

“What is Your Image of New Life?”

*A sermon delivered by the Rev. Dr. Bill Steadman
at St. Andrew’s United Church, Sudbury*

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Second Sunday of Easter Season

Acts 4:32-35; Psalm 133; John 20:19-29

The story is told of a monastery that was located at the top of a huge hill – given the flat nature of the landscape around it, people referred to it as “the mountain,” but it was more like the escarpment on Manitoulin Island than it was one of the Rockies.

A guest to the monastery was being taken up to the monastery by the regular route – in a large basket connected to an intricate pulley system that people rode high above the slope of the mountain to reach the monastery above.

The guest noted that the pulley rope was fraying, and was somewhat concerned about his safety, so to allay his fears he asked the operator of the basket transportation system “How often do you replace the pulley rope?”

“Whenever it breaks” came the reply.

Don’t you love, direct, honest answers?

Slightly more direct and honest than I often heard as I attended auctions in southwestern Ontario run by Bill Elliott, a long-standing auctioneer in the region.

Bill had the gift of the gab, as most successful auctioneers do. When people were nattering as the bidding escalated on an item, “that’s more than it is worth,” Bill would stop and confidently proclaim: “Don’t worry, I’ll let you know when the bidding gets too high.”

His best line, though, was reserved for selling lawnmowers, toasters, television sets, or other electrical appliances or power items. When asked “Does it work?” Bill would quickly retort: “It worked the last time they used it.”

What gives us confidence, and how do we have a sense of new life?

A lot of energy and discussion is placed on the post-Easter appearances of Jesus, and how they established his resurrection and entry into new life.

What impresses me about the story in John is not so much the appearances as the message. “Peace be with you” and “Receive the Holy Spirit” are the repeated messages. There is some authenticity in a Jesus, whatever form he takes, whatever experience the disciples had, who reiterates the very realities that he embodied in his life. The disciples maybe could hear that message with more clarity after all that they had been through in the days and weeks preceding these experiences.

Tim Russert was a television commentator, and after a career of being a political advisor became the moderator of the long-running political show “Meet the Press.”

In a biography of his father entitled “Me and Big Russ,” Russert writes a poignant and personal account of growing up in Buffalo, and the role his father played in that experience. His dad also was named Timothy Russert, but was known to all as “Big Russ” to distinguish the two Tims in the family.

In a fascinating compilation of tales of growing up in the 1950’s and early 60’s in Buffalo (south side), Tim Russert tells of one story involving his father. He worked for the city sanitation department, working his way up from a garbage man to a garbage truck driver to a foreman to then taking exams to be a supervisor, or the foremen’s boss.

He did well in the exams, but Russert's father was not the favoured candidate, so three of those in the leadership group at City Hall paid Tim Sr. a visit one day. Tim Jr never knew what it was about, and his father never discussed the visit, but he knew his father never got the job.

As his father aged and Tim was an adult he asked his dad about that visit, probing until he got the story out of his father.

"Well, they wanted me to sign off the supervisor thing and say I was not interested, so they could give it to their favoured candidate." It seems that the favoured candidate did not score well on the exam, but they had a by-law in Buffalo that those appointed had to be among the top three candidates in terms of the qualifying exams.

"I told them I would not do it."

"They said that it would be worthwhile to me, that I could get a nice bonus if I just simply played along."

"I refused, and they eventually left. I did not get the job and I did not get any payment, and they appointed who they wanted to appoint anyway."

"But why did you refuse the bonus, Dad?"

"Because if I am trying to teach you children to obey the rules and do what is right, how can I have any credibility if I bend the rules myself? I could not look at myself in the mirror, much less face my family, if I were to play along with what is wrong."

Big Russ lived his life with a simple and direct idea of what is right and wrong.

And the story of the risen Jesus continues the story of his life – being clear what is expected, what is right and wrong.

In a somewhat related story, Anthony de Mello writes about a Master who emboldened his disciples. The story is found in a helpful little book entitled ***One Minute Wisdom.***

The disciples asked the Master: “What did you gain from Enlightenment. Did you become divine?”

“No.”

“Did you become a Saint?”

“No.”

“Then what did you become?”

“Awake.”

Could it be that in the experience of Jesus after his death, it was the disciples who really had the new life, that they suddenly became “awake” to the possibilities that Jesus shared with them while on earth, and they now were charged with awakening the rest of us to the peace that Jesus shared, and the promise of God’s Spirit being amongst us?

I think that may be enough for us to experience Easter again this Sunday, and every day, as we seek to follow in Jesus’ steps.