This is Our God

Isaiah 25:6-9; John 20:1-18
Lethbridge Mennonite Church
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April 4, 2021/Easter Sunday

When last we gathered, online on Maundy Thursday, we departed with Jesus crying out with a loud voice, "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit." And then, he breathed his last. Our final reading concluded with Jesus' broken body being laid in a tomb.

On this Easter Sunday, 2021, I want to begin with the words of the English poet John Donne, from a sermon preached almost exactly four hundred years ago, Easter Sunday 1622:

> The dead hear not thunder, nor feel they an earthquake. If the cannon batter the church walls, in which they lie buried, it wakes not them, nor does it shake or affect them… but yet there is a voice, which the dead shall hear; the dead shall hear the voice of the Son of God and they that hear shall live.
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> It is a clamour, a vociferation, a shout. It carries a penetration and a power, a command. Since that voice at the Creation said, *Let there be a world*, was never heard such a voice as this, *Arise ye dead.*

I got goosebumps when I read this earlier this week and I figured after a year like the one we've all been through, we could use some triumphant words on this Easter Sunday.

Those are words to match the glorious, life-changing, world-changing hope of this day.

This is our second pandemic Easter Sunday service. I remember last Easter vividly. We were still in the relatively early days of COVID-19, trying to figure out what we were going to do, how we were going to continue to worship.

I remember new words making their way into our collective lexicon. Words like "Zoom" and "livestream" and "YouTube channel."

Last year, our Easter Sunday service was made available across Mennonite Church Canada. I remember recording the service in two stages, on Good Friday and Holy Saturday, to have as few people in the building at a time as possible.

I remember how strange it all felt but also how good and necessary it was to proclaim the hope of resurrection in the midst of times that did not seem particularly hopeful.

Hope is a funny word. We so easily reduce it to something far less that it ought to be. It shares the same fate as other important words in our vocabulary like "love" and "faith" and "beauty."

Each one of these words invites us into vast, expansive landscapes, into depths that we could take lifetimes to plumb. And we turn them into Hallmark cards.

Love is reduced to our emotional temperature; faith is reduced to "beliefs about stuff we can't prove" in our brain; beauty is reduced to superficial attraction.

And hope? Well, hope becomes kind of a vague openness to "possibility"—an undemanding and imprecise optimism that everything will turn out all right in the end.

I often think that one of the central tasks of faith in our time and place is to rehabilitate Christian vocabulary.

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So, what can we say about hope on this Easter Sunday? Well, we should start by acknowledging that hope is not where that first Easter started.

Esau McCaulley is a professor of New Testament at Wheaton College near Chicago. In an article in the *New York Times* on Friday, he writes about "two Easters that struggle alongside each other":

> One is linked closely to the celebration of spring and the possibility of new beginnings. It is the show that can be church on Easter. The other deals with the disturbing prospect that God is present with us. His power breaks out and unsettles the world.
>
> We like to imagine the story of the first Easter as the first of the two, a celebration of possibility. We would be wrong.[1]

I reread the four gospel accounts of Jesus' resurrection this week. What strikes me every year as I read these familiar stories is how incredibly odd the reaction of those first witnesses really was.

[1] https://www.nytimes.com/2021/04/02/opinion/easter-celebration.html

In Mark, the women's reaction to the news that the tomb is empty is risen is to flee, "trembling and bewildered… because they were afraid."

Luke reports that the disciples refused to believe the women at first—"their words seemed to them like nonsense" (Luke 24:11)—and that two of them didn't even recognize Jesus as he walked with them on the road to Emmaus.

Matthew's account is probably the most triumphant of the bunch, but even here it says that some among the eleven disciples doubted, even after seeing Jesus in the flesh.

And in our reading this morning from the gospel of John, confusion and chaos reign.

Mary Magdalene sees the stone rolled away and rushes off to tell the disciples. Peter and "the other disciple" come rushing back and peer into the tomb, needing to see for themselves that the tomb is empty, not relying on the testimony of Mary.

They see the strips of linen lying neatly in the tomb. And, it says that the "other disciple" "saw and believed."

But at this point, it seems that all he believed was that Mary wasn't lying, that the tomb really was empty. Even when they see the strips of linen lying there, they still don't have any clue that Jesus might have risen from the dead, as verse 9 makes plain:

And Mary? Well, she returned with the disciples to the tomb. But rather than joy or even perplexed wonder, she just stands there and weeps.

Hardly the joyous response you might imagine if discovering an empty tomb were the eagerly anticipated good news of the defeat of death!

After reading the four gospel accounts of the resurrection of Jesus, we could be forgiven for thinking that the first witnesses are rather confused, sluggish, even reluctant participants in God's great moment of triumph over evil, sin, and death.

The first stories of resurrection are not "celebrations of possibility." They are disruptive and disjointed stories full of confusion and fear and doubt at every turn.

Esau McCaulley sums it up well:

> The women did not go to the tomb looking for hope. They were searching for a place to grieve. They wanted to be left alone in despair. The terrifying prospect of Easter is that

> God called these women to return to the same world that crucified Jesus with a very dangerous gift: hope in the power of God, the unending reservoir of forgiveness and an abundance of love. It would make them seem like fools. Who could believe such a thing?
>
> Christians, at their best, are the fools who dare believe in God's power to call dead things to life.

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We are inheritors of this "dangerous gift." We are "the fools who dare to believe in God's power to call dead things to life."

This last year has seen a lot of death.

Physical death, obviously. 2.8 million people worldwide. 23 000 in Canada. Almost 2000 here in Alberta.

But death comes in more than one form, doesn't it? There have been other deaths, too.

For many, there has been a loss of meaning and purpose. Some have lost jobs, businesses, life savings. Some have lost relationships, sadly.

On some level, we've all lost the rituals and routines that lend stability and predictability to life. The death of a thousand casual daily rhythms and interactions that collectively add up to happiness and the possibility of something different or unusual or unexpected or, at the *very least*, something unlike what we did yesterday.

And there has been a loss of meaningful connection.

On Good Friday morning, after doing some work on my Easter sermon, I took a brain break and went to wash my car. As I was finishing up a woman came wandering into my bay. She had left a few coins on top of the machine and was coming to see if they were still there (they were).

I knew this woman, although not well. She had lost her husband a few years ago and had been scraping by with a small business that she could barely keep afloat at the best of times.

I asked her how she was doing. She had given her business up, she said. It was so hard without her husband. And she was so lonely.

She was planning to sell her house and move into a retirement home in Lethbridge. She didn't want to, but she couldn't afford her house anymore. She was hoping to maybe save a bit and move back to Coaldale in a few years. Something smaller, she said.

"I'm so sorry," I said. "It's been such a hard year." She looked vacantly past me and said, "Yeah, it's been a hard year."

We talked for a little while longer before she turned to leave. I wished her a "Happy Easter" and her face momentarily flickered with a bit of light. "To you, too. It was nice to talk to you for a bit." And she turned around and walked away.

Her story was as heartbreaking as it almost certainly is familiar. I have had many similar encounters with people over the last year. It has been a hard year for hope.

In his NYT article, Esau McCaulley says that, in a strange way, hope is often harder than grief. Grief and despair we know all too well, he says. These responses are as familiar to us as they are tragic. They're kind of what we expect given what we know of the way the world goes. Grief and despair are hard, but we "have a place for them in our lives." We know the script.

Hope asks more of us. Hope asks us not only to *believe* in the foolish and impossible but to embody this hope in the midst of what seems hopeless.

Hope is not a pious, passive sentiment that asks nothing of us.

We do believe that God has done for us what we could never do for ourselves—that God done all that is required for our salvation and for the redemption of the cosmos. Easter proclaims this loudly and gladly.

But hope sent those first shocked witnesses to resurrection back out into a world where God's kingdom had not yet come in fullness, where the victory had been accomplished but not yet fully inaugurated. And it does the same for us.

It asks us to be courageous in the face of death.

It asks us to love sacrificially when fear or apathy seem the easier responses.

It asks for faith when cynicism or despair come more naturally.

It asks us not to grow weary of pursuing justice even when our efforts may seem in vain.

It asks us to be patient in the face of affliction.

It invites us into a life of an unconquerable and unquenchable joy. I sometimes wonder if this is the one that comes hardest for us!

To repeat the words of Esau McCaulley, "Christians, at their best, are the fools who dare believe in God's power to call dead things to life."

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Last week I referred to an article by Jamie Smith where he said that mid-life, he was starting to cast his lot with the artists and the poets rather than the philosophers—that it was the artist who speaks the tongue of the heart and the language of God, not the logician.

I agree with him. I almost always listen to music in my headphones while I'm writing my sermons. Sometimes it's classical music, sometimes it's Taizé worship, sometimes it's Christian pop, sometimes it's acoustic coffee shop music.

And sometimes it's just full-throttle, blistering rock and roll. Whenever someone asks me what I would have been if not a pastor. I usually say that I would have liked to be in a rock band. ☺

At any rate, yesterday I had a young band from Detroit called Greta Van Fleet ringing in my ears while I was writing, and I heard the following line from a song called Broken Bells:

> I believe the sun still shines
> And I believe there comes a time
> When out of silence we will sing
> And even broken bells will ring

These seemed to me like perfect words for Easter 2021. The sun still shines, even after the year we have endured.

A time will come when we, too, will sing out of the silence, no longer behind our screens and masks, when we will come together with joy and eat and laugh and share together in more familiar ways.

And I love that image of even broken bells ringing. For this is what we are, right? Imperfect vessels, but still enlivened by the Spirit of the risen Christ, still capable of bearing witness to the good, the true, and the beautiful.

As Paul says in 2 Corinthians 4:6-7:

> For it is the God who said, “Let light shine out of darkness,” who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.
>
> 7 But we have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us.

Broken bells and clay jars point beyond themselves to the God who is able to bring newness and hope.

Well, for those keeping score, I have now quoted a sixteenth century English poet, an African American New Testament scholar, a rock and roll band from Michigan, and a recovering first century Pharisee.

I want to end with one more quote from a poet who speaks the language of the heart. This one comes from the prophet Isaiah. You’ve heard it already, but I cannot think of a better way to end this Easter morning:

> And he will destroy on this mountain the shroud that is cast over all peoples, the sheet that is spread over all nations; he will swallow up death forever. Then the Lord GOD will wipe away the tears from all faces, and the disgrace of his people he will take away from all the earth, for the LORD has spoken.
>
> It will be said on that day, Lo, this is our God; we have waited for him, so that he might save us. This is the LORD for whom we have waited; let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation.

What an image. What a hope!

This is our God. Let us be glad. The tomb could not contain him. The life and love of God are stronger than death and fear. We are invited to live into this dangerous gift that has changed, is changing, and will change the world.

Let us rejoice in his salvation.

Amen.