

*Easter Sunday*  
**Easter Faith in These Troubled Times**  
**(John 20:1-18)**

***Easter Comes Again***

So we come to Easter Sunday again, this joyful, even triumphant day, here at the conclusion of a week we remember for its loneliness, rejection, deception, avoidance, hate, and murder. The fading prawns on the Jerusalem street. Jesus isolated in the garden awaiting his fate. A sarcastic kiss. Loyal disciples fading into the night. A small circle around an outdoor fire and an unequivocal denial. The shouts “crucify him.” The brutality of crucifixion. A crown of thorns. The agonizing “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me.”

Interwoven, of course, were scenes of mercy, dignity, and grace. A final meal where bread is broken and shared willingly. A common cup of dark, red wine. Jesus’ hands attending to dirty feet. Poise and restraint before an inquisitor. Simon of Cyrene willingly lugging the heavy cross that last final mile. A group of women standing faithfully by. A kindly word to a common thief.

And joy came with the morning. The persistent Mary Magdalene, walking to the tomb. Seeing it empty she wonders what happened. She appeals to the male disciples. She returns. She weeps. She sees a man, a gardener, and questions him. She hears her name. Easter light has come. She returns to the others to share what she has seen and heard.

Resurrection Sunday bolsters us again this year. It embraces us with bear-like strength, it lifts our feet off the ground. Lifting us high it shouts “he is risen.” And in response we muster up the courage to say, maybe even shout, “he is risen indeed.” Easter says to us that love will have the final word, not evil. Easter says to us that ultimately trusting in beauty and life will be victorious over wallowing in the mire of destruction and death. Peace will prevail. There will be no more war. Jesus, the prince of peace, will reign. We’d been reminded a couple days ago that yes it’s Friday, but Sunday’s a comin’. Yes, it’s true, and Sunday is here. Sunday has come. Easter has arrived. Yes indeed, Jesus is risen.

But let’s be honest with ourselves. The truth may be that our “he is risen indeed” is actually a little timid. How deeply can we believe what our mouths express? How can Ele possibly play the organ so aggressively proclaiming that “this joyful Eastertide?” How can our choir members possibly crescendo their voices to harmonize and sing “the strife is over, the battle won” oh yeah, really?

***This week***

A little part of me remains in Brussels where I spent one year studying French in the early 1970’s. So it was a shock, and a little personal, to wake up Tuesday morning to the horror of suicide bombers, the ravaged international air terminal, mangled subway cars, the grainy images on a video surveillance camera, bodies draped with blankets.

Then there’s our country’s politics. What we really need to do is take this entire group of people, all those folks over there, all 12 million of them, and send them back where they belong. That country over there, Israel by name, they have every right to exist and no matter how they dis-respect their co-inhabitants of the same sacred land they must have our full and unquestioning support. Maybe waterboarding is too mild a form of persuasion. We must be very suspicious of people of Muslim faith. Our country must be militarily strong and forceful.

This spirit of domination, control, greed, and superiority is embedded in our national political dialogue. It's part of a cultural and national assumption that our ways of being and doing are actually the best ways and they need to be guarded, preserved and promoted at all costs. And if we are attacked or violated, then of course righteous revenge, the spirit of "an eye for an eye" is appropriate. We say with our mouths and with our actions that other people's ways are inferior. And there is plenty of worry all around us that we've gone way too far in allowing some of those "other" people to influence how we function.

### ***Jesus of Easter***

The events of Holy Week, today climaxed by Easter Sunday, stand at this pivotal juncture of biblical history. The Creator God, designing humankind in his own image, desiring communion, right relationship, between God's self and all creation. But divisions and acrid derision, schisms and abuses, selfishness and greed, power-seeking and oppression....all the expressions of sin and evil-doing, they intervene. The Bible tells the story of a God yearning for harmony and justice, and people hitting the right notes for a time, then returning to their evil ways.

In Jesus we see one who did not see equality with God as something to be exploited, but who willingly took on the form of a servant. In Jesus we see one who calls us still to "follow me." One who says we find life in leaning on his words, following in his footsteps, doing as he has done, actually straining to behave with all that we are in ways that faintly resemble our Lord Jesus.

These translates into welcoming the stranger into our home and church, taking the time to go the extra mile, doing our part to heal the sick, visiting the prisoner, attending to the forlorn in spirit, alertly and constantly caring for the "least of these."

The biblical story moves steadily towards this moment, and we live today in the ongoing afterglow of the events of this week. How today does our "he is risen" become more than a barely audible whisper? How do we live Easter faith in these troubled times?

Well, for one we solemnly commit to do all in our human power to not fall into the trap of disparaging a whole group of people because of the actions of a few. Easter faith, living in the spirit of our risen Lord, says we will stand with our Muslim friends, holding their hands, reminding them that we stand with you.

Easter faith testifies that love is stronger than all evil. We will not be fans of channeling our understandable and justifiable anger into equally violent acts of revenge. Rather we will be voices of moderation and restraint. We will caution that it is always wise to check the beam in our own eye first. We will remember how Jesus advised making space at the table for those who have been slighted. We will recall that Jesus' counsel to religious people (like us) was to not walk on by but rather to stop and get our hands dirty. We will remember that he was the one who paused to wash the feet, an act of service and humility, of the disciple who would betray him. We will be those who willingly listen to and strive to appreciate voices and opinions different from our own. We are those who allow that the world is bigger than us, that we see only in part. We will pray for those who mourn, for those who suffer. Our hearts and hands will go out to the victims of violence and oppression. We will pause to monitor our own unacknowledged privileges. With our money and with our time we will apply this spirit, this mindset and approach of Jesus to the places where we work, the streets we walk, the church we worship in, our homes, and our world.

We will be alert to and distance ourselves from the spirit of our times that calls us to be instinctively suspicious and mistrustful. With Jesus we will stand against the politics and the spirit of division and hate.

In all these ways we begin to live an Easter faith. It translates into things like building new schools where people before got the leftovers. It means volunteering to clean up someone else's mess. It means singing songs of faith and hope and love in the face of callousness and evil. It means rising to the defense of someone being pushed around. It means caring enough to listen to what we really don't want to hear.

It's a faith that sings "hosanna" but then lives into the knowledge that this victory over the grave is not primarily a ticket to heaven, but more a validation of the truth that the way of Jesus, the words, the life, the spirit of Jesus is God's best for us and for all humankind. He is risen. He is risen, indeed!

May we willingly and joyfully live an Easter faith even in these troubled times.

Amen.

--March 27, 2016

--2016.13

--First Mennonite Church, Reedley, California