

Sermon by Bishop James S. Dunlop  
Seventh Sunday of Easter  
May 24, 2020

In a little while we will confess our faith as the people of God. We will say these words, *He (Jesus) suffered death and was buried. On the third day he rose again in accordance with the scriptures.* That is the core of our faith. Jesus died and was raised from the dead. Everything we believe as Christians hangs on that. Period.

The entire Easter season, which comes to an end this week, is about that – death and resurrection. As the Apostle Paul said to the Corinthians, *“For if the dead are not raised, then Christ has not been raised. If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile, and you are still in your sins. Then those also who have died in Christ have perished. If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied.”* (1 Cor. 15:16-19 NRSV)

So, I have been pondering a couple of questions. Do we believe it? Not just say it in the creed but deep down in our bones believe that Jesus was raised from the dead. If we do believe it, what does it mean for us in this moment?

I think that is what the Apostle Peter is trying to address in these writings, which we have had for the last five weeks. The people in the church in Asia Minor, in what we now call Turkey, were having a rough time being Christian. It was in the first century. There were not many Christians around and the culture was decidedly anti-Christian. In a culture that was filled with gods of every shape and kind, these Christians believed in one God, the creator of heaven and earth. Roman gods were powerful, mighty and many in number, and yet the Son of God for Christians, the followers of Christ, believed that God revealed God’s love by giving his son, the only son, to be crucified, the most humiliating death imaginable. In a society where power, control, wealth, and prestige were desired, Christ was revealed in humility and perceived as weak.

The Roman society had rigid class distinctions and it was good to be the elite class. Everyone aspired to that, but you had to be born in. Christians were to be humble servants, sharing what they had with each other, with the poor, with the stranger, the alien. These Christians were derided as fools. They were out of touch with the normal ways and they suffered for it. They were ostracized.

In First Peter, this writing was addressed to them today. In this time of ridicule and suffering, a time of persecution, the letter is encouraging them and giving them some advice for living in a hostile culture. Speaking about how to live knowing that God can raise the dead, that death is not the end but the beginning of new life in resurrection. They are suffering. The letter encourages them in suffering. It warns them of the presence of the temptations to take the easy way, to lose their way, to wander from the light of Christ. The author tells them to put their trust in the Lord, to put their worries on the Lord for they will be tested but they are to remain faithful. God will give them strength and the promise of everlasting glory.

Sometimes when we read these lessons, we hear them with new ears in a different situation. *“Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that is taking place among you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you.”* (1 Peter 4:12 NRSV). This letter was not talking about COVID-19 but that is what we hear. We are in this incredibly difficult time in which not just

the followers of Jesus but everyone on the planet is being tested by a fiery ordeal. There are 4.2 million cases of COVID-19 and 290,000 deaths as I write this, and many more when you hear it.

We have been sheltering in place for months. Millions of people have lost their jobs. Millions are at risk of hunger. Our congregations have been reaching out into communities with food and support. This will be with us for perhaps a year or two.

We have many questions. What will happen to schools and our children? What will happen to businesses that so many of us depend on? What will happen to our churches? What will happen to us and the ones we love?

And on the third day Jesus was raised from the dead. Do we believe it? If God can raise the dead, do we not believe that God will care for us?

In the letter of First Peter we hear, *“cast all your anxiety on him, because he cares for you.”* (1 Peter 5:7 NRSV) *“And after you have suffered for a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, support, strengthen, and establish you.”* (1 Peter 5:10 NRSV) To believe in the resurrection is to believe that God can turn the darkest of moments into new life. Do we believe it? Faith and fidelity to God are gifts to us from God, through the work of the Spirit. It might be a temptation to think God’s got this covered, so we can sit back and wait in a self-piety for God to act or just wait for God to come and take us home. What this letter reminds us is that if we have faith in the risen Christ then we will live a life that reflects God’s glory in us. That Christ is the light of our lives and way in which we orient our lives. That we live our lives in ways that reflect Christ and the path that Christ chose, a path of humility, a path of service, a path of patience, waiting for what God has in store in the new life of resurrection.

What do those traits look like for us in this time of COVID-19?

A path of humility. I have heard so many people say, I do not have to isolate; I feel fine; I’m not worried about me; I’m not in a high-risk category; I do not want to wear a face mask; I’ll look ridiculous. What if in humility you assume you are an asymptomatic carrier? Would you wear a mask to save the people around you that you love; to save the person next to you in the grocery store that you do not know has a serious heart condition? Humility means caring deeply for the other at the inconvenience of ourselves. Wearing a mask is an act of humble service. Inconvenience and embarrassment for the sake of others, is this not the acts that we would do following the one who went to cross for us?

A path of service. We need to find ways to care for those around us who are suffering both within our congregations and in our neighborhoods. I have been heartened by the stories of our congregations that have stepped up in this crisis with feeding ministries and helping the homeless, those struggling to keep a roof over their heads, and those who anxious and lonely. This is a time when we all need to find ways to serve. Whether it is picking up the phone and talking to the lonely, helping with a feeding ministry, sewing masks for people who cannot obtain them, sharing from our bounty with those who do not have enough, Christ calls us to service. As Luther said, “God does not need our good works, but our neighbors do.”

A path of patience. This may be our most challenging path that we are called to in our resurrected life. We are not a patient people. We want it now; we want it delivered the next day. What do you mean you have no toilet paper? What do you mean there are no pork chops? Why can't we get back to church now? I want to be back. I want to sing hymns. I want church to be back the way it was. I want... God, who is the God of new life and resurrection, is guiding us to a path of patience.

Will God act? *Humble yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God, so that he may exalt you in due time.* (1 Peter 5:6 NRSV) My absolute faith in the resurrection gives me hope that when this passes there will be a church of Jesus Christ. And it will be a new creation, for the old is passing away and all things will be made new. Now is a time for patience, for God will work in God's time. God who has raised Jesus from the dead will raise the church to new life.

Jesus died and was raised to new life. Do you believe it? Will the church, the body of Christ, be the same as back in January? I doubt it. How many stories have we heard in the Easter season in which the followers of Jesus do not recognize the resurrected Jesus? We have been working on renewing and revitalizing congregations for years. Now it will become an imperative. What does it mean that our congregations have been gathering without our buildings? Perhaps they are not as important as we have believed in being the church. Perhaps it is time to discern what is necessary for us to be the church. What will a resurrected church need to be? We need to be patient, to wait and see what God is up to in due time.

Peter's letter, written in a time of suffering, calls the faithful to trust in God's unfailing love seen chiefly in the death and resurrection of Jesus. It calls us to find the joy of following the path that our Lord set before us, a life of service, humility, and patience. Peter warns us that the devil prowls tempting us to turn inward on ourselves demanding that our wants and needs be satisfied now. Now is the time for us to re-center ourselves in our faith, in a God who, as Peter says, cares for you. Have patience, care for your neighbor, and know that a God who brought Jesus from the dead will be with us and bring us to new life. Amen.