

Easter sermon - A death that nourishes life
Toronto United Mennonite Church
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Good morning everybody,

This weekend we've walked with Jesus through the most difficult moments of his life and ministry. At the Good Friday service, with words spoken powerfully through the voices of members of the Sanctuary community, we journeyed together to the cross, and then kept vigil with the women at the tomb where he was buried. Jesus, our friend and brother, wise teacher, the hope of the future, the messiah, died.

This year the journey to the cross has never felt so real. Death is close at hand these days, the spectre that looms as we keep to our homes, careful to keep distance from one another, daily checking statistics and curves, monitoring the spread of this new virus through global communities, reeling as it touches our own. The future is uncertain as we gratefully greet each other this Easter morning. What does resurrection even mean when the very essence of life as we know it hangs in the balance? When we are experiencing in real time a collective trauma, with no end in sight?

These weeks as I prepared this sermon I have spent hours in the forest, following our intrepid little explorers on their adventures. I wish you all could have been there with me. The trees are alive with the sound of birds, branches are coming into bud. I can smell the rich earth of the forest floor, soft with its cover of thick moss and the cushion of leaf fall. The heavens are telling the glory of God, writes the psalmist; God's works are displayed in the firmament. And so this morning I will invoke the testimony of the forest, for this morning it will be our companion and our teacher. It has much to teach us about death and life, about resurrection, about the purposes of God. At the end of this sermon I have prepared some photos - look in them for evidence of resurrection. It's everywhere.

Accompanying me has been an essay written by Laura E. Donaldson entitled "Theological Composting with Romans 8: an Indigenous meditation on Paul's rhetoric of decay." In *Buffalo Shout, Salmon Cry: Conversations on Creation, Land justice, and Life Together* (ed. Steve Heinrichs, 2013), 142-148. Thanks to Peter for pointing me in that direction.

And also with me has been this story of resurrection, read for us this morning, the women at the empty tomb.

There must have been melee and confusion around the story of the empty tomb, accounts multiplying and spreading like wildfire. The four synoptic gospels differ wildly from each other as they scramble to give account. In John there's only Mary Magdalene at the tomb, in Matthew there are two women, in Luke and Mark there are more. There's always some figure, but John

says it's Jesus, In Matthew there's an earthquake and the angel descends. In Mark it's a simple man dressed in white sitting to the side in the tomb. Jesus also appears in all of them, but those accounts also differ. John tells of the upper room, doubting Thomas, and fish cooked on a charcoal fire by the shore. Luke recounts the journey to Emmaus, in Matthew the disciples meet him on a mountain in Galilee.

What a flurry of conflicting accounts. Here these synoptic gospels, who align on so many other things, can hardly get their stories straight. The core of the story, however, is consistent among them. This Jesus who had been crucified, has been raised from the dead and is alive. We are left with questions that Christ-followers have been trying to answer since the beginning: why did Jesus die? Why was he raised? Why didn't anyone recognize him? Where did he go? Surely it's good news, but what does his resurrection mean for us?

Paul was one of the first to interpret this resurrection event for the people of God, using the frameworks he was most familiar with. For Paul, Christ's resurrection is a victory over death, which holds all of creation in bondage in our earthly bodies, which have no recourse but to be subject to the ravages of decay. Christ's resurrection is good news because it gives us hope that we too can have victory over death, and a freedom in Christ which means freedom from degradation and the inevitability of death. Our hope, then, is not on earth but in life after death when we can finally be reunited with Christ.

Here you can hear echoes of Greek philosophy, in which death is the ultimate separation between soul and body, and in death the soul is freed from the prison of the earthly body.

I submit to you today that Paul never spent any time in the forest.

In contrast to Paul, Laura Donaldson offers a counterpoint, drawing on the richness of ancient Indigenous wisdom, and its deep connection to the land. Paul's disembodied hope in some life after death makes no sense in the forest, where decay is life and life will die, where resurrection happens every day as death nourishes life and renews the land. The heavens are telling God's glory, God's works are displayed in the firmament.

Think of it - soil that is most alive has the most dead things in it. "Dirt" is actually a web woven by an incredible diversity of organisms - from single celled bacteria to fungi to insects and earthworms - all of which do the work of decomposing once-living things, transforming their physical bodies through decay into nutrients that nourish the life of plants and other soil organisms. Soil, it can be said, literally renews the earth and enables a resurrection of the earth's body by transforming old matter into new life (Donaldson, 146).

The Anishinaabeg tell a story about Nanabush, a trickster, shape shifter, and world co-creator, who regards the limestone cliffs of the Niagara escarpment, and remembers that they were once a coral reef, life literally built on the death of others. John Borrows, author of *Canada's Indigenous Constitution*, tells the story this way, "Now the escarpment basks in the rising sun

and reflects on the shimmering waves. Its ancient death still feeds life. Cedar, birch, and poplar grow from the old rocks. They host a thousand species under their expansive green canopies. Sea life has turned to stone, and eventually turned into trees, birds and insects. Animals feed on each, and humans follow this same pattern. Transformation is the law of life" (Borrows, *Canada's Indigenous Constitution*, 284).

Death, then, is a worthy and invaluable part of the spiral of life.

Here I want to be careful. I need to be clear about what I am saying and what I am not saying.

- I am not saying that we should actively seek death in order to allow other things to live. There's a way of thinking going around that suggests that the coronavirus is earth's solution to its own problem, and that humans are the real virus who need to die in order for the earth to live. This kind of thinking creates two false options: either humans live and the earth dies or humans die and the earth lives. But Christ came so that we may have life, and life abundant. While we live we must find ways to seek abundance for all of creation.
- I agree with Donaldson, however, that this Christian impulse to view death and decay as an obstacle to overcome has contributed to our inability to live sustainably on the earth. She invites Christians to a deeper knowledge of "how the movement and exchange of death and decay form a necessary part of the greater life spiral: life begets death, which in turn begets life, albeit in a different form. Viewing it as the enemy to be conquered, and reaching for some disembodied freedom as the fulfillment of God's promise hampers our ability to perceive the ongoing resurrection miracle right in front of us.
- I also do not see inherent value in suffering, nor anything salvific about injustice. Jesus died at the hands of a mob. Let's be clear that God did not require Jesus's suffering and death for our salvation. God, being a loving God, surely has more options than that.

So where do we find meaning in the death and resurrection of Jesus, this singular most central moment of our faith. Why did Jesus die, and why was he raised, and what does his resurrection mean for us?

I ask you to consider this, that Resurrection is God's whole project, and has been from the beginning of the earth. Resurrection is God's purpose built into the very marrow of creation. Maybe Christ's death and resurrection are God's ultimate proclamation of a hope that has always been and will forever be: that death is not the end nor the beginning, and that redemption is ongoing, nourished and strengthened by that which has come before. The heavens proclaim.

And so this Easter, as we reach for meaning and connection from the solitude of our homes, as uncertainty swirls around us, and suffering and death are so very real, may we allow Christ's life to compost within us, and be the fertile ground from which we can nourish others. Amen.

