

Summerland United Church
April 14th
Second Sunday in Easter
Resurrection Stories: Released

Threshold

In 12-step recovery programs, the first step is admitting powerlessness over anything that threatens to destroy our connection to our Higher Power, to ourselves, and others. It is in this powerlessness, that we paradoxically find strength. It is with this acceptance we learn to lean on our High Power for support and healing. Step 5 is the practice of integrity when we recognize who we are – human beings – with human triumphs and failings. Today we will hear of Jesus' message to his disciples, who have locked themselves away in fear. Jesus' message reminds them and reminds us that opening up and accepting our powerlessness, unlocks a strength that can and will release the Good News.

We will celebrate the Good News so that we can refocus our lives on things that lead us to life and connection to the Holy.

Scripture: John 20:19-23(NRSV)

Whether you take what is written in the bible as fact, metaphor, or story. Receive the meaning it has for you on this day. A Reading from the book of John 20:19-23.

¹⁹ When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors were locked where the disciples were, for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." ²⁰ After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. ²¹ Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." ²² When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. ²³ If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained."

One: May God bless our understanding of these sacred words.

All: Thanks be to God.

Reflection: Released

It's from this passage in the bible that we get the practice of "Passing the Peace" during worship service. Since Covid, here at Summerland UC the passing of the peace segment has come and gone from worship services. Which is rather common for a lot of churches, not just Summerland UC or United Churches in general.

This is probably because churches and their members have a pretty odd relationship with this ritual. And I think that's because we have really no idea what it is, why we do it, or what it's supposed to mean.

If Summerland United Church is like most churches, prior to Covid – passing the peace – might have looked like a free-for-all mini coffee/social time with people up from their seats and heading all over the sanctuary not just to say ‘peace be with you’ but also – “hi, how are, did you get my email about this, oh I wanted to ask you about...” “How’s your mother, how’s your sister...” A quick friendly chat between opening prayers and sermon. For some this is a wonderful moment of friendship, for others a jarring disruption of their worshipping mindset. And for those who lean towards deep introversion – a moment of complete and utter terror.

In my study on introversion and clergy, all of them said that Covid had done them a favor in the elimination of passing of the peace. Many haven’t brought it back to services and most of their communities haven’t noticed.

If you think back, you might notice that when we’ve done this segment in service I’ve given clear, “From your seats, turn to those around you and share the peace of Christ”. These words are intentional to keep this ritual, and it is a ritual quiet and contained and closer to its original intention.

After the crucifixion the followers and friends of Jesus were afraid. Afraid that they too be arrested and tortured and killed as Jesus had been, because of their association with him. In this passage from John we have the first of 3 appearances of Jesus that occur after the morning experiences of the tomb.

Here, the disciples are gathered together in a room. The last time they had all gathered like this had been the Thursday before – when they shared a meal together and Jesus explained how – when they come together, share together he would be there also.

But the mood this night is of course very different. They are afraid, grieving and confused. Jesus had died and yet somehow his presence was still very much around some of them. Judas, a good friend had betrayed them, Peter had denied them, some had visited the tomb and had an inexplicable experience of holy mystery.

Tension would have been high. Did they argue, did their grief and frustration create raised voices? Were some ready to stomp off into the night? Was everything they dreamed of, everything Jesus promised them falling apart?

Would a locked door keep everything together?

I like to imagine that one of them, stood up and said – we're more than our fears, we're more than our broken dreams. Remember what Jesus told us just last week when we were all together? This person suggested they practice what Jesus taught them – share the bread and share the cup. Be a servant to one another and serve this broken bread and drink from the same cup and remember that together with each other and with God, I am there and you can be made whole. I like to imagine that some of them begrudgingly said, fine. Their cynicism and grief locking their other feelings inside.

That disciple then broke the bread and shared the cup and in the moment of remembering their friend, it was like he was there with them. They remembered his teachings and his words and he said, "Peace be with you." He held out his wounded hands and said "Peace be with you."

And this wasn't the equivalent of 'hi, how are you today?' what he was saying was "*I give you the peace of knowing you are loved and forgiven.*" We've all made some mistakes over the last while, but be at peace, rest in the knowledge that I do not hold those mistakes or transgressions against you and neither does God.

Receive the Holy Spirit, when you forgive the sins, the mistakes, the transgressions of others they are forgiven. Says Jesus, and he's saying that releasing these incidents through forgiveness gives peace – peace of mind, peace of rest- for both sides.

When we do not forgive, when we hold on to grudges, resentments, and offences, we cannot know peace.

And so the ritual of Passing the Peace came into being. When early Christian communities met they took time to share this peace of forgiveness with each other. Whether there were known transgressions or not, known grudges or not – each person would make peace with each other – letting go, unlocking and releasing anything within their hearts and spirits that might damage the peace of the community.

For the disciples how comforting must it have been to know that despite everything God and Jesus loved them. They were afraid for their own necks, and Jesus gave them peace. They betrayed and denied him, and Jesus gave them peace. He gave them the holy spirit so they could continue the practice of letting go and the practice of unlocking their hearts so they could know peace. What a relief, what a release to know that no matter what – the peace of Christ is always available to us.

And so, remember when we say, “peace be with you” we’re not saying ‘hi how are you?’ or reciting empty words – we’re in fact, opening up our hearts to forgiveness and releasing all those things that do not enliven us to the holy one.

Each week as we share this peace we have the opportunity to begin anew, a clean slate with transgressions and mistakes released and the peace of all within our hearts. May it be so.