

Easter 2 Sermon Notes Ap 11.21 Three things pulling us down. Easter People don't give up.

Pray: Lord Jesus, give us a word from your word. Amen.

Rainy day people always seem to know when it's time to call
 Rainy day people don't talk, they just listen till they've heard it all
 Rainy day lovers don't lie when they tell 'ya they've been down like you
 Rainy day people don't mind if you're cryin' a tear or two

If you get lonely, all you really need is that rainy day love
 Rainy day people all know there's no sorrow they can't rise above
 Rainy day lovers don't love any others, that would not be kind
 Rainy day people all know how it hangs on a piece of mind

Rainy day people always seem to know when you're feeling blue
 High stepping strutters who land in the gutters sometimes need one too
 Take it or leave it, or try to believe it
 If you've been down too long
 Rainy day lovers don't hide love inside they just pass it on
 Rainy day lovers don't hide love inside they just pass it on

Who knew Canadian singer/songwriting legend Gordon Lightfoot could provide pastoral counseling, mental health therapy and evangelism, all in one song!

And we need the encouragement, as a third wave, pushed largely by deadly variants of Covid 19 run rampant through our country and world, even as more and more get the first shot of the vaccine. "Oshawa This Week" had a story that showed Ontario statistics from the CMHA that percentages are on the rise from pre-Covid numbers, for those experiencing higher stress, high or very high anxiety, always or often feeling depressed and those using more substances to cope.

On this rainy day we are jumping into the middle of exploring bible stories of real people who struggled as we do, yet are Easter people. Ordinary people who witnessed something so extraordinary they barely had the words for it. In fact, the resurrection was so extraordinary that it caused the first disciples three reactions: fear, doubt and uncertainty, locking them away in a room.

Those same three things can pull us down: fear, doubt, uncertainty.

How do we get past it, through it? What does our faith tell us?

Well, we are Easter people, on a rainy day or any day. We are intelligent, caring, faithful people who happen to believe in a God who has not abandoned us but has chosen to jump into the middle of a not-so-nice world, in the person of Jesus.

In this series Easter People we are looking at Jesus' closest friends, the first Easter people and the impact the Resurrection had on them.

First, there was fear pulling them down.

¹⁹When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews..."

On Easter Day, when night falls, the disciples are huddled behind locked doors out of fear of those who had turned Jesus over to be crucified. Would they be next? This was fear of not only being put out of the temple and therefore unshielded from the basic religious and economic protections against Roman rule in Israel, but fear of arrest, of torture, of shame, just like Jesus. Very real fear indeed.

Yes, the disciples had heard the report from Mary Magdalene that (after her first mistaking him for the gardener) she had seen the resurrected Jesus early that morning; but they obviously didn't believe her. (Which of us would?) Suddenly, the resurrected Christ appears in the middle of the fearful group, behind the locked doors, imparting peace.

Doubt was pulling them down.

Thomas wasn't there that first Easter night. When the other disciples tell him that they have seen the Lord, he retorts, "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe." (John 20:25) A week later, the disciples are gathered together again, the door was again shut and Thomas is with them. Again, the risen Christ appears to them (without opening the door), imparts peace, and says to Thomas, "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe." Thomas answers him, "My Lord and my God!" (John 20:26-31) Why is it that nobody, at first, recognizes the risen Christ? Most likely because, while this is definitely the same Jesus whom they followed for three years, who bears the marks of the crucifixion, he is at the same time 'different.' This Jesus can go through walls and locked doors, appear and disappear at will. This is the spiritual body Paul speaks about.

There is something just different enough about the resurrected Jesus that he isn't recognized at first by those who knew him best. "He comes and goes as though he belongs both in our world AND in a different world," writes Biblical scholar N.T. Wright, "one which intersects with ours at various points but doesn't use the same geography." Both in our world and in a different world -- a different reality which most of us, most of the time, are unaware of.

Maybe Thomas and all the disciples were struggling with what we too would struggle with; the spiritual and the so-called real-world colliding. What is real? Should certainty be our goal?

Uncertainty was pulling them down.

God who is immutable created the mutability of time and even entered it himself. God gives to his creatures a love of permanence as well as a love of change, a love of certainty as well as a desire for the risky. God seeks to satisfy both of these via the rhythms of life. To over-emphasize certainty in the midst of struggle, is to neglect the other. The anti-dote to the excesses of change is to discover permanence. The anti-dote to excesses of permanent is to discover the novel and unique/ the particular. The enemy of God seeks to exaggerate either, to make an end of it. He seeks to destroy balance and the struggle that brings about balance,' as CS Lewis scholar, Dr Jerry Root puts it.

Gnosticism is the belief that the material world is bad and the spiritual world is good. Hyper-gnostics were called Docetics; they believed if the material is bad, Jesus could NOT have come in the body and therefore he came in a phantom body. However, the flesh is not bad. We are made in the flesh. Jesus came in the flesh. He was raised the flesh. Christianity is a religion that believes in the material world as well as in a non-material heaven. Paul says, 'flesh becomes bad,' Gal 5, 'when it sets its desire against the spirit which causes a person to be split off.' God wants these things to be together. In the incarnation, we find these things together in the life of Christ. True spirituality brings these things together in a kind of balance. Real physical hunger? Eat food. Real spiritual hunger? Eat Jesus' word. "If you love me, keep my commands," Jesus tells the disciples (John 14:15).

Certainty is a psychological concept that may or may not be connected to truth. A person can be absolutely certain about something only to discover that they were wrong. Certainty is not a guarantee of truth; similarly, uncertainty is no indication of error. It's totally understandable that the disciples would seek certainty, and here they were staring at a heavenly, yet earthly body. There was no category for the reality of Jesus standing there.

No, what changes in Thomas is his perception of reality itself. Of what is possible. Of what God can do. Even of what God can do through him. "Jesus comes and takes his mocking words and turns them back on him, not to humiliate or scold him, but simply to confront him with the possibility that his reality was too small..." writes David Lose.

So, Christianity is less about raising absolute certainty to the standard of believing than it is a balance of a material and a spiritual religion, having faith in a God who holds both in tension; we care for the soul and we care equally for the body; that's why the greatest numbers of hospitals, hospices, homes for orphans worldwide were begun by Christians caring for the sick and dying. While there's no simple explanation for the numbers of those experiencing anxiety is on the rise; forgetting to feed the soul with the life-giving word, may be part of it. Maybe God is speaking everyday we just have trouble hearing. Maybe hearing is believing! As in the Spring bird calls.

Here's an experiment I conducted near our house.

VIDEO

I know I am guilty of seeking certainty; is God real? Yet, time after time, the circumstances are just too perfect. How did that just happen?? My reality is too small. Seeing is believing? Hearing is believing? All too often I live as though reality is only that which I can see, hear, taste, touch, smell. As though reality is what I read in the news headlines, which are seldom good and paint a distorted picture of a world gone amuck, with no apparent possibility of redemption.

The biblical witness is that the disciples, the first Easter people, recognize Jesus in their midst.

The disciples were calmed by His presence. They came in afraid, nervous, hunched over. And they went out triumphant, they went out bold, they went out comforted because they had been with Jesus.

The disciples were calmed by his words, hearing his voice. The circumstances didn't change. They were still very much in danger, but as he opened his mouth, He spoke the words, "Peace, I give to you" and his Words washed over them.

The disciples were calmed by his wounds, seeing him alive, with wounds; it's him or someone's done an amazing make up job! By showing them his wounds, he was proving to them he was actually risen, that he was who he said he was, that he did what he said he'd do and that he could be trusted.

The disciples were calmed by his Spirit. Jesus breathed on them and he filled them with his power. Jesus comes to us in the middle of locked doors and lock down. Nothing can keep him out. If we ask, he'll come and calm us.

We can learn to doubt our doubts, and have faith in our faith, and not give in to Satan's sewing doubt or raising unrealistic expectations of certainty, then turning around and pricking our conscience to feel guilty that we doubt.

Just like Jesus showed up in the middle of a locked room, when the disciples in their worst fears, doubts and uncertainties, and he calmed them, I believe that he wants to calm you and I too. Easter people, who know rainy days and bright days, are days to be encouraged, to lift us up and see us through. Right in the middle of what you are facing, of what we are going through, that's where Jesus wants to show up.

Invite Jesus into each part of your day and watch/listen for the miracles.

Alleluia. Christ is risen. The Lord is risen indeed. Alleluia!

Next week in Easter people series: confused yet forgiving. Does the resurrection of Jesus make a difference in our lives? Today's bible readings respond with a resounding, 'Yes!'

"We hold the death of the Lord deep in our hearts; living, now we remain with Jesus the Christ."