

Sunday May 28th, 2019
Easter II

PRAYER: The rulers conspire upon their thrones; the peoples plot within their dwellings-even the disciples, scheme behind closed doors, wondering, “How can we save ourselves?” But the one who sits in the heavens laughs! Laugh, O God! Pity us for pitting our power against yours, even as Pilate and the priests pitted their power against Jesus. Pity us for putting our desires above yours, even as the crowds and the disciples put their desires above Jesus. Yes, laugh, O God, and turn the folly of sinners into the fidelity of saints, even as you turned the tragedy of the crucifixion into the triumph of the resurrection!

OFFERTORY SENTENCE: What is our response to be to God’s love and grace to us. The psalmist suggests in Psalm 116:12, 14 this approach for a faithful life. “How can I repay the Lord for all His gifts to me? I will pay my vows to the Lord in the presence of all his people.”

PASTORAL PRAYER: O God, you are the Alpha and Omega, who in Jesus Christ turns the world upside-down, who makes folly of the world’s wisdom and wisdom of the world’s folly, who mocks the strength of the strong and crowns the weakness of the humble, you are our sovereign and our Saviour, and we adore you.

We thank you, O Lord, for Easter: for the ways it kindles our awareness of who Jesus was and what he was about; of who you are and what you are about; of who we are and what we are about. In Jesus your character and our destiny were joined, and you promised that his work would not end with his death. You kept that promise, dear Lord; not only did the apostles take you at your word, and they took your word to the world. And for this we thank you: not only for the favour with which the world responded to them, but for the faith with which they confronted the world.

When we compare our faith with theirs, O God, we are humbled. They were bold; we are timid. They turned the crucifixion into a model for discipleship; we turn discipleship into an alternative to crucifixion. They interpret Easter as a summons to choose between divine and human rule; we interpret Easter as the divine sanction of human rule.

They received the resurrection as a call for radical decision; we receive it as a proof of ultimate security. They identified the suffering servant as the risen Lord; we glorify the risen Lord as the expense of the suffering servant.

Forgive us, O God, for separating Good Friday from Easter: for believing that, because our Lord’s Easter lay behind us, no Golgotha lies before us; for supposing that, because he risked everything, we need not risk anything. Forgive us, above all, for thinking that, because we praise him loudly, we need not follow him closely.

We acknowledge, O God, that our divorce of Easter from Good Friday has done us no good and others no harm. Help us to proclaim the oneness of the empty tomb and the cross, to narrow the gap between our confession and our conduct. Empower us so to live that our works will confirm the words of our Lord about true greatness. Send us into the world, as you sent him into the world, to become the victorious servants of all.

BENEDICTION: As God sent Christ to us, so now Christ sends us to the world. Let us not be faithless. Let us not lock ourselves in the upper room. But let us go down into the streets and do as he asks, allowing his grace to overpower our doubt and his peace to overcome our fear.

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Revelation 1:4b-8

“Enduring”

I cannot believe that after 32 years of pastoral service I have finally learned of the one special service of the church year that suits my personality more than any other. I did not know that today is historically called “Bright Sunday”. In Latin it is called “Risus Paschalis” or Easter Laugh. Other churches call it Holy Humour Sunday. The idea was that the joy of Easter was to continue on and lead to a Sunday where jokes, pranks, and even funny attire were encouraged.

This was all in a real effort to celebrate the joy of the resurrection. To have fun and build deeper relationships in the fellowship. Next year, there might very well be a call to wear funny hats and swap jokes. However, for now, I simply turn to humourist and writer Steven Wright who is famous for one-liners that make comment on observations he has made about life. Here are a few of his more humorous observations. Have you ever noticed; Wright says...?

- That hermits have no peer pressure.
- If someone with multiple personality disorder threatens to kill himself is that considered a hostage situation?
- It doesn't matter what temperature a room is, it's always room temperature.
- Where do forest rangers go to get away from it all?
- If we believe in free speech why do we have phone bills?
- Why isn't there mouse-flavoured cat food?
- If a parsley farmer is sued, can they garnish his wages?
- Should vegetarians eat animal crackers?
- If a policeman arrests a mime, does he tell him he has the right to remain silent?
- Why is it that the same guy who owns a \$1000 treadmill also owns a \$2,000 riding lawn mower?
- and finally, what is another word for synonym?

I appreciate people like Steven Wright who can look at the seemingly ordinary things of life and see something absurd or funny. Comedians, of course, do this all the time; it is how they do their craft. They see something, reflect on it, and discover something funny about it. Like why in the world do they have Braille writing at drive through teller machines at the bank? Who thought that was a good idea?

The reason we don't see these funny things, to be honest, is that we are not paying attention. Maybe it is because we are distracted by life, or simply in our own little world, that things and events can move past us without a reaction from us. As a culture we are beginning to arrive at the point that we fear we are too distracted. Thus, we have new laws about driving while using our cell phones or other technology.

I also fear we are raising an entire generation of young people that cannot be attentive for but a few brief moments. I have noticed that many people cannot abide sitting in silence, as the invasion of the iPods and MP3s continues unabated. I wonder how many people, here in this place right now are focused not on this experience of worship, but rather on how soon they can get out of here, and on to the next thing or activity.

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If we do not observe our world or dwell in the moment, we will miss the vital things of life. If we do not take the time to reflect and sit in silence, we will fail to grasp any deep meaning about anything or anyone. How often have we simply demanded to know the point of it all, without wanting to expend the effort to discover it for ourselves? Do you remember the old TV show *Dragnet*? Are we not like Henry Morgan's character Joe Friday saying to the world, "Just the facts!" But maybe the old English idiom is correct, "The devil is in the details."

The significance, the power, and the life altering aspect of whatever we are dealing with, are in the details or the fine observations of life. Ask yourself why John writes at the very end of the Gospel of John these words, "Jesus did many... signs in the presence of his disciples." What, pray tell, are signs? Signs by their definition are things that engage our five senses. We display our own signs, we advertise; to catch the attention of our sight, our hearing, our taste, touch and smell.

In my old neighbourhood when we lived in Scarborough, there is a cookie factory (Dad's Cookies) and also a large bread bakery. No one had to tell me what goes on there because my nose told me. I can understand the sign of baking without reading the identification on the building. I can even imagine what flavour of cookie they were making on a particular day simply by what I smelled. Just as I can drive north on Highway 24, and know what is growing in those greenhouses by the smell. Signs are important and they are everywhere.

The signs of Jesus were so important that John writes again in his first letter these words, "We declare to you what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life." (1 John 1:1) John is telling us that what the earliest followers of Jesus experienced with their senses is the basis of what they are telling others.

Back in the Gospel of John, the apostle writes, "These signs 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." (John 20:31) This last verse is very important. It is not enough to simply observe the work of Christ, whether in the lives of the disciples, in the lives of the people around us, or even our own lives. We must seek, by the Holy Spirit the meaning of what has occurred.

For example: It is not enough to commemorate Christ's resurrection, as we did last week, but we must also grasp its meaning. John is really big into the senses guiding us to meaning. In the book of Revelation, he (if he is the author) calls us to "Look!" That's the senses' part, but then he adds the meaning, "He comes with the clouds of heaven. And everyone will see him-even those who pierced him. And all the nations of the earth will weep because of him."

The power in observation is found in the meaning. The power of Jesus' parables is in the meaning. The power of the miracles Jesus performed is in the meaning. The power, the Apostles and other believers have, to share Christ even under persecution; comes not from having seen and heard, but from the meaning of what they have seen and heard. I likened this to the "Aha!" or "eureka" moments.

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In psychological terms, therapists talk about the “cathartic moment”. It is the moment when all that introspection and discussion finally pays off and the patient makes a breakthrough. They see the meaning of what is happening in their life, and why they see things the way they do, and respond to life the way they do. It is the goal of almost all psychological therapy to reach this catharsis.

One of the most famous examples of catharsis in the scriptures occurs in Luke chapter 5. Very early in Jesus ministry, we read of our Lord walking along the shore of Galilee and he encounters Peter who had been fishing all night but had caught nothing. After teaching from Peter’s boat, Jesus tells Peter to set out from shore and cast his net and Peter catches a huge haul of fish; so much so his nets start ripping. What fisherman would not be pleased with such an experience, an experience that happens to Peter again in John 21 after Jesus’ resurrection?

Then in Luke 5:8 we read this, “When Simon Peter realized what had happened, he fell to his knees before Jesus and said, “Oh, Lord, please leave me-I’m too much of a sinner to be around you.’ For he was awestruck by the size of their catch, as were the others with him.” (Luke 5:8-9) Now, the point of this particular encounter, the meaning of it all; is not the huge number of fish; although that was exciting.

The meaning, or the point of it was; who was this that can fill the nets to the breaking point? This is a cathartic moment for Peter. His whole life, I mean everything he uses to define his life, will change. No longer is he in a boat fishing, but he is to be a fisher of people. He is to become an apostle; a man of faith whose confession of faith is the rock upon which the church is built.

So, a good question to ask today is this; do you think God still uses signs? I am not talking about water stains that look like the Virgin Mary, but signs that are cathartic and change lives. I honestly believe that God in Christ continues to offer signs to his people. God works, tirelessly, to catch the attention of our five senses. God dispenses his grace with abandon, hoping that we will see, and then catch the meaning.

One of the genres of stories I like to read, and watch in movies, are spy movies. You know the kind; like *James Bond* or the *Bourn Identity*. One thing that I notice in these stories is how much time and resources governments, not only in these fictional stories, but also in real life, expend on what they refer to as “intelligence”. The CIA in the States, or CSIS in Canada are but two examples of this effort.

What I have come to understand is that governments around the world have vast networks of satellites, and other eavesdropping equipment, to listen in to conversations and data transmissions from all over the world. They even have computers that can electronically screen the millions of bites of information to catch key words or phrases. There are also highly trained computer hackers who seek to break into sensitive networks to steal information.

Such was the story a few years back in the Toronto Star, regarding a Chinese based computer espionage ring that broke into India’s Defense Ministry, and the Dalai Lama’s email accounts. But getting information is not the critical part of the intelligence.

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The critical element is a whole class of specialist called “Analysts” who take what the intelligence gathering has collected, and they sift through it looking for meaning.

Then the analyst makes a report to their supervisors and eventually decisions are made by governments based on that intelligence. Sometimes it works, such as the arrest of the Toronto 18 who were preparing to launch attacks in Canada. Sometimes it goes horribly wrong, like in the Iraq war, where President Bush invaded Iraq looking for weapons of mass destruction based on faulty intelligence.

I think God wants us all to be “Intelligence Analysts”. I think God wants us to sift through all the stuff we encounter in our lives to find the meaning. To find the cathartic moments God wants to use to change our lives. Moments that give our lives new purpose, just like what happened to the apostles. Can you see the change the Resurrection of Christ wrought in Peter in our lesson from Acts today?

Yes, they saw Jesus before, and after his death. Yes, they heard his teaching and witnessed many signs. But without the Holy Spirit helping them to analyze all that happened, and help them find meaning; it would be for naught.

What I fear is that we are so distracted by the concerns of life, or by technology, that we not only miss recognizing something as a sign, but even worse, we miss the meaning. Whether out of indifference, or lack of faith; we have stopped looking for God’s hand at work in our midst. We think that those marvelous signs that guide us to believing, somehow ended at the close of the book of Revelation.

We no longer marvel at God’s hand in nature, or how a love one is healed. We no longer believe God speaks to us in dreams and visions. But the absolute, most tragic thing of all, is that whether we state it openly or not, we have slipped into thinking that life has no meaning, and that what happens to us in turn has no meaning. We have become Darwinist by default; thinking that all of life is simply by natural cause and effect.

The scriptural record is not meant to just tell us stories; it is written to give us meaning through stories. The scriptures were given to engage the heart and our minds. Yet, there is so much more than even scripture that God uses to capture our senses and grant us meaning. Sometimes the single most beneficial thing we can do for our own spiritual vitality is to simply look around and reflect on what we see.

Perhaps we need to heed the words of the prophet Isaiah who when speaking to Israel encouraged them to not only remember past victories by God on Israel’s behalf, but to look for even greater things. This is what he wrote, “But forget all that-it is nothing compared to what I am going to do. For I am about to do a new thing. See I have already begun! Do you not see it?”

Do you not see it? Therein lies the question. The issue is not whether or not God is at work in our midst but rather do we have enough faith and sense to see the new thing. Look and see. See and live.