The second Sunday of Easter: 19 April 2020

Reflection by the Rev Dr Niki Francis

Gospel reading: John 20:19-31

Contemporary reading: “Wild Geese” by Mary Oliver

(see order of service for the text)

**Introduction**

It’s a week since Easter Sunday and the resurrection story.

The community of John’s Gospel is in despair. The people feel dislocated and abandoned. The historical context gives us some understanding of the community’s mood, and it’s a mood that we can perhaps relate to during our time of uncertainty during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Community is central to our navigation of these difficult times, whether it’s the community of family, dance group, sport, work, church or whatever community or communities nurture us.

To start, I’ll outline the story and then, in good Presbyterian fashion, I’ll give you some historical background to the story.

**The story**

In today’s reading from John’s gospel, Jesus twice visits the disciples after the resurrection. Thomas is not around for the first visit, so when his fellow disciples tell Thomas that Jesus has returned Thomas refuses to believe. He wants evidence: “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.” Fair enough, I think – I might do the same if confronted with that extraordinary situation!

Yet when Jesus appears the next time in Thomas’s presence, the Gospel writer has Thomas proclaim Jesus as his Lord and his God

without checking Jesus’ wounds.

The gospel writer is making a point about who Jesus is.

Other stories from the same era suggest that different communities understood Jesus in other ways.

And I’ll talk about this in a bit, but first

**Let’s look at the backstory**

John Spong, US Episcopalian bishop and well-known writer, identifies John’s gospel

as a highly symbolic, interpretive account

of the historical person Jesus of Nazareth

shaped by a popular form of first century Jewish mysticism.

Spong writes that the book is not to be taken literally.

Biblical scholars generally agree that the gospel of John was written by several authors 65 to 70 years after Jesus died.

The authors belonged to a Jewish community that followed Jesus and worshipped in the synagogue alongside traditional Jews.

Almost inevitably, tensions built between the two groups,

– one believing Jesus was the promised Messiah,

the other not accepting that.

The Roman army’s capture of Jerusalem and destruction of the temple in the year 70 of the common era further heightened tensions and exacerbated the differences between the two groups.

By 88 CE synagogue leaders had expelled the Jewish Christians.

The two groups were hostile to one another, hence the locked doors of the house in which the disciples were staying.

We need to remember that we’re hearing just one side of the story here.

But we do know that John’s community was in disarray after the expulsion.

The people had lost their place of worship.

They were isolated from the wider community.

The promised Messiah hadn’t returned.

They felt abandoned, uncertain about the future and fearful.

Some of that might sounds familiar!

Another source from the same era

that didn’t make it into the Christian bible

tells a different story of Jesus.

I’m talking about the Gospel of Thomas,

which was discovered in a cave in Egypt in 1945 along with 52 other early Christian writings that were also excluded from the Christian canon.

One of these, the Gospel of Thomas is a collection of Jesus’s sayings.

US biblical historian Elaine Pagels asserts that similarities between the two gospels suggest that the writers of John’s gospel would have been familiar with the Gospel of Thomas.

A distinct difference, however,

lies in the two gospels’ understandings about Jesus.

John’s Gospel proclaims Jesus as the light of the world,

and in today’s reading the writer of John’s Gospel has Thomas proclaiming Jesus as Lord and God.

On the other hand,

the Gospel of Thomas suggests

that such light dwells in all human beings,

that we can all be like Jesus

and bring light to the world.

What I wanted to highlight today

is our capacity to love

and make a positive difference for other people

especially when we are part of a community

or communities

that strengthen us and nurture us

enabling us to reach out

with the different gifts we all have to offer.

I also wanted to highlight

with these stories

that the way we live is more important than what we believe.

As Canadian Atheist minister and author Gretta Vosper writes, compassion outshines doctrine every time.

The writers of John’s Gospel describe Thomas refusing to believe in the resurrection until he sees evidence Jesus is alive.

The compiler of the Gospel of Thomas has Jesus telling Thomas stuff he hasn’t told the other disciples.

The writer of John’s Gospel

has Jesus proclaim he is the light of the world.

In the Gospel of Thomas

Jesus directs each disciple to discover the light within.

This is a profound difference!

In the end, surely what is important is the way we live.

Whether we accept John’s mysticism

or Thomas’s recognition of the light within all beings,

or both,

the Jesus of both gospels tells us to love one another.

And love is a core message of many other world religions

and philosophies.

It’s radically simple:

Love as expressed in compassionate and just living.

How do we express this love when we are struggling ourselves in the face of the Covid-19 pandemic? In the uncertainty, anxiety and fear of these times when we can’t be physically present to people unless they are in our own residential bubble, when we are isolated from others we love, when we are confined to within 2 kilometres of our homes unless we are an essential worker

Just on that note – kudos and love to the essential workers who are keeping the country going, keeping us fed, caring for us if we are sick, collecting our rubbish, driving public transport, public servants in health, education and welfare. Arohanui. Kia kaha.

So a question, especially but not exclusively for those of us who have the privilege and luxury of warm homes, plenty of food,

good internet, people who love us,

is how do we live justly and compassionately in these times?

Two things immediately spring to mind:

This first is the statement made by Wellington intensive care doctor Paul Young who said in a newspaper article recently that we could save more lives than he will in his entire career simply by staying at home.

If you’re not an essential worker and you’re sitting at home feeling lost and a little hopeless in the face of this pandemic, remember that you are doing something vital for the community and the nation by staying at home and preventing the spread.

The other is Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern’s injunction to be kind

I understand this as a way of love

an interpretation of Jesus’s command that we love one another.

Such kindness or love covers a myriad of possibilities.

One of which is donating to organisations that need help –

for people who are struggling because they have lost their jobs, can’t pay their rent, can’t feed themselves and their children, women and children trapped in lockdown with their abusers.

Through this pandemic, we’re learning how interconnected we are – as individuals and globally. We’re learning that our actions can keep others safe or endanger them.

The fact that we aren’t all equal is also thrown into stark relief by the pandemic…

If you can afford it, there are plenty of organisations supporting people in need.

We can also listen to others, call someone each day and talk to them, especially people who might live on their own. Mary Oliver says in her beautiful poem that is full of compassion

:

Tell me about despair, yours, and I will tell you mine.  
Meanwhile the world goes on.  
Meanwhile the sun and the clear pebbles of the rain  
are moving across the landscapes,

We are all in this together. But we’re not all in the same waka. Some of us are in little tinnies, some in luxury yachts. For those of us who are able, the things I mentioned are some things we can do, in love for each other – and by each other I mean everyone in Aotearoa New Zealand, not only those we know and love in recognition of our connection as humans.

And if you’re one of those people need, reach out if you can to the St Andrews community or to other organisations that can provide you with support – COVID-19 restrictions may be exacerbating your problems, but you are valued members of the church community and we hope to support you as Jesus would have done.

As Mary Oliver wrote

Whoever you are, no matter how lonely,  
the world offers itself to your imagination,  
calls to you like the wild geese, harsh and exciting–  
over and over announcing your place  
in the family of things.

You are part of our family. Thank you for joining us today.

Kia ora, Kia kaha.

Niki Francis

19 April 2020

Te Whanganui-a-Tara Wellington

Aotearoa New Zealand