

Embracing love's return

Pitt Street Uniting Church, 21 April, 2019

A Contemporary Reflection by Rev Dr Margaret Mayman

Easter Sunday C

Isaiah 65:17-25; Luke 24:1-12; Contemporary Reading: "*The Paschal Way*"
by Joy Cowley in *Psalms Down Under*

This reflection can be viewed on You Tube at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t9rf_PsoMQs

During lent and holy week, this community of faith at Pitt Street has reflected on trees; on the way that in order to keep growing, some trees lose their bark for a season. Some of the tree photographs from lent, taken by Hazel and others in the congregation, have been hung on the church wall.

Several species of Australian trees evidence this often spectacular unveiling and unwrapping, as the hard outer layer of the tree, peels away to reveal a soft core. There is beauty in what is stripped away, and in what is revealed. We reflected on this season in our lives, and on taking time to let go, to renew; to be vulnerable in order to grow.

On Good Friday, we turned towards the tree; the cross of wood, which we draped with bark; and we remembered the cross on which Jesus was crucified.

That cross was in the centre on Friday. It is more distant now, but still present. The bark has become fertile ground as the tree has given of its being to nourish emerging signs of new life, as we embrace the return of love. If you can't see the bark and the green shoots, come and have a look at morning tea and coffee.

The church has often represented resurrection as dramatic, as a triumph, as a grand action of divine power. But I think that resurrection comes quietly and slowly, that it comes in tentative fragility, small green blades rising in places where there seemed to be no possibility of life.

That it whispers rather than roars. It whispers to us: "*I love you, and I am not dead*"

One of my favourite books is *The Colour Purple*, by Alice Walker. Published in 1982, it was a text book in the first feminist theology class I took when I started my post-graduate studies at Union Seminary in New York in 1983.

The main character, who is the narrator of the story, tells us her story through letters addressed to God and to her sister. She is Celie, a poor black woman who has been abused all her life by men in her family and by the white supremacist world in which she lived.

The novel is set in rural Georgia, in the US, in the first half of the twentieth century.

In it, Alice Walker reimagines God and she writes resurrection.

Despite the violence in her life, Celie has somebody in her life who loves her, her sister Nettie, who gets chased away by Celie's violent husband, Albert. Albert doesn't ever let Celie see the mail, so Celie does not hear from Nettie, and starts to believe that her sister is dead.

But Nettie isn't dead. She has gone to Africa as a missionary and writes many letters to Celie over the years. Nettie never receives a reply, but she keeps writing letters to Celie anyway.

Then, one day, years later, Celie finds the packet of letters from Nettie that Albert has stashed away under the floorboards.

"Dear Celie," Nettie writes, "I know you think I am dead. But I am not." Nettie explains that she has been faithfully writing to Celie all along, and she continues to try to reach her, to tell her, "One thing I want you to know, I love you, and I am not dead."

"I love you, and I am not dead. You may think I am dead, and you are unloved, but I am not dead, and you are loved.

Celie suffers terrible childhood abuse from her father, and further abuse through the forced marriage to a violent man. She has her babies taken away from her, and her sister driven from her, but God loves Celie. And her life, so full of hardship because of the hard-heartedness of others, is transformed anyway.

When Celie and Nettie are both old and grey, they are finally reunited, and they fall down on the ground with joy. Everyone, Celie says, must be thinking how old they look. "But I don't think us feel old at all. And us so happy. Matter of fact, I think this the youngest us ever felt."

Old, but young and new, anyway.

Easter is the Divine Yes to Jesus, and to new life, and new creation, and to new life in us.

When the world said, or says, no to Jesus and to new life and new creation, to reconciliation and peace, justice and healing and mercy, the Divine says yes anyway and raises up our hope.

Like Nettie to Celie, Jesus speaks through the years and says, even today, even to us, "I love you, and I am not dead."

The words Jesus said, the actions he took, the love that he expressed did not die. Through stories told in community, from generation to generation, they live.

We lose the mystery and the power if we try to pin resurrection down to the facts of what did - or did not - happen after Jesus of Nazareth was executed by the Roman Empire.

The Romans feared insurrection, which they thought could be put down by the torture and public death of that rabble rouser, Jesus. They had no idea that, far more dangerous than insurrection, was resurrection, the truth that the dream of God made flesh in the life of Jesus could not be crushed by imperial power and might.

Jesus' dream of the reign of God, where peace is achieved not by violence but with justice. This passion of Jesus, is alive and well and lives in, with, through and beyond you and me, by the power we call God.

The resurrection of Jesus lived in the lives of his friends and followers because Jesus lived his passion for the reign of God in such a way that his presence could not be killed, not even by the by the power of Rome.

Resurrections are the point of the Easter story. Facts are not the point.

Each of the Gospels tells a different story – and the story that the children read to us was a blending of the Gospel stories. Those Gospel stories don't all agree on the facts, but instead give us, in Frederick Buechner's words, a "*narrative (that) is as fragmented, shadowy, and incomplete as life itself.*"

Easter is a myth. A myth is a story that communicates an essential truth. Easter, the myth of dying and rising again, is the truth that is in the fabric, the DNA, of life itself.

There are questions, but they are questions of meaning that can only be answered with the living of our lives in community.

- How do we care for one another in ways which do not suffocate and oppress?
- How do we pursue the well-being of our neighbour in the context of complex realities such as the global displacement of millions of people who have become refugees and asylum seekers in the face of a complicated reality, such as the rise of white supremacy?
- How are communities developed positively around respect and care for each person, rather than around a common enemy?
- How is the delicate web of life on this planet earth to be sustained in the face of climate change?
- How are the systemic causes of non-love to be eliminated?

John Shelby Spong has spoken of loving God in this resurrection context in this way. He wrote:

"Loving God... means that people do not treat the legitimacy of their own spiritual path as a sign that every other spiritual path is somehow illegitimate.

"Loving your neighbour... means treating all people - regardless of race, gender, sexual orientation, age, disability, nationality, ethnicity or economic class –all people - as holy, as having been made in God's image."

"Loving ourselves... means basing our lives on the faith that all things are made new and all people are loved by God."

To live with this faith, is to live in the spirit of the prophet and teacher, Jesus, and his community of friends.

It is to embrace life, not be scared of it.

To experience new life here and now.

As we celebrate this Easter, we acknowledge that all we have are the fragmentary stories, told and retold, shaped and reshaped, by people of faith from generation to generation.

Just stories. Just stories that tell us:

That in the midst of brokenness – healing stirs.

That in the midst of darkness– a light shines.

That in the midst of death – life is breaking forth.

That when all seems lost – hope springs eternal.

Resurrection isn't so much something that we believe in, or not.

Resurrection is something the sacred invites us to witness,

and then, to live

in the embrace of Love that has returned.