

*Alleluia*  
Easter Sunday  
April 4, 2010  
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Texts:       Acts 10.34-43;  
                  Psalm 118;  
                  1 Corinthians 15.19-26;  
                  Luke 24.1-12

Last year was the first time I witnessed the tradition at Hope Church of putting the hm-hm-hm-hm<sup>1</sup> away for Lent with the children. I thought it was a really sweet way to engage children in this practice of Lent. It struck me in a different way this year, though. It occurred to me that there is a real appeal in putting *Alleluia* away for a season. First of all it just seems more realistic. We live in a world where the intersection of poverty and an earthquake can destroy 230,000+ lives. We live in a world where the intersection of unemployment and a medical crisis can wipe a family out. We live in a world where the intersection of bullying and a fragile adolescent soul can lead to suicide.

Observing a season where there is space to lament this kind of suffering without the pressure to quickly sing alleluia feels liberating. Spend some time reading the prayer requests on the Healing Tree in the gathering area and you can see the kinds of honesty and vulnerability and suffering that can find voice when we make space to put the alleluias away. I suspect this is part of the reason why Tenebrae (the service on Thursday night where we walk with Jesus through all the events that lead up to his death) is the one service in the year some of us do not want to miss.

Tenebrae is so compelling in part because we can identify with the suffering and failure of that night. We can see ourselves and see our world in living color in the betrayal and weakness of the disciples, in the self-promoting, self-protecting temple leaders, in the rulers from Rome who abdicate their responsibility and give in to the demands of the crowds who

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<sup>1</sup> The word we teach the children not to say during Lent is *Alleluia*.

need someone to die. But the real center of this story – the one to whom our attention is riveted- is Jesus. In him we see God moving toward us at precisely the moment when we are moving away. In him we see what it is like to face suffering and fear in a different way; it is impossible to turn our eyes away. As Trygve Johnson said on Good Friday, there is this *gravity of grace* that pulls us in and does not let us go.<sup>2</sup> We see that grace at work when Jesus so tenderly washes his disciples' feet. It is also grace working through him when he is brutally honest with them about their part in the darkness that was descending. We see it in his vulnerability in the garden that reveals the cost to his soul of entering so fully into this broken life we live. We see it when he refuses to take up arms to defend his innocence and when Jesus stands before the powers with such clarity and inner strength. And most clearly when Jesus forgives, from the cross, all those swept up in the swirling forces of evil surrounding his death. It's staggering to believe that such love, such grace, such power could move toward us at precisely the moments when we are at our worst. But that is what Jesus reveals.

This is what the women have witnessed. And now he is gone and all the hope that they had placed in him died with him. The women determine to honor Jesus in his death in the only way they knew how: to give him a proper burial. When they find that Jesus' body isn't there they are perplexed and then terrified. Then the men in dazzling clothes put the real question before them: "Why do you look for the living among the dead?"

That is **THE** question of Easter. They were looking for the dead body of Jesus. They were looking to pay homage to the broken, defeated body of their friend and teacher whose life was over. The ministry he shared with them would never be again and they were bereft for all they had lost. What they could not see and what they did not know was that the Resurrected Christ had gone on before them to draw all of them into something entirely different. They were no longer to be his followers and disciples. They were to become apostles and witnesses; new creatures who were transformed by all they had witnessed and received.

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<sup>2</sup> Rev. Trygve Johnson is the Dean of the Chapel at Hope College and preached a sermon by that title at Pillar Christian Reformed Church for the Holland community Good Friday Service, April 2, 2010.

It's disorienting when the truth begins to dawn on you that maybe all of the horror and suffering you have experienced - even the power of death that has touched you - isn't all there is. In Jesus' resurrection the truth of God is revealed: nothing in life and in death can ever separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.<sup>3</sup>

Jesus embodied for us the Way (this is how Luke names it) – the way that makes for peace.<sup>4</sup> He embodied it in his teaching and healing ministry; in the way he remained connected at **all** times to the source of his life, the ground of his being. Even when he felt himself disconnected in the garden and on the cross, still he was held by the love and grace of God and remained faithful to the Way, the Truth, and the Life. And when he was resurrected the Way, the Truth, and the Life lived on as his disciples became his witnesses.

It's not surprising that the disciples initially regarded the testimony of the women as an idle tale (and not just because they were women!) When you are consumed with grief or guilt or despair - whether it is the state of the world, the state of your life, or the state of your heart that seems broken beyond repair– it sounds utterly ridiculous to talk about resurrection and new life. To sing alleluia in those moments seems naïve at best verging on irresponsible and disrespectful. Somehow their testimony sparked some curiosity in Peter enough for him to go and do a little investigating for himself. So he sees the empty tomb with his own eyes and he goes home amazed at what has happened.

I love this dimension of the Easter accounts. Each gospel writer tells the story differently - each gives a different spin – but all of them reveal this variety of response among Jesus' friends: those who can make that move more quickly from fear into faith and those who need time to puzzle it over and figure it out. As we share in worship on this Easter Sunday, whether you find yourself spontaneously erupting into praise, whether you shake your head in some disbelief, or whether you find your curiosity peaked and need to do some more investigating - there is room for you to count

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<sup>3</sup> See Romans 8.37-39.

<sup>4</sup> See Luke 19.42.

yourself among the witnesses to the resurrection. I'm not talking just about how you respond during this service of worship. I am talking about the way each of us responds in worship to God as we live life in all its complexity.

I'll tell you this, committing ourselves to sing alleluia day in and day out in the face of all the realities of this world requires a great deal of thoughtful, soulful reflection. (I'm reading a wonderful book right now by Joan Chitterson and Rowan Williams called an *Uncommon Gratitude* in which they wrestle with what it means to sing alleluia at all times: in the midst of conflict and division, faith and doubt, poverty and wealth.) We're not talking about an easy optimism that closes its eyes to reality and thinks happy thoughts. What I am talking about is acknowledging how often we look for the living among the dead. It is so hard for us to step out of the games this world plays: competing, posturing, winning, hoarding, fearing, judging. As I said, the passion narratives captivate us both because they describe the games of human life so accurately but even more because it reveals to us what it can look like to refuse to live life on those terms.

And then as we come to this story of Easter we discover that the ways that make for peace - the deep conviction and compassion that Jesus embodied all the way to the cross - are not destroyed or defeated with his death. The ways of peace are vindicated! Jesus was raised and the Spirit of Christ lives on! There is hope...the power of God is stronger than the powers of this world: forgiveness and healing is stronger than the bonds of sin and brokenness; love and justice and reconciliation will prevail over fear and oppression and division.

It's a long road for Peter as he connects the dots between his amazement at the tomb and this profound sermon he preaches in the book of Acts standing in the living room of a gentile proclaiming his confession: "I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation ANYONE who fears God and does what is right is acceptable to God."

I have hope today that we are gaining ground in this work of reconciliation. The Reformed Church in America passed the Belhar confession last summer that comes out of the struggle of the church in South Africa to dismantle the legacy of racism and Apartheid. The

confession they wrote calls the church to a ministry of unity, reconciliation, and justice. It is a confession that is in direct alignment with this sermon from Peter. Our classes<sup>5</sup> around the country have been deliberating and this weekend the final votes are in. While the announcement won't be made public until tomorrow I have sources that are clear that the Belhar confession has been upheld: Alleluia! It was close – this vote – but the adoption of this confession gives me hope that our church **IS** connecting the dots between the empty grave and our witness in the world that we are all **ONE** in Jesus Christ.

I felt the same hope (the alleluia) rising up in me listening to James Allison<sup>6</sup> on Monday night when Holland is Ready<sup>7</sup> hosted its first public event here at Hope Church to launch its witness that we be a city where all citizens know that they are welcomed and accepted and we would say deeply loved by God.

I feel that alleluia rising up in me as I look out at all of you and consider the witness of your lives in this community – the ways that you resist the forces of fear and death - the ways you invest yourselves in life and embody the ways that make for peace.

I have hope today...I can feel the alleluia rising up.

Jesus Christ is Risen...Alleluia – Amen.

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<sup>5</sup> The term classis (plural classes) refers to our local governing body that is a gathering of ministers and elders from local congregations. There are 46 classes in the Reformed Church in America. We needed 2/3 of those classes or 31 of them to vote affirmatively in order to uphold the General Synod's acceptance of the Belhar Confession.

<sup>6</sup> James Allison is a Jesuit priest and theologian who is also gay and has worked to articulate why he believes the church should offer welcome and acceptance to gay Christians.

<sup>7</sup> Holland is Ready is a gathering of community members and church leaders who believe that Holland is indeed ready to be more open and inclusive of all people regardless of sexual orientation.