

The Easter Story of Resurrection! Of New Life in Christ! Of Resurrection and New Life in *OUR* lives! So much to say, so little time; you'll just have to come back next week! (Actually we *will* be right here next week with nationally known music leader and friend Ken Medema. He *always* has victorious Easter songs!) Where to start with the Easter Story? Well, the story begins with the 4 gospel accounts of Jesus' resurrection in Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. They vary slightly on some details, like how many women came to the tomb, or how many angels were seen there, but they all agree that Jesus was no longer lying there dead, and that he appeared then and later to his followers. In one gospel account, Luke, he appears to two of them (on the road to Emmaus) and talks therapeutically with them quite a while, but they do not recognize him until they break bread. In most accounts, the *women* were the first to be at the empty tomb. In John, he appears first to Mary Magdalene, who also does not recognize him at first, and thinks he is a gardner, then finally recognizes him when Jesus calls her by name! *HOW* the risen Christ appears to his followers varies quite a bit, so I thought this year I would focus on *Paul's* experience, in his own words.

Paul tells us that Jesus, as Risen Christ, appeared to more than 500 of the brothers and sisters who had been following him, and that he himself was one of the last that Christ appeared to. As always, when I interpret scripture, I look for words that "pop out" with greater emphasis or meaning, sometimes I circle them ... and from this morning's account, the first key word for me is the word GRACE. Paul is telling the church at Corinth that he met the risen Lord after at least 500 others, probably because he was a persecutor, even murderer of those who followed this Jesus. So Paul needed forgiveness, big time, and shows us that one principal way to receive Christ into our lives is as Grace, as Forgiveness of sin. We may cringe at the word sin, or we can just admit that we are all part of a world of sin; None of us is so selfless or saintly that we have not offended anyone or stepped on

any toes. And we are complicit in systemic sins of our society, insomuch as we do not try to change injustices we see, nor try to change the way we abuse and pollute our mother earth. Let us rejoice that we do not need to be “locked by guilt, or bound by our past” as Ken says in the choir song, but the love of God and Christ can “set us free,” “free for friendship at last!” As Paul say, we are “made alive” in Christ. Whatever was “dead” inside of us, can be transformed, can have a metamorphosis into a new life as we follow in Jesus’ way and welcome his risen Spirit into our hearts. This is welcoming GRACE and living a life of love, like Jesus did, like Paul did, like so many disciples through the ages have modeled for us!

One other word that “pops out” for me in our reading from Paul is that at the sound of a trumpet, in the twinkling of an eye, we will all be CHANGED. Naturally this can refer to the literal and chronological change... that we live on *after* death in some form of “resurrection body,” that our soul moves on through a kind of metamorphosis, like the caterpillar and the butterfly, or the bulb and the flower. But Paul is also referring to Change or transformation in *this life* when anyone is “in Christ.” Paul’s own experience is that he was growing more and more into Christlikeness, and he offers the same promise to us all. We recall that Paul says that “in Christ” people are “changed from one degree of glory into the next.” So this metamorphosis, this transformation, is not just for the hour of our death, but is possible in every stage of our life! We can ask ourselves, what is dying in us, what are we letting go of? And what is being born, what are we embracing that is new?

As many leaders of our faith have said, we are an Easter People in a Good Friday world... a resurrection people in a world of death and decay. So we hold fast to resurrection hope; we hold fast to a conviction of transformation possibilities, both worldwide and in our personal lives. This year it is particularly tough to keep resurrection

faith, with so much illness due to a virus and its mutations, or so much news of killing and war.

But we do hold on to hope, and to conviction that new life always comes, change is always possible, through the power of love and grace.... A Jewish friend told me recently that Judaism, at least reformed Judaism, itself is always evolving; that recently most reformed synagogues have recently added to the Seder Plate at Passover a unique piece of fruit to symbolize welcome to the LGBTQ community, and this year also a unique vegetable to symbolize prayer for the Ukrainian community (you can look up the details on that!). When people expand their tribal sensibilities to lovingly include others, this surely is the Spirit of Christ; It is the spirit that was in Paul who spread Good News of GRACE and CHANGE beyond his Judaism to all Gentiles in Mediterranean world. And it is the spirit that must be in all Christian churches as well; the reformed churches must keep on reforming, letting go of any harmful or exclusive practices while embracing ways of loving God and neighbor more inclusively.

Let me close with looking again at our interpersonal world, for surely when we sing "Let there be peace on earth," we believe the necessity of the next phrase "and let it begin with me." If we are to be *changed* by God's *grace*, as Paul testifies, and changed from glory into glory, then the steps of transformation must start here and now, with every friend, every family member, every acquaintance, even some enemies. We must be quick to say we are sorry when we offend. We must be ready to forgive, even if it takes some time. This is *resurrection life*, this is making all things new. We remember that Jesus was always offering forgiveness, keeping Judas with him to the very end, even offering forgiveness from the cross, saying "Forgive them for they know not what they do!" A key story of his is the Prodigal Son, where the father runs and embraces the reckless, wayward son and welcomes him home.

In my home, during these past two years of relative isolation, we have indeed watched a bit more TV than usual, turning, like many, to Netflix to rest from all the horrible news; and we followed one suggestion to try a series called “Anne with an E.” Yes, it’s based on the story of Anne of Green Gables, set in Prince Edward Island. Yes, it is one of those emotional tales that can bring a tear to almost anyone. In one episode, Anne, the orphan girl who wondered if she were ever really loved and wanted, and Marilla, the rather harsh adoptive mother, have a wonderful scene of GRACE, that involves both of them asking for forgiveness. Like the father and his prodigal son, like Joseph and his brothers, they hug and shed tears of release from the past and promises of a new start.

Stories with reconciliations and reunions are “feel good” stories that we need so desperately in tough times. They are also the evidence of the kind of love expressed most fully as Grace in Jesus the Christ. It is a love and *grace* that *changes* everything forever. There is no going back. I say to us all: Accept the Amazing Grace, the Resurrecting Love, from the Risen Christ and from one another, and we will only want to grow more deeply in this Love, and share this Love more widely. Amen.