

Wor.Serm.ChYr iC
“These are the days of miracle and wonder”
John 20:19-31
TUMC
April 24, 2016

Sisters and brothers, I greet you with words of the risen Christ,
“Peace be with you!”

This will be my last sermon as a member of the preaching team, second time around. My first immersion in life at TUMC started in 1979 when I began my doctoral studies. Of unforgettable significance for me was that the congregation sponsored me for ordination for my work as college chaplain. When I returned in 2012 I had the great blessing that several people still remembered me and drew me back into this community as if I had never been gone. Now I have retired and started making a home in Niagara-on-the-Lake and at Grace Mennonite Church. TUMC has nourished and challenged me over the years. Its ministers, including Marilyn and Michele, are deeply grounded in the Gospel. This grounding has allowed them and the rest of us to trust one another as we explore authentic ways to grapple with the mysteries and complexities of the Christian life. I’m deeply grateful to be a part of all this.

I was listening to Paul Simon’s “Graceland” album after Easter. I was especially struck by the ironic song ‘These are the days’. ‘These are the days of miracle and wonder. This is the long distance call: don’t cry baby, don’t cry.’ I took these words as an unconventional affirmation of resurrected life at a time when we’ve stopped believing that miracles and wonders are possible.

This was the case with Jesus' disciples. His death left them shell shocked. How could the life of the man they had just started believing in as the Anointed One of God be snuffed out. Apparently the trauma of losing their master was so disillusioning that they banished his predictions of coming back to life. All his friends were dumbstruck when they first encountered Jesus returned from the dead. So foreign was the thought to his close friend Mary that she couldn't even recognize Jesus when he met her near the tomb.

The question I bring with me today is how we can participate in the *unkillable* life Jesus offers. The only starting point is to surrender the self-made life we cling to. Only in dying can we be born to eternal life.

I once read an interview with a dwarf who worked in a carnival. The interviewer stumbled around with awkward questions. Finally he blurted out, "What's it like to experience life as a dwarf?" Silence. Then the man said, "The hardest part is the day you realize you are abnormal and that you'll never have the life you thought you would. It's overwhelming". "But", he continued, "if you come to terms with that brutal fact, you've passed through the worst possible trauma. After that you're an *aristocrat* because nothing can terrorize you again."

After dying with Christ you're an aristocrat. You lose the person you thought you were fated to be. But if you let go of your old self, you are given an *eternal* self, a kind of life physical death cannot take from us. *Because Jesus died, we can live; because Jesus lives, we can die.* **2x** But surrendering to that possibility terrifies us. Recently I listened to a webinar with Richard Rohr and Kathleen Downing Singh, two widely read spiritual directors. I was especially struck by one of Singh's claims.

“One of the profound commonalities of all religions is that they try to teach you how to die *before* you die.” The rest of her lecture was an elaboration on that one sentence: learning how to die before you die.

Like the disciples we recoil at the thought. We huddle with them in the upper room, gathered – really – for a wake in remembrance of Jesus’ death, *barricaded* behind closed doors to blunt the knife-edge of reality, protecting ourselves from further loss. But Jesus crashes through the door, overcoming our barricade of fear. All of a sudden a dead man is unmistakably present, making clear that this is not a case of mistaken identity. He offers his trademark greeting, “Peace be with you.”

We are dumbfounded. It can’t be him. Jesus sees our confusion and shows us the nailprints in his hands and the spear’s thrust into his side. Before us is the very person we last saw suspended from a gallow. These *are* the days of miracles and wonder! Those who have seen Jesus hurry to tell their absent friend, Thomas, “We have seen the Lord!” but Thomas recoils in Nietzschean disbelief.

One week later the disciples, including Thomas, gather again in the upper room. The door is still locked. Was it to see if Jesus could do his trick a second time? What moves me most about this encounter is that Jesus *lets* himself be scrutinized. He does not resent Thomas’ doubt. He lets his body be probed by someone of whose friendship he is no longer certain. Thomas stands there on our behalf, poking his hardest question at Jesus: is the gospel of resurrection a cruel joke? I take comfort in Jesus’ vulnerability to scrutiny because in a world of

suffering, destruction, and loss we can't help but interrogate Jesus' claim that love is stronger than death.

How do we come to faith in the risen Christ? There is no single path. For some it comes through the gift of a mystical encounter, for others through rational inquiry, for still others through the experience of community. However it happens, it involves two responses. One of them is a moment of realization that nothing less than resurrection can account for this experience of eternity *breaking into* time. The other response is that of surrender, of letting go of everything that stands in the way. We can let go because now nothing could happen that would take us beyond God's care.

Gerhard Gloege was a theologian who had sided with the persecuted Confessing Church in Nazi Germany. After the war he taught theology in the restrictive confines of East Germany. Somebody asked him how he could still live with hope under such circumstances. His answer? "*Easter unlocks Good Friday*. The meaning of Easter is that it makes it possible to return to a suffering world in which Good Fridays continue to happen. But now we enter that world without cynicism or despair." To put it in other words, because a body like ours, yet transformed, came forth from the tomb, death and sin were overpowered on the plane of reality we inhabit. We don't have to leave this world to find salvation; we find salvation in it. Or to put it yet another way, if we let Christ in we discover that grace is stronger than fate.

When we persist in loving someone who offers none in return, grace is stronger than fate. When we persevere in breaking a crippling

habit, grace is stronger than fate. When a country like Myanmar risks a collective change of identity, grace is stronger than fate. When people like Ken and Peter persist in loving each other in the face of structures that try to prevent it, grace is stronger than fate.

“These are the days of miracle and wonder. This is *the* long distance call. Don’t cry, baby: Christ is risen.” Amen.