

Easter Worship Series: Know the Resurrected Christ As... Sermon Title: "Security System"

Luke 24:13-35; Psalm 23; John 1:1-10; Acts 2:42-47

Salem United Methodist Church; May 3, 2020

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On this fourth Sunday of Easter, we continue to explore who the Risen Christ is and how he offers resurrected life to all, especially those who are struggling with life.

The Canadian television (CTV) network's morning show broadcasted a video of a sweet, unnamed music teacher. She wrote a song for her young students in which she shared her feelings about this pandemic. She begins the video sharing with her students that the best way she can process the transition from going from classroom teaching to online teaching is by writing a song. Then with a sweet smile, she picks up a ukulele and strums a few soothing chords. After a brief introduction of strumming, one expects this young, blond, smiling music teacher to sing a Raffi style original song about her feelings and how she is coping. Instead of singing, she shrieks. Then she goes back to playing some more soothing chords and shrieks again and repeats with soothing chords and shrieking. The news casters who are watching are caught off guard and laugh uncontrollably. As we enter our 8th week of the stay-at-home order, I think we all have had moments where we have shrieked in frustration, screamed in exasperation, and/or cried from the weariness of the disruption this virus has caused to our lives. So, we laugh with the newscasters, because we can identify with this music teacher.

We are frustrated, exasperated, and weary from this pandemic. We want life to go back to the way it was, and yet, we don't know what lies ahead of us. We are betwixt and between. We dislike the sense of uncertainty and not being in control of our lives. The initial two weeks of being self-isolated has turned into eight weeks, and still there is no end in sight. The numbers of identified cases of Covid-19 keep going up. Both young and old are dying from it. Thankfully many are surviving and building up anti-bodies. However, we don't know how many more weeks or months we will still be furloughed, work from home, learn from home, worship from home, and plain stay at home! We are becoming impatient and want everything to open up. We want this to be over. We want things to get back to normal! Yet, what will happen in the future is unknown. We are betwixt and between. And that makes us very uncomfortable.

Richard Rohr, a Franciscan priest, who heads up the Center for Contemplation and Action in New Mexico shared in his daily online devotion this week about this time of betwixt and between. He entitled the devotions "Liminal Space." He defines liminal space as "an inner state and sometimes an outer situation where we can begin to think and act in new ways." We are in a liminal space when we are between two worlds. He continues to explain that it is like "having left one room or stage of life but not yet entered the next. We usually enter liminal space when our former way of being is challenged or changed—perhaps when we lose a job or a loved one, during illness, at the birth of a child, or a major relocation. It is a graced time, but often does not feel "graced" in any way. In such space, we are not certain or in control. This global pandemic we now face is an example of an immense, collective liminal space."

Being in a liminal space can be a distressing place to be. We try to avoid it, if we can. We may even plan for it, if we can. And when we can't, we try to get through it as fast as we can. However, wise, spiritual people through the ages have come to realize that this liminal space provides us with a time for self-reflection and self-discovery, a time to be silent and listen for God, and a time to experience emptiness and humility. Being in a liminal space provides us with the space and time for personal growth, re-centering, creativity, and rebirth. As I read the 23rd Psalm, the psalmist writes about this liminal space with these words: "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death" (KJV). Or "Even though I walk through the darkest valley" (NRSV). Or "Even if I pass through death-dark ravines" (Complete Jewish Bible). No matter if it is called the valley of the shadow of death, the darkest valley, or death-dark ravines, the Psalmist is naming liminal space. We go from a state of normalcy where life is good and the pastures are green, to a time of disorientation - a time of the unknown - a time of uncertainty - a time of betwixt and between. Eventually we will move to a time of reorientation, a time of new life. The line in Psalm 23 that describes a dark space, a liminal space is followed with reassuring words, "I will fear no evil: for thou art with me" (KJV). "I will fear no disaster; for you are with me" (Complete Jewish Bible). Liminal space can feel like a total disaster. It can feel like evil is attacking us, but the wise psalmist knows that we are not alone in our liminal space. The Good Shepherd is with us.

The word, liminal, comes from the Latin word, *limen*, which means threshold. When we think of a threshold, we think of a place of entry into another space, or perhaps a new beginning. Did you know that one of the ways shepherds protected their sheep at night was to place them in a pen with one entrance? The shepherd would sleep in this entrance or threshold both to keep the sheep safe inside and to keep any harm from entering the sheep pen. The shepherd was the security system for the sheep. In the Gospel of John, Jesus says, “I am the Gate of the Sheep.” The listeners of that time would have understood the image of the shepherd literally being the gate to protect the sheep during the dark nights. The shepherd kept the sheep in the pen for their own good, for their own protection. The shepherd then laid across the threshold. The Shepherd became the the gate of the one and only opening, protecting the sheep with his own body. The shepherd was the gate, the threshold of the sheep pen. The sheep were safe inside this space. They may not have had the freedom to roam, but they were safe from whatever was lurking outside the walls. When the morning sun rose, the shepherd would deem it safe and allow them to pass through the gate, the threshold, the liminal space to green pastures.

I find it comforting that while we are in this liminal space, this threshold to an unknown future, Jesus is that threshold for us, that security system, that Gate. I, also, find it comforting that we are not alone in this liminal space and am reminded of the Psalmist words, “for you are with me.” Even in this liminal space, the valley of the shadow of death, the darkest valley, the dark ravine, the Gate becomes the Shepherd who protects us, feeds us, and remains with us as we come through the Gate to the new life on the other side. Our dark times can be a time like this pandemic, in which in order to keep everyone safe, we are limited to what we can and cannot do. Our dark times can be a time of grief, a loss, a time of uncertainty, or even the time of our death. Jesus, the Gate, is not only with us, protecting us, but bringing us through to the new life on the other side. What grace! What mercy! What comfort! And what hope! What joy! Is there any wonder that the Psalmist claims that he knows he will be with God forever?

Now, think about the what is happening inside the sheep pen. There isn't just one sheep, but a whole flock of sheep who live together in community. They stay together as a flock. The first believers did this as well. Because they believed in Jesus as the Son of God who died and rose again, they were bonded together. They shared everything with each other. If one was hurting, they cared for that one. They were a flock of sheep who became shepherds to each other when one was hurting. They even sold their own property to help out one who was in need. This is how strong their love was for each other. When one of them was in a liminal space, an uncertain time in life, they walked with them through the darkest times and waited for the Gate to open into a new place, a new life. We at Salem are this kind of community. We have had ten deaths since January of members of Salem or relatives of Salem members. Then in addition, we are going through this liminal time of the pandemic where we are betwixt and between. And over and over again, I hear of how even while practicing safe distancing, we are finding creative ways to be there for one another. Salem is very much like this early Christian community, with one exception. We aren't able to come together to share a meal at this time. We aren't there yet. We are still in this liminal space. We are still in need of a Security System that keep us in the “pen” and keeps us safe. Jesus is the Gate and our Security System. Jesus is the Good Shepherd who provides and protects us. Jesus is with us during our liminal spaces of uncertainty. Jesus provides us with space to reflect, to discover, to be creative, and find ways to live into whatever is on the other side of this dark ravine.

Kitty O'Meara from Madison, Wisconsin wrote a poem for this pandemic that I think reflects this liminal space that we are in. She wrote: “And people stayed at home, And read books, And listened, And they rested, And did exercises, And made art and played, And learned new ways of being, And stopped and listened, More deeply. Someone meditated, someone prayed, Someone met their shadow, And people began to think differently, And people healed., And in the absence of people who, Lived in ignorant ways, Dangerous, meaningless and heartless, The earth also began to heal, And when the danger ended and People found themselves, They grieved for the dead. And made new choices, And dreamed of new visions, And created new ways of living, And completely healed the earth, Just as they were healed.” May it be so.

Reflection Questions: What is happening in your liminal space? How is the Risen Christ being present with you, walking with you during this dark time? How is the Risen Christ being a threshold to a new life?

Resources: *John: The Gospel of Light and Life* by Adam Hamilton; “Teacher's song about feelings during the pandemic made our hosts cry with laughter” April 21, 2020, CTV; “Liminal Space” daily devotions-April 21, May 1, by Richard Rohr, www.cac.org; “Who Is Kitty O'Meara? Author of ‘People Stayed Home’ Interview,” www.oprahmag.com