

St Philip's Anglican Church O'Connor
Resurrection and the life of the believer

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Acts 4:32-35; Psalm 133; 1 John 1:1-2:2; John 20:19-31

What a fascinating time Easter is—what mixed messages, strange ideas and cultural anomalies. All the anti-Christian, anti-religion people come out of the closet. Letters to the editor are written, bishops make announcements and everyone, well lots of people, has a four day holiday—Buddhists, atheists and Christians included. And vast quantities of chocolate are consumed. Those of us who are practicing Christians, or who at least have a more or less positive connection to the story of Jesus, find it a bit bewildering; also a little cringe-worthy. With Cardinal George Pell debating Richard Dawkins on the ABC, there is no side to take at all, although a Catholic friend of mine did end up rooting for Dawkins. None of this is helped by the fact that church leaders seem more inclined to apologize for the resurrection than to proclaim it. It was all so different that first Easter.

It is easy to forget that the first Easter led to an explosion of language, a different way to talk about God and what God, as creator, redeemer and Spirit, was now doing in the world. The language moved from faith 'in God' to 'faith in Christ'. It was a new thing, a *novum*, to use the technical language. Today there is a hesitancy to confess Christ. Rationalism, scientific materialism, political correctness all mean that we hesitate to make any claims about God in Christ. More and more Christians seem to be more comfortable talking about the pre-Easter Jesus—the so-called historical Jesus—as the ground and content of faith. However it was the earliest Christians, who experienced the resurrection, the post-Easter Jesus, who seem to have been renewed, empowered and sent to mission. Something happened that Easter Day that brought about a radical change in the followers of Jesus.

So many debates today get bogged down in whether there was physical resurrection or even whether there was a tomb. Your more evangelistic atheists even want to assert that there was no Jesus. In all these debates, there is little or no connection made between the resurrection and the life of the believer and the community of faith. We get so hung up on whether the resurrection was possible that we forget what it has begun and who we are because of it. This is not the New Testament tradition, however. It is certainly not what we find in today's readings. All of them make the link, the essential link, between resurrection and the faith community and its mission. These passages and others like them tell us that the resurrection is fundamentally relational—it is by a person, for a people, for a world.

In our Acts reading, the early Christians report that "*with great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all*". In the epistle, John declares that the testimony of the community is based on what they have heard, seen, looked at and touched—and they are talking about the risen Christ, the risen Christ, who reveals that God is light, in whom there is no darkness at all. In our Gospel reading, that fantastic passage from John, the resurrection is foundational for the gift of faith—the fullness of life. Thomas sees, hears and touches; he falls on the ground, believes, and is changed.

In the New Testament then there is a clear link, a fundamental link, between the risen Jesus and a new reality both for the individual believer and within the community. With this new reality comes a corresponding new lifestyle, a new way of being. The lifestyle of the community has a 'good news' function—in ever-changing situations it is to preserve the memory of the crucified one who is raised from the dead. The lifestyle of the community is

meant to embody, en flesh this new reality, and show others that God is light in whom there is no darkness.

There is a flow of power and possibility in this story. It begins with the ‘powers and principalities’, the forces of power and violence that define the world. Those forces were embodied in unjust civil and religious structures and the family and cultural scapegoating that maintained peace at the cost of the victim. Those forces are still with us today. The power in the story moves to Jesus, who in the face of such violence brings peace and forgiveness: three times in the Gospel the crucified and resurrected Jesus says, “Peace be with you”. Three times—a trinity of grace; a victory over violence, death and darkness. Finally the power moves to the disciples, the community of faith. We are the resurrection, we are the Body of Christ.

As Thorwald Lorenzen, says, *“through faith and baptism the resurrection of Christ flows into the life of the believer and creates analogies to Christ’s life, death and resurrection . . . the power of the risen Christ aims to transform history in the direction of God’s shalom”*.

You know I am not a Christian because I want to go to heaven—what ever that may be. I am Christ-follower because I want to be part of something much bigger than myself that I can stand in and for. I want to nail my colours to the mast of a ship that is actually going somewhere positive and makes a difference in a world that has broken dreams and pain and suffering. I am also one of those weirdest of people, a Christian, because my own life has been redeemed and transformed by the risen Lord. And I want to do all of this with some one else—you guys—for it is only in a community of faith, a community that trusts in God, just as Jesus did, that any of this becomes possible. We need each other and it is only in relationship that God is truly revealed and known since God is a relationship of Love, love that is for others. That’s why Jesus didn’t write a book—he gathered a community.

So what is the nature of this community that embodies the risen Lord? There are many answers to that question but I will just take a few pointers from our readings today. These points are not definitive or in any order of importance but if we make these our practice then I guarantee Christ will be proclaimed amongst us and we will be on the road to wholeness.

I’ll begin with a quote from Bishop Azad Marshall of the Anglican Diocese of Iran, based in Jerusalem. I came across this quote this week when I was doing some background reading on the persecution of Christians in Iran. As you can imagine it is very difficult being a Christian in a country like Iran, which is a theocracy and whose current leaders are attempting to tighten control.

Bishop Marshall is talking about the nature of the church in the Middle East and the question of interfaith dialogue.

He says, *“The Church needs to show that Christ is for the whole world, and therefore we serve people of all faiths. We cannot restrict Jesus to ourselves. We are there to serve. Out of our service come relationships. There is no conflict between the desire to have inter-faith dialogue and to retain the integrity of the scripture and the Christian faith. The Christ we follow came for all. Whatever relationships we have flow from that given. The Church is often caught in the crossfire. The Church cannot be for one or for the other side. It is for Jesus, the prince of peace. So the church is to be a bridge, bringing the communities together”*.

I like this man! He could almost be talking about St Philip’s. With our focus on welcome and hospitality and our foundational value of inclusion, radical inclusion I would say, we are about bringing communities together. As Bishop Marshall says, this is about service. We serve one another and those in need. In our Acts reading this is exactly what the early Christian communities did. In verse 34 it says there was not a needy person amongst them. It

also says that it was the grace of the risen Lord that enabled them to take this step. And so welcome, hospitality and service are signs of and embodiments of Christ in and amongst us.

The next point is that the Christian community is to be a community of peace; peace that is proclaimed and worked towards and peace that is known by each of us and among us. Jesus Christ is called the Prince of Peace. His task was to bring reconciliation, to draw all creation into a unity of love. He came and stood among his followers, showed them his hands that had been pierced by nails and offered them peace. He didn't berate them for their cowardice and betrayal. He didn't punish them. He offered them peace.

It is heart rending to see so many Christian communities in conflict. It is understandable, given our very fallible and human natures, but saddening. Peace truly is a gift beyond price. I have two questions for you to reflect upon. What is it that you can do as an individual in this community, here at St Philip's to promote peace—amongst us, in your family and in your heart? Secondly, do you have a sense of peace in yourself, a sense of serenity? If not, why not? If you want any pointers about that come and see me :) I am always available.

Lastly, we embody the Risen Lord when we forgive. I know this is a fraught subject. I am loath even to bring it up. Some of us have suffered terribly at the hands of someone else. Some of us have seen others suffer because of the actions of someone else. And some of us have had the trite phrase thrown at us, "well you just need to forgive". When we are hurt and wounded, fearful and resentful, forgiveness seems impossible. I have been on a forgiveness journey myself, so I speak from experience.

Yet forgiveness is fundamental to the Risen Christ and therefore fundamental to our communal life. John's epistle says that in God there is no darkness and that through Jesus we are forgiven all our sins. I think John can say this because if he was there in that upper room when Jesus appeared to those frightened, guilty, shame-filled disciples, then he would have experienced this forgiveness first hand. New life would have become possible for him because he would have been released from the horror of what he had done. Jesus also released himself from the chains of resentment when he forgave those who had violently betrayed him. Forgiveness is as much about and for the person who has been wronged as it is about the one who needs to be forgiven. Forgiveness brings freedom. It brings freedom from the cycle of blame, retribution and violence and freedom from the chains of resentment and anger.

Welcome, hospitality, service, peace, reconciliation, forgiveness: if we make these things our way of life then in word and deed we will truly be the body of Christ, the risen Lord. We will take hold of the promises of God and begin to live what salvation means—*shalom*, wholeness of life here and now.

Jesus Christ came and stood amongst his disciples and said, "Peace be with you".

Jesus Christ is risen. Alleluia, Alleluia.

He is risen indeed. Alleluia.