to check it out. He recounts tiny details of their response – how the other disciple outran Peter, but did not go in right away; how Peter went in first and found the linen wrappings – with the cloth that had been on Jesus' head rolled up in a place by itself

After his brutal death by crucifixion, Jesus left a band of shaken followers - grieving mourners, uncertain people filled with fear. I was particularly drawn to the Luke 24 story because of the different characters. Not surprisingly, they have a mix of responses to the news that the stone in front of the tomb has been found rolled away - and Jesus' body gone.

- We read that the women are initially perplexed, and then terrified. After being reminded of Jesus' earlier words, their grief, fear, and shock turns into eager witness to the apostles - the completely unexpected has happened.
- But their story is largely met with skepticism and disbelief. Verse 9 says: "These words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them." Those apostles resist the story; they're not open to hearing truth in it.
- In Peter, however, a tentative faith opens. *Could this be true? What might this mean?* He runs towards the scene of the story for a firsthand experience of it. Seeing the empty tomb for himself, he stoops and looks in. In stunned wonder, he returns home – still trying to process it all.

Many of Jesus' own followers struggled to accept and make sense of his death and resurrection; and we are still grappling with it all these years later! What I love about Peter's response is that he is curious and open. Despite having denied even knowing Jesus just days earlier, now he runs towards the story seeking a firsthand experience with it.

We know that he later goes on to live the rest of his life joining God's work in the world and bearing witness to Jesus Christ.

May our lives cry out in witness!

Might we learn from Peter's response and stay curious and open to the mystery of the Easter morning story? In response, might our own lives cry out in life-giving witness to God's desired *shalom* for us and for all?

In his book, *Shalom: the Bible's word for salvation, justice, and peace*, Perry B. Yoder argues forcefully that Jesus' birth, life, teachings, death, and resurrection can only be fully understood together in the context of God's big work of *shalom*: all things as they should be - in us and in all of creation.

From this perspective, Jesus did not come simply to die for human sin – which may have been the emphasis some of us heard as children.

Instead, Yoder understands Jesus Christ as a hard *No!* to evil; and a dramatic *Yes!* to God's *shalom* project of salvation, justice, and peace - in both the personal and systemic sense:

- Gabriel announces Jesus' birth to Mary, saying that "his kingdom shall have no end: a clear witness to the hope for a royal messianic figure...[whose] reign will be marked by shalom justice, just as the prophets envisioned." (120)
- Mary responds by bursting into joyful song: "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior... he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things..."
- Jesus confirms these words by beginning his ministry by reading Isaiah 61: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor... to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free..."
- His continued challenge of the status quo threatened religious and political leaders so much that they decided to crucify him. But Jesus turned away from the option of violently forcing his *shalom* agenda - instead, choosing to put himself forever on the side of all who experience suffering.
- His resurrection was God's message that love is always greater than death! In response, we're called to pour out our lives as a life-giving witness – joining God at work in the world in ways that stretch on and on

May our souls cry out with praise!

The four lines of the reed cross (shown in the beautiful banner Jan Stoltzfus made) illustrate the reach of this kind of witness. The four trajectories extending out from the cross – remind me of the different directions – north, south, east, and west – and the many various ways in which we can join God's work of *shalom* around the world, in our neighborhoods and in our individual lives, too:

- Some participate in relief, development, and peace work in the name of Christ through organizations like Mennonite Central Committee
- Some respond in Christian love to those affected by disasters in Canada and the U.S. through Mennonite Disaster Service
- Many give to the budget here at CMCL and so help ensure that this building is an inviting and safe place for us and many others from the community to gather (a Spanish-language congregation, groups of people fighting addiction, kids in foster care wanting to visit with their birth parents, folks who like to sing together)
- Many of us work as teachers, nurses, dieticians, social workers, doctors, and counselors – bringing healing and hope in our work lives
- Some of us offer a caring before-school program here at Mornings On Orange Street for families living within blocks of our church who struggle financially
- Some of us volunteer as tutors at Fulton Elementary or other schools
- Others serve as peacemakers at work, at church, and at home
- Some care for frail family members
- Some sing for dear friends in their last hours

As Annie Dillard said, "How we spend our days is, of course, how we spend our lives. What we do with this hour, and that one, is what we are doing."

We could go on and on naming ways we are - or can - bear witness to the birth, life, teachings, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. These examples of spending the hours and days of our lives crying out with this kind of witness in the world strengthens my faith at Easter and throughout the year - and causes me to cry out in praise! *This* is the God I want to follow. *This* is the kind of faith I long to say yes to.

In closing, let's join together in singing *My soul cries out* – Mary's song of praise. I know it's Easter, but Mary glimpsed God's big mission from the start and knew she had a part to play. So let's echo her words in praise and celebration this day!

May our souls cry out with praise!