

“No body now but ours”

April 2009

Hymn “We shall go out with hope of resurrection” VU 586

Scripture *“Woman,” he said, “Why are you crying? Who is it you are looking for?”*
Thinking he was the gardener she said, “Sir, if you have carried him away tell me
where you have put him, and I will get him.” Jesus said to her, “Mary”. She
turned toward him and cried out in Aramaic, “Rabboni”.
Jesus said, “Do not hold on to me, for I have not yet returned to the father. Go
instead to my brothers and tell them, ‘I am returning to my father and your father,
to my God and your God.’” John 20:15-17

Prayer Let us pray – O God, sometimes we look for you in our abandoned dreams, in the things that might have been. Today, when we take time to look, we may see your face and hear your voice in the gardener, or the grocery clerk, or other unexpected people. We may feel new life, and new hope, and new beginnings through an unknown source. Help us to know you and know what you would have us do to make Easter happen in the world today. Amen.

Lesson It is early Easter morning and Mary Magdalene is in conversation with her risen teacher but she doesn't recognize him until he speaks. It's apparent that something has changed. Then he tells her she cannot touch him – “Do not hold on to me,” he says. She cannot continue the personal, individual relationship she used to have. She must now seek a relationship with Jesus' spiritual brothers and sisters, the beloved company behind the telling and the writing of this gospel.

Many of us have been taught that we should relate to, even worship the risen Christ. Stained glass windows and paintings portray the risen Christ, ruler of all, on a heavenly throne. Keeping Easter need not centre on worshipping the post-Easter Jesus.

As with loved ones who have entered into the mystery of life beyond death, we may still feel a strong connection to Jesus – to who he was and what he taught us. But what matters most is not what we believe about life beyond death or about the risen Christ in particular. Like Mary Magdalene, we are not to hold on to Jesus' individual being or to whatever image we may have, pre- or post-Easter, of Christ.

The risen Christ is no longer a human being, but is found in the community of all God's people, of all God's beloved creation. Easter is not about insisting on one particular version of resurrection. It is about choosing new life in our ways of acting, caring and creating together.

Our loved ones live on as we live out the best of what they have given us. So too, Christ is alive when we embody holy wisdom and compassion, when we work for peace, justice and well-being in God's beloved world, and when we sense God's presence everywhere in one another.

What should be clear is that resurrection isn't just limited to the experience of Jesus or to however we understand a life after death, but in the passing from death to life here and now. The message of resurrection and of Easter hope is that we can live fully in this life, the life we are living as AOTS men, giving of ourselves, and risking for love's sake.

The secret to practicing resurrection is in giving who we are and what we have completely, wholly away to something greater than ourselves – in escaping from the circumstances and choices that entomb us and entering into new life here and now. In life and in death, Jesus modeled this generosity and transformation for followers then and now. As we embrace resurrection as a credible and meaningful principle for living, we, like Jesus, may become more than anyone around us – or even we ourselves – could have imagined.

Prayer-in-action Come together in a circle prayer where you each share where you see new life emerging in your lives or in the world around you. Before you part, share ideas about what you can do to help mend the world. Even small things count. Check in with each other from time to time, being an Easter community for each other.

Prayer Let us pray – Turn us on, O God. Help us to reach out for the spirit power that Jesus promised to those who follow his way. We seek this power, yet we need the Spirit in other ways as well. We need a comforter, a teacher, an enabler, so that the power is used wisely and well, to lead us into your eternal ways of truth. Amen.

“We will be faithful! Will we not?”

April 2010

Hymn “When the Son of God was dying” VU 153

Scripture *Mark 14:27-40, 50 (Contemporary English Version)*

Jesus said to his disciples, “All of you will reject me, as the Scriptures say, ‘I will strike down the shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered.’ But after I am raised to life, I will go ahead of you to Galilee.”

Peter spoke up, “Even if all the others reject you, I never will.” Jesus replied, “Before a rooster crows twice, you will say three times that you don’t know me.” But Peter was so sure of himself that he said, “Even if I have to die with you, I will never say that I don’t know you!” All the others said the same thing.

Jesus went with his disciples to a place called Gethsemane, and he told them, “Sit here while I pray.” Jesus took along Peter, James and John. He was sad and troubled and told them, “I am so sad that I feel as if I am dying. Stay here and keep awake with me.”

Jesus walked on a little way. Then he knelt down on the ground and prayed, “Father if it is possible, don’t let this happen to me! Father, you can do anything. Don’t make me suffer by having me drink from this cup. But do what you want, and not what I want.”

When Jesus came back and found the disciples sleeping, he said to Simon Peter, “Are you asleep? Can’t you stay awake for just one hour? Stay awake and hope that you won’t be tested. You want to do what is right but you are weak.”

Jesus went back and prayed the same prayer. But when he returned to the disciples, he found them sleeping again. They simply could not keep their eyes open, and they did not know what to say.

All of Jesus’ disciples ran off and left him.

Prayer

An upper room did our Lord prepare for those He loved until the end;
And his disciples still gather there to celebrate their risen Friend.
A lasting gift Jesus gave his own: to share in bread, his loving cup.
Whatever burdens may bow us down, He by his cross shall lift us up.
And after supper He washed their feet, for service, too, is sacrament.
In Christ our joy shall be complete: sent out to serve, as He was sent.

Lesson I began to prepare this on Maundy Thursday prior to our celebration of the Seder meal, similar to Jesus’ last supper with his disciples. I could not help thinking of how the twelve must have felt. They had followed this ‘man’ Jesus for many months and now he was telling them they would soon desert him. “We’ll show you how faithful we can be!” they thought to themselves, but they couldn’t even stay awake for one hour while Jesus prayed.

Following the Seder meal, we hold a prayer vigil with one-hour shifts from 9 p.m. to 9 a.m. on Friday morning with one or more people praying in the sanctuary and one AOTS man at the door of the church to welcome the next persons. Regardless of your hour, it’s a good time for reflection and contemplation.

The disciples temporarily gave up hope

In the April, 2010 issue of 'the Observer', Keith Howard notes how 'folks ride a spiritual teeter-totter between despair and hope, wondering if they have it within them to cope with, much less embrace, what lies ahead.'

And he goes on, 'yet, from my vantage point, the church has been blessed with a remarkable spiritual resource – women, of a certain age, as they say.'

But, what about the men of the church? Do we drop off when times are tough? We're in tough just now – our numbers are dropping; our clubs are folding; it's almost impossible to find younger people who will commit to continuing leadership.

It's not that Jesus has "deserted" us.

Just because our neighbours, the men of nearby churches, are not active, it is no reason why we who are devoted to AOTS and to men's ministries should fall asleep. From what we read, men are seeking to find spiritual meaning in their lives. The call to help to deepen the spiritual life of our neighbour is strong. We're just not sure what we should do. Let us prayerfully prepare to eagerly and joyfully go out "as one that serves".

Discussion When things aren't going the way you would like, do you react with outrage or with action? Is there room in your reaction to struggle for God's justice and for the benefit of your neighbour? Where is your faith in your response?

Prayer Let us pray – God, grant me serenity through all life's trials. Bless me with honesty in my relationship with you, with courage in my actions, and with a faith that allows me to believe without yet seeing. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

“What’s a friend for?”

April 2011

Hymn “What a friend we have in Jesus” VU 664

Scripture *John 15: 9-17 (Good News Translation)*

I love you just as the Father loves me; remain in my love. If you obey my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have obeyed my Father’s commands and remain in his love.

I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete. My commandment is this: love one another, just as I love you. The greatest love you can have for your friends is to give your life for them. And you are my friends if you do what I command you. I do not call you servants any longer, because servants do not know what their master is doing. Instead, I call you friends, because I have told you everything I heard from my Father. You did not choose me; I chose you and appointed you to go and bear much fruit, the kind of fruit that endures. And so the Father will give you whatever you ask of him in my name. This, then, is what I command you: love one another.

Prayer Let us pray – Ever present One, help us to see you in our friends and in all the people we meet and in the hands that we touch. Enable us to know you, and to serve you in our world. Amen.

Lesson The dictionary defines the word “friend” as “a person who is attached to another by feelings of affection or personal regard.” When we think of a friend we think of someone who is trustworthy, loyal, helpful, understanding, forgiving, and encouraging. A trusted friend can help us find God’s purposes for our life.

Professor John Bond at Newcastle University points out that advances in medicine combined with healthy relationships can contribute to extended happiness. He says that “Even people with serious degenerative illnesses like Alzheimer’s can retain their well-being for a long time if they have good relationships with the people around them. In the end, it’s your friends and family that count most.”

Each of us is a unique individual. We all have our own stories and our own history. In our appearance, our gifts, and our life, we are different from everyone we meet. But we are joined together in many ways. We are united by language, culture, customs, and pleasures. We are also united in our human condition. Each of us suffers, hurts, and grieves. Each struggles with the storms of life and the winds of adversity.

In a recent *Soft Edges* column, Jim Taylor describes his feelings when he was forbidden to drive after heart surgery. He found it difficult to ask for help, even from his friends. He confesses, “Somehow, I have absorbed the message that the highest human virtue is to be ruggedly independent. Real men, it seems, not only don’t eat quiche, they know how to use a chainsaw or an arc welder; they do their own oil changes and rewire basements; they drive.” He notes an opposing view later in the column, “I have been known to argue that a truly isolated individual can never be fully human. Our relationships make us who we are. Sometimes I think of relationships as a kind of invisible web of energy, linking us together.” He goes on to conclude, “I seem unable to

shake off my dependence on independence. Why do I find it so difficult to depend on others?"

Sometimes we just are not ready to disturb our friends with our problems or our needs, but a true friend will be ready to listen and, if requested, to help.

C. S. Lewis notes that "True friends don't spend time gazing into each other's eyes. They show great tenderness toward each other, but they face in the same direction, toward common projects, interest, goals, and above all, to a common Lord."

Discussion Who are the friends you can count on?
 Who are the friends who can count on you?

Prayer Let us pray – O God, we thank you for our friends. You have brought wonderful friends into our lives. Let our friendships honour you as we walk in the footsteps of your son. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

George Bishop – Spiritual Life Chair

“Prophets and Prophecy”

May 2012

Hymn “Today we all are called to be disciples” VU 507
Verse 4

May we in service to our God act out the living Word,
and walk the road the saints have trod till all have seen and heard.
As stewards of the earth may we give thanks in one accord
to God who calls us all to be disciples of the Lord.

Scripture *Ezekiel 1:1-3; 1:28b-2:3a; 3:1-4* (*King James Version*)

Now it came to pass in the thirtieth year, in the fourth month, on the fifth day of the month as I was among the captives by the river of Chebar, that the heavens were opened, and I saw visions of God. In the fifth day of the month which was the fifth year of king Jehoiachin’s reign, the word of the Lord came expressly unto Ezekiel, the priest, the son of Buzi, in the land of the Chaldeans, by the river Chebar; and the hand of the Lord was there upon him.

This was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the Lord. And when I saw it I fell upon my face, and I heard a voice of one that spake. And he said unto me, Son of Man, stand upon thy feet, and I will speak unto thee. And the spirit entered into me when he spake unto me, and set me upon my feet, that I heard him that spake unto me. And he said unto me, Son of Man, I send thee to the children of Israel, to a rebellious nation that rebelled against me:

Moreover he said unto me, Son of man, eat that thou findest; eat this roll*, and go speak unto the house of Israel. So I opened my mouth, and he caused me to eat that roll. And he said unto me, Son of man, cause thy belly to eat, and fill thy bowels with this roll that I give thee. Then I did eat it; and it was in my mouth as honey for sweetness. And he said unto me, Son of man, go, get thee unto the house of Israel, and speak with my words unto them.

(roll* = scroll)

Prayer Let us pray – O Spirit, above us, beneath us, around us, within us; we seek your prophecy for us today. Whither is our way? Or are we to wither away? Amen.

Lesson This year is the 400th anniversary of the introduction of the King James Version of The Bible. Within the English speaking world the introduction of this version was most important in acquainting the common people with the messages in the Bible. For many years The Book, the KJV, was **The** Word of God. It was an item to be worshipped and remains so for some people today. But, in the 21st century the King James English doesn’t flow off the tongue and into the mind in a meaningful way. There are better translations for use now, where the translators have gone back to the original language and written in the English commonly used today.

We see something of the difficulty of the language in the verses chosen from the book of Ezekiel, but for us who grew up with the King James Version it is possible to understand. For younger people it may be more difficult.

The priest, Ezekiel, has a vision where he is called to go to the people of Israel and prophesy using the words that a divine presence has given him. It is important

that the Israelites receive and understand this message. It is important for the future of the people of Israel that they take action when they understand the message.

When Ezekiel saw the vision, there was a big change in his life.

When the Israelites paid attention to Ezekiel's prophecy, a major change in their actions and lives was necessary.

When the Bible was printed in English, in the King James Version, there was a major change in the church and in the lives of many people.

In the Christian church today there are "prophets" who are saying that major changes are necessary and offering suggestions so that the church will carry on.

In AOTS men's clubs there are other "prophets" who are saying we are doomed as an organization unless we do something, or perhaps everything, differently.

Do we have an Ezekiel or an Isaiah, or a Jeremiah in our midst that can cajole, or direct, or steer us in a new direction where we can follow Jesus teachings and example to mentor followers into 21st century disciples?

Discussion - How would you be willing to change the structure of your club or of your meetings, or the time and location of your gatherings, or the focus of your group, in order to accommodate the needs of men who are seeking fellowship and wish to nourish their souls and may consider being part of your group?

- How would you know if you are making the right choice of changes?

Prayer Let us pray – O God, we would love to bring more men to know you better. We thank you for all the joy we share within our group whether we are sharing food together, or working to create or repair something, or deep in faith discussions. Make us aware of the prophets who carry your message today and who seek to guide us in the direction you would have us take as we strive to become better servants and true disciples. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

George Bishop – Spiritual Life Chair

Easter Sunday

Devotion for April 2014

Hymn: Jesus Christ is Risen today VU 155 Vs 1, 3 & 6

Scripture: Matthew 28 vs.1 to 8 St. Mark vs. 9 to 16

Reflection:

What a surprise! What a shock! Jesus was gone and then when he did make an appearance his most faithful followers did not recognize him. They failed to get the message and even confronted with proof, did not believe. Well, do you suppose we may be the same? Good Friday is the darkest day in the new testament and Easter Sunday the most glorious, and yet we have our doubts. So, one must ask the question, what does it take, what will it take? We have to touch, feel, see, then like Thomas we believe. Each of use at some time in our lives experience an incident, a happening, that we can only describe as a miracle. A miracle we can not explain, but experienced, so we believe. Was the resurrection of Jesus one of those unexplained miracles or just a really amazing tale telling a lesson in faith? You decide! Amen

Discussion: What kind proof do you need in order to believe?

Hymn: O sons of God VU 171 Vs 1 5 & 6

Prayer: Lord, we see so we believe, we touch so we believe, help us have the faith to truly believe. We thank you and ask in the name of the risen Christ. Amen

“Easter Message”

Devotion for April 2015

Hymn: VU 155 Jesus Christ is Risen today

Scripture: Mark 16: 1-8

Reflection:

Unlike the Christmas story, all four gospels relate the crucifixion and resurrection, and even parts are found in Acts. The details vary quite a bit, but the underlying message, dying on the cross, buried and risen is the same. If you read religious books, or otherwise, about this part of Jesus life you will get any number of variations. Almost all world religions from Judaism to Islam have their own take on Jesus, who he was, or not, and the effect he has had for over a couple thousand years. No Jesus as the son of God and therefore no United Church, so you know where our faith stands. The more we learn about whom we are, where we supposedly came from, our differing beliefs around the world, questions keep arising. Definite answers are fleeting and hence we have faith. Was Jesus really who our church teaches he was? Was he really crucified, and more importantly, did he escape the tomb and rise into heaven? Like the rest of the rest of world we each have our own individual thoughts. One thing is clear though, just a good story or the real thing, Jesus set an example for the world and we can do worse than believe the Easter message and follow the teachings of Jesus.

Discussion:

Where does the Easter message fit into your faith system?

Scripture: Acts 1: 4-8

Hymn: "Because He lives" Not in VU but you can get the music and lyrics easily on the internet.

Prayer:

For the gift of Jesus Christ we are truly thankful. Help us Lord to remember the Easter message throughout the whole year. amen

“April Showers Bring May Flowers”

Devotion for April 2016

Hymn: VU 577 Peace Like a River

Scripture: Leviticus 26:4 and James 5:18

Reflection:

Like March, April has its own saying, “April showers bring May flowers”. Well, showers and or rain are a staple to life in our world. The Bible, both old and new has many, many references to rain. As necessary for life as water is we still treat it like a throw away: a disposable for the dump. Man seems to have a certain disdain for what God has provided. We destroy animals until they are no more, we destroy forests and drive the inhabitants out, we modify our food sources so they no longer nourish us, we pollute the oceans and all our water sources. Does God look at our world and frown or grimace. So how long?

Discussion:

Is there still hope that we can rebuild, correct all our errors or will we allow companies like Monsanto and Nestle’ just to name a couple really bad guys, to continue destroying God’s world.

Hymn VU 632 “Oh Blessed Spring”

Prayer:

God we thank you for the renewing rains of April. May we be ever mindful of your goodness, of the paradise you gave us, and give us the will to correct our errors and stop destroying our world.
Amen

The Rooster's Crow

April 2017

Hymn VU 161 Welcome Happy Morning

Scripture: Mark 8:31 and Acts 4:33

Reflection:

Easter seems to jump around from late March to May, but whenever, it always seems to bring with it something special. A feeling not around the rest of the year. Is it because we personally hear the rooster crow more so at Easter but can ignore the sound throughout the rest of the year? Or is it something more? Perhaps a feeling that there is hope for the future with sadness on Good Friday but renewed hope and gladness on Sunday? Each and every year “He is Risen” sends a new message that there really is a Jesus looking out for us!

Discussion:

Does that noisy rooster ring in your head, or do you just hear happiness for what Easter stands for?

Hymn VU 155 Jesus Christ is Risen Today

Prayer:

Lord, you know it is pretty easy for us to hear, but ignore that rooster. At times we have all heard and ignored but on Easter Sunday we hear something different. We hear the joyous peeling of bells, the grateful prayers and laughter of children, all because He Lives. Thanks you God. Amen.