

April 4th 2010- The Rev. Scott Pittendrigh

Easter Sunday 8 am

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Let us pray:

Gracious and loving God,
may it be your word that is spoken here;
may it be your word that is heard;
and may it be your word that is received into our hearts
through the one who breaks the bonds of death this day,
Jesus Christ our Risen Lord. Amen.

You probably don't know the name Nikolai Ivanovich Bukharin nor should you. But during his day, he was a powerful man on this earth. A Russian Communist leader, he took part in the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917, was editor of the Soviet newspaper Pravda, and was a full member of the Politburo. Although Communism in Russia is long dead and buried, we should not forget how aggressively Communism sought to undermine, and even destroy the faith (the Christian faith of the Russian people) and replace it with atheism – seeking to make the entire country an atheist state. In fact, the Soviet Union was the first state to have as an ideological objective the elimination of all religion. As a result, the Communist regime confiscated church property, ridiculed religion, harassed believers, and propagated atheism in its' schools. Russian Orthodox priests and believers were tortured, sent to prison camps, labour camps or mental hospitals, and a large number were executed. Many Russian Orthodox (along with people of other faiths) were also subjected to psychological punishment or torture and mind control experimentation in order to force them give up their religious convictions. Thousands of churches and monasteries were taken over by the government and were either destroyed or converted to secular use. It was impossible to build new churches.

There's one particular story about this man, Nikolai Bukharin, that many Russian people remember and like to tell again and again. It's about a journey he took from Moscow to Kiev in 1930 to address a huge assembly on the subject of atheism. Addressing the crowd, he aimed his heavy artillery at the church and specifically at Christianity, hurling insult, argument, and proof against it.

An hour later, when he was finished, he looked out at what seemed to be the smoldering ashes of the people's faith. "Are there are any questions?" Bukharin demanded. Deafening silence filled the auditorium, but then one older man began his slow but steady pace to the lectern.

Standing shoulder to shoulder with the communist leader, this old man surveyed the crowd first to his left and then to his right. Finally, he mustered all the strength he had inside him and shouted the ancient greeting known so well in the Russian Orthodox Church, "Alleluia! Christ is Risen!" and en masse, the large crowd stood to their feet and the response came crashing like the sound of thunder, "He is Risen indeed! Alleluia!"

I love this story. Not only because it reminds us of how even with the most oppressive efforts a people's faith could not be stifled or stamped out or silenced, but because it goes to the heart of what this Easter Day is all about. That even when it looks like everything is gone; even when it looks like death has taken away everything that you love and everything that was precious to you, God brings new life.



My dear friends: the Resurrection: This morning's epistle outlines the core of our faith, the true Gospel proclaimed by the Church for millennia and as real today as it was in 55AD when Paul wrote to the Church in Corinth.

It is always before us: in our Creed, at the heart of our faith. Paul had to remind the church at Corinth, and we too need to be reminded of the gospel that we have received and on which, we have taken our stand.

This is the Easter message, our faith is an Easter faith, we are an Easter people, liberated by the Resurrection. I stand here today, in this pulpit, to proclaim this word that...

Alleluia! Christ is risen! Join me in saying, He is risen indeed! Alleluia!
Alleluia! Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! Alleluia!

We face interesting times: in this diocese as it re-invents itself; and we face the challenges of the future; in this parish as we become the "hub" church for the South Cowichan region and welcome parishioners from St. Andrew's and in the Church as a whole – a fragmenting Anglican Communion with its divisions about human sexuality.

Lurking behind all of this is the whole issue of how Christians engage with modern society, and explain what the Gospel has to do with them, and how it can transform them.

That Gospel has little to do with heavy-duty theology, or complex philosophy but at the heart of it, and at the heart of all that we do...it's all about the Resurrection.

Paul said if there's no Resurrection, then all the preaching is useless.

If there is no Resurrection, our faith has no value.

If there is no Resurrection, we become false witnesses.

If there is no Resurrection, the transformation that takes place within our lives when we know Christ is meaningless.

If there is no Resurrection, then we are to be pitied among humankind.

But Paul was quick to proclaim, "But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, (he is) the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep."

In a later verse in the same passage of I Corinthians 15, Paul says the resurrection will change us....

The body sown is perishable, but it will be raised imperishable;

it is sown with dishonour, it will be raised in glory.

it is sown in weakness, it will be raised in power;

it is sown as natural, it will be raised as spiritual" (15:42-43)

This Resurrection is our hope! It is our joy! It is our faith!

The resurrection of Christ from the grave is the cornerstone of Christianity. It is the Magna Carta of our faith. Everything depends on it. Nothing in the Christian faith is worth trusting without it. As a matter of fact, it is not stretching too far to say that all of the New Testament stands firmly on the event we call Easter.

And when we begin to doubt, we need to be reminded that no event in history has shaped the world like the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.



It is unique in that it is the only religion anywhere in the world that offers an empty tomb as its salvation. The resurrection of Jesus Christ has stood the test of time. Even in the face of persecution, the apostles and those who followed them willingly underwent Martyrdom proclaiming Christ risen.

If they had made it up, then surely, at the first sight of an axe, a hammer and nails or a gridiron, surely they would have admitted that it was made up. But no, with faith in Christ resurrected, the glorious martyrs held fast to the Gospel. If anything is worth dying for, then it is worth credibility. That is why I believe in the resurrection and the power that it has to change lives: my life, your lives.

And because of that Gospel message, hopes have been restored, attitudes have brightened, emotions have been positively influenced, and lives have been changed.

Let me tell you another story...

It was Easter Day 1973 . Uganda groaned under the terror of Idi Amin. Still fresh in the memory of young priest Kefa Sempangi's memory was a face burned beyond recognition, the sight of soldiers cruelly beating a man, and the horrible sound of boots crushing bones, all for the crime of being Christian.

But that Easter of 1973 Sempangi bravely and openly preached on the Risen Lord in his town's home football stadium to over 7,000 people. After the service, five of Idi Amin's Secret Police followed Sempangi back to his little church and closed the door behind them. Five rifles pointed at Sempangi's face.

"We are going to kill you for disobeying General Amin's orders" said the captain. "If you have something to say, say it now before you die." Sempangi, thinking of his wife and little girl, began to shake.

But as he would say, it was the risen Lord living in his heart who gave him the courage to speak. "Do what you must," he said, "The Word of God says that in Christ I am already dead, and that my real life is hidden with Him in God. It is not my life that is in danger my friends, but yours. I am alive in the risen Lord, but you are still dead in your sins. May He spare you from eternal destruction."

The leader looked at Sempangi for a long time. Then he lowered his gun and the other guns followed, "Will you pray for us?" he asked. Sempangi did, and from that day those five officers, now converted through the witness of Sempangi's bravery, protected the Anglican Priest with their very lives."

In our gospel reading this morning Mary Magdalen learns that resurrection is not just about a private moment of joy between herself and Jesus, but an experience that compels her to move out, tell her story, and transform the world. She shows up at the tomb after her male companions have returned home, weeping for what is gone. She obviously expects nothing to happen; she has come to mourn the loss of life, to touch a dead body, and to bid goodbye. In her grief, she can hardly think clearly. She sees two angels and does not recognize their otherworldly origins. She sees Jesus and mistakes him for the gardener. Then he speaks her name, and she suddenly knows exactly who this mysterious stranger is. She responds to the call of her name; "Teacher," she replies. Then Jesus commissions her to go and tell others what she has seen.





The story of the resurrection is really a story about commissioning, sending believers out into the world to tell everyone that death is not the last word. If the first disciples had not done this, no one would have ever known what had happened, and Easter would be just another reunion story of dear friends with tears and hugs all around. However, Mary obeys the risen Jesus, fighting her impulse to cling to a familiar body, and leaves the garden to tell what she knows to be true. An expected ending is now a beginning. Just like the elderly Russian who came to the lectern when asked if there were any questions – a man who summed up all his courage and strength to tell what he knew to be true.

All of us here today – we are commissioned on this beautiful Easter Sunday morning to go out into our world and tell what we know to be true – that Christ is risen!

Nothing has ever shaped the world like this gospel message.

As we are reminded that it's all about the Resurrection, and that nothing has ever shaped the world like it, I'm also reminded a very simple fact about life itself...Life on this earth, in these bodies, does not go on forever.

There is death. Every one of us must face our own mortality. There is no military victory, no medical cure, no global village that can prepare any individual to answer the ultimate questions in life any better than the Resurrection of Jesus Christ. It's the hope of the Russian Orthodox standing against the atheism of Communism; it's the hope of St. Paul and the Corinthian Church. It's the hope of hope of Mary Magdalene who told others what she knew to be true. It's the hope of people like Kefa Sempangi, who in the face of death itself, stood firm and claimed that indeed Christ is risen!

Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! Amen.

