

New St. James Presbyterian Church, London, Ontario
Sunday, April 1, 2018
The Rev. Dr. David Thompson
“Intellectual Suicide or Life Changing Hope?”

“Filled with awe and great joy the women came quickly away from the tomb and ran to tell the disciples...” The disciples of course didn’t believe them. After all, why would they? 2,000 years ago, women were not even allowed as witnesses in any Jewish court of law and this news was also so utterly preposterous that he was alive, and so Peter and John ran for the tomb to see what had actually happened. They came away mystified. But Mary hung back and talked to a man she supposed to be the gardener, who she suddenly knew as the Master she had lost.

Many people I talk to have difficulty believing in the resurrection. They just don’t think it’s possible and if you do believe it somehow you are committing intellectual suicide. It is just too hard to believe! But perhaps part of the problem is that we moderns are interpreting the resurrection of Jesus as resuscitation rather than as a resurrection. As the progressive theologian Marcus Borg says: “resuscitated persons resume the finite physical life they had before and will die again someday. Whatever affirming the resurrection of Jesus means, it does not mean this.”

Neither does Borg like the so called spiritual option. He says; “... given the modern world-view in which the physical and material are assigned a greater reality than "the spiritual," to speak of the resurrection of Jesus as "spiritual" assigns it a lesser and commonly unimportant significance. It's "just spiritual," [meaning] not really real.” But in the pre-modern meanings of "spiritual" and "mystical," the resurrection of Jesus was *both*: the spiritual is about "the real" and the mystical is about knowing, experiencing, "the really real." Although the resurrection does not mean resuscitation in the New Testament there are some interesting similarities to note. There is the experience of touch of the risen Jesus- Mary tries to embrace him and Thomas who doubts is invited to touch his wounds. Borg says: “The risen Jesus suddenly appears in a locked room (Jn. 20). He journeys with two of his followers for a couple of hours and is not recognized, and when he is recognized, he vanishes (Lk. 24). He appears in both Jerusalem (Luke and John) and Galilee (Matthew and John). He appears to Stephen in his dying moments (Acts 7). He appears to Paul in or near Damascus as a brilliant light (Acts 9).” He eats in front of them and cooks a meal for his disciples.

The tomb is also empty. In his chapter on the Resurrection in 1 Corinthians 15, St Paul makes a strong distinction between the physical body and the spiritual body. For St Paul there is a natural body and a spirit body. What seems to be the case then in New

Testament times is that the resurrection meant that *the physical body of Jesus was transformed into a spirit body- the natural body disappears into the new spiritual body.* And the New Testament writers were content with this mystery because they had picked up on one thing, the only thing that mattered to them- **Jesus was not dead but alive and apparently actively present in their lives.**

In this last century we have had the medical opportunity to be able to resuscitate the body and the medical profession has done so millions of times. What emerges for me in all these resuscitations is the stories of their lives going into the beyond. People are clinically dead- no heartbeat, no brain activity for as long as twenty minutes. Then the doctors are successful in bringing the person back. But then they have a story to tell about the afterlife.

They talk freely about those twenty minutes when they felt that they had left their bodies- of being aware of the operating room and then drifting away, meeting relatives who have died, seeing beautiful scenes and then coming back as if through a tunnel into the body and returning to the operating room. These stories are well validated by the research of Dr Raymond Moody and others. The incidences of these experiences are high- a ratio of 8 million to 21 million of people who have been resuscitated, according to Gallop poll. Interestingly the people who are resuscitated universally lose their fear about dying.

What I think this research is giving us is a glimpse into the first twenty minutes of the life to come and **that is its value. It is telling us is that death is not the end of everything.**

What then can we believe about the Resurrection itself?

Something huge started the Christian church, transforming frightened men and women into courageous people who were willing to die for their faith as martyrs.

- St Paul was a devout Jew and a man of great integrity. I believe him when he spoke of his encounter with the risen Jesus on the road to Damascus. Why do I believe that? That encounter changed him profoundly. How is it that a man who was murdering Christians has a complete turnabout to become the founder of the Christian church? Modern scholarship authenticates that he wrote the epistles that are credited to his name. Luke the physician chronicled his travels and was an eye witness to events.
- All the apostles, eye witnesses to the resurrection, died for their faith. Hard to do that if it was just a lie they had spun... Surely they would crack under torture.
- That the message of the resurrection was first given to women is regarded by biblical scholars as the strongest proof for the historicity of the resurrection accounts. Had these texts been fabricated by overzealous male disciples, they would never have

included the witness of women in a society which rejected them as legal witnesses. So, says (Christine Schenk from an article titled ‘Women in church leadership’)

But these aren’t the only reasons. As an unknown writer stated in the Lewiston Tribune: ”Easter is a day to fan the ashes of dead hope, a day to banish doubts and seek the slopes where the sun is rising, to revel in the faith which transports us out of ourselves and the dead past **into the vast and inviting unknown.**” *The vast and inviting unknown...* yes to me that is what Easter is about. I don’t know about you, but it is not my experience, that life will iron flat! Life itself is so mysterious. We often describe ourselves as having a body and a mind and a soul/spirit. Why should not the other parts of us simply move on after the physical death of the body?

The mystery of Spring reminds us each year that life triumphs over death. What appears to die, springs to life again. Nature dips, pauses, recovers and renews herself. I see this as a huge annual parable that spawned the dying/ rising myths that Joseph Campbell talked about in many religions and mythologies. Were primitives not perhaps right that the annual parable of nature might have a spiritual meaning, that it might be indeed a metaphor for us?

How many of us have experienced a death of some kind- a job that suddenly ended, a relationship that foundered and died, a failure of some kind, some incredible loss. But then the ashes of a dead hope were fanned, a new day came to banish all doubts. We suddenly discovered that we were Divinely guided and protected. We were resurrected, so to speak, into a new life.

I was listening to news program about a woman who had had her voice box mutilated in an accident and who could not speak afterwards. But one day, years later, she heard of a doctor who might be able to help her. After incredibly difficult and complex surgery her vocal chords were pried away from the scar tissue and now she is beginning to be able to speak again. This is a story of resurrection- her voice was dead but is now alive again. She said; “I have so much to get out of me!”

Virginia Johnson lost her son that she adored. He had been in a plane that had crashed on the top of Mt Trelease. Some time earlier she had given him and her husband twin rings with their initials on them. Her son’s body was recovered at the crash site but there was no ring on his finger and that was unusual, for he wore it every day. Virginia in her deep grief kept asking her self and her family *where was the ring?* Over the years her grief ebbed away but she never forgot the loss of the ring. Her husband stopped wearing his and whenever Virginia opened the drawer and her gaze fell on the box with the solitary ring in it, she wept. She felt that her son Ronnie was lost too, just like his ring.

One afternoon the phone rang and a woman on the other end said: "I have been to Mt Trelease and I have found something that may belong to you." "You have Ronnie's ring!" gasped Valerie. "Yes" the woman said after a long pause.

The woman's name was Kathy. Her husband, who was in aviation, had an interest in crash sites. They had taken a hotel not far from the area. Kathy was awoken from sleep by a dream in which there was a vision of a young blond man walking away from her. As Kathy was telling this story to Virginia, Virginia thought to herself *My Ronnie had blond hair!* Kathy told Virginia that the dream disturbed her so much she convinced her husband to change hotels. But the same thing happened the next night and this time she felt compelled to follow the young man.

In the morning she and her husband drove to the base of the mountain. Kathy had no intention of going up there in fact she had brought along a book to read. But when he husband and a guide were about 75 feet up the path a feeling came over her that *she just had to go with them.* It was a hard climb- over three hours. When Sally sat down on a boulder to catch her breath she saw something glinting at her feet. Reaching down she brushed the dirt away from a ring. "I just knew it had to belong to the blond boy," she said. "Yes!" said Virginia into the phone, choking back her tears. Kathy said that this was so extraordinary that when she got down the mountain she checked with the local TV station and looked through the footage of the accident. "That's him!" she shouted when she came to Ronnie's picture. And that was how Kathy knew how to trace Virginia.

A few days afterwards the door bell rang. Virginia opened the door to a beautiful calm face. It was Kathy standing there, opening her purse and taking out the beloved ring. Valerie hugged Kathy. She was someone Ronnie's spirit had last touched. She had known for years that having the ring would bring her peace. And it did. She knew that it was Ronnie's way of reaching out to her to say, "I'm all right Mom."

Jesus walks with them on the road to Emmaus, sits down and eats with them. Picks up bread and breaks it and they KNEW HIM!

Mary on Easter morning lost in her tears and anxiety confronts a gardener. Suddenly there is recognition with a familiar voice that calls out her name "Mary!" And overcome she responds "Master!"

Or on the beach where Jesus cooks a resurrection breakfast over a fire of coals and asks them for some fish to fry up. And his disciples get out of the boat and have breakfast with him.

Thomas who doesn't believe a word about what the women have testified gets his own audience. The doors being shut tight. HE comes... Reach hither your finger and put it into the nail holes and Thomas the skeptic says, "My Lord and my God!"

Why is the resurrection so important to God and our world that is so beset with violence, injustice, cruelty and death? Was the wheel of suffering and death to turn endlessly on without an answer?

The Resurrection was God's way of saying No!

Pay attention to the life and teachings of this particular man. I am not going to let this man, or his teachings die. What he taught you about Me is too important to human life to let the cross be the last word.

Learn from him to love your enemies your survival on planet earth depends upon it... You don't need to worry about your loved one's death. Love is stronger than death. Your loved ones are alright. Because this man lives you and they shall live as well. One day you too will experience your own Easter. I have set this preview in the center of history, of a vast unknown to which you are invited.

There is a plan under all of life:

As St Paul says: "Behold I tell you a mystery. We shall not all die but we shall all be changed. In the twinkling of an eye. At the last trumpet. The trumpet shall sound, and the dead shall be raised."

And that I put to you is Good News!

Happy Easter!