

“It’s Easter Sunday: How Do You Want Your Life Changed?”

A Sermon Shared with the Congregation of St. Andrew’s United Church
for Easter Sunday, April 16, 2017 at 10:30 a.m.
Scripture Readings: John 20:1-18; Acts 10:34-43
(by The Rev. Dr. Bill Steadman)

Our biblical stories rely on personal eyewitnesses in order for the events recounted to be filled with information that is engaging and reliable.

Thank God I was not one of those eye witnesses. Reliable eyewitnesses are people who are sensitive to colours, shapes, clothing, the general personal attributes and the surrounding context of any event.

The witnesses pick up unique aspects of an individual’s habits and easily identify an individual’s affectations when they speak, listen, or are engaged in deep thought.

In the Myers Briggs typology, usually Sensate people are helpful eyewitnesses, for they are the type of people who often accurately and succinctly can summarize another’s appearance as well as the presenting qualities and attributes of any scene they experience.

But however we react and respond to the world, this is Easter Sunday. It is the day of the promise of new life, and the experience that death is not the final word for us. Regardless of who was there and how they communicated their experience, the disciples knew that Jesus’ message was alive and he was with them still.

If we accept that news, what do we want to experience as a new hope and renewed reality in our lives?

I looked around for some people – famous or not, prolific writers or blog reflectors – who could help me find that answer.

Henry Nouwen’s book *In the Name of Jesus* was produced as a result of an invitation to speak about Christianity for the 21st Century. Nouwen was invited to address the 15th anniversary of the Centre for Human Development in Washington, D. C. While Nouwen had fairly recently left his teaching position at Harvard to become part of the Daybreak Community in Richmond Hill, Ontario (which in turn is part of the network of L’Arche communities established by the Canadian Jean Vanier), he accepted the invitation. Nouwen then decided that if he was going to speak about the Christianity of the 21st century, which he believed would be more and more about finding community and human support rather than hierarchical leadership and established belief systems, then he needed to bring with him a member of the Daybreak community to share in the presentation. And so Nouwen took Bill van Buren as his co-presenter to this event.

One of the learnings that Nouwen clearly had garnered in his brief time at Daybreak was that the present dominated one’s life in that setting. In a community where the past was not significant, and often something to be forgotten, and the future was too difficult to imagine, the community focussed on the present – what would happen today, how would

people interact today, and how would faith be lived today. How could that reality of being focused on the present help explain Christianity in the 21st century.

Never mind the 21st century, but let me insert my own comment here. Easter morning shattered the perspective of the disciples and followers of Jesus. They felt the world had ended, their hopes were dashed, and then, suddenly, they felt that the light of God had returned into their midst. What an experience!

But back to Henri Nouwen's story. Nouwen, who had taught for two decades in some of the most prestigious universities in North America – Harvard, Yale, Notre Dame – learned that such credentials did not impress his new community. What they needed to know was: “Who are you *for me*, and how will you live *with me*?”

Nouwen's life of the past – educated, learned, world renowned, famous for books and articles and class instructions – meant nothing in his new setting. Even his ecumenical connections and history did not work – when he offered meat to one of his new fellow residents, a person opposite him shouted out, “Don't give him meat – he's a Presbyterian.”

In life we usually look for acceptance based on what we have studied or what we have accomplished. But Nouwen learned an important lesson – we are at our greatest when we are broken down and modest, only able to see around us what the challenges are and beginning to learn how we can live in the midst of the reality of our day. Easter is not about what we do or have done, but is about who we are when we simply need to cope.

The Christian leader of the future, says Nouwen, will know of his or her irrelevance. That individual will connect with people not based on where he or she comes from, or what they have achieved, but how well they see the needs of the present day, and how willing they are to engage others within the realities in which they live. The message is clear – to convey the realities of the divine, one must be genuinely human. After all, that is what incarnation is about.

The basic lesson of Easter is clearly the question of Jesus to the disciples: Do you take my teachings and example seriously? Are we able to make a difference by who we are and how we live?

Another lesson shared by Nouwen concerning Christianity for the 21st century was the fact that ministry and priestly training has been a solo enterprise up until now. Nouwen said that he was always taught that to be an effective priest he had to be able to act and serve and preach and teach on his own. At Daybreak, he learned the importance of community, and the reality of having others concerned about his own well-being and caring for him as much as he felt called to care for them.

When Nouwen went away on a speaking engagement shortly after arriving, he left without saying goodbye to Trevor, a resident of Daybreak. When he reached his destination, Henri received a tearful call from Trevor: “Henri, why did you leave us? We miss you so. Please come back.”

Nouwen felt he had made it as a professional, a priest, an educator and researcher, a presenter of insights and spiritual truths, and so had become one who could travel where he wanted and do what he desired. Then he learned that such “making it” is being more concerned with building up one’s personal power and being less interested in embodying the love of God. Being present for others was taught to him clearly and dramatically by those mentally challenged people with whom he now lived at Daybreak. If he was to live in community, he needed to learn how to embrace that community. And quickly.

No doubt the post-resurrection appearances of Jesus are a reminder that the disciples needed that extra teaching to get straight what they were about. They thought they were followers of a powerful leader and Messiah, and when he died as a common criminal on the cross, they felt dejected and forlorn. It no longer was about them being on the inside, and being in the glow of a powerful leader; suddenly they needed to cope, and missed the lessons Jesus carefully taught throughout his lifetime, that survival means living in community and caring for one another.

Jesus needed to get the message to them, somehow, that the essence of his teachings was not power and might and privilege, but being present for others, yes, being prayerfully reflective, and unabashedly caring. Jesus was not the answer to everything the disciples would face, but he was the one who helped them not to be overwhelmed by the questions and experiences they would endure in the months and years again.

In his book *Writing the Sacred, a Psalm – Inspired Path to Appreciating and Writing Sacred Poetry*, Ray McGinnis offers different ways by which emphasis is given in the religious writing of the Psalms and other traditions based on what he calls the “psalmist approach.”

One of those patterns in the Psalms is asking questions of God, followed by answers, or at least implied answers. From the Psalms, No. 22, we get the famous line of Jesus: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” Psalm 42 repeats that perspective: “I say to you, my rock, ‘Why have you forgotten me?’ ” Such stylistic writing is found in other religious traditions as well. Rumi, a thirteenth century Persian mystic, writes the following: “How to cure bad water? Send it back to the river. How to cure a bad habit? Send me back to you.”

Rumi called out a need that clearly the disciples learned they needed – even as Jesus was barely dead. They needed to be sent back to him and learn the lessons they missed when he was with them.

These are lessons that parallel insight Father Nouwen rediscovered a few years ago, shortly before his own death: Jesus came to celebrate the poor and downtrodden, and invites us in humility to be the kind of leaders who are led by others. Jesus invited questions, but only if we are patient and willing to listen for the answers. Do not seek fame and fortune, but seek community and understanding, and look out for one another in all that you experience this day. Listen to Jesus – let the future take care of itself, but you need to be present with and for others.

Ann Weems was a prolific writer, liturgist, developer of prayers and poems. A Presbyterian, she has written several popular books about Jesus in Bethlehem and Jerusalem, and how we as believers can respond to his presence.

One of her lesser known but I would say more powerful poems addresses the reality of Easter. In it, she speaks about how there are many people who seem to hear the loud no's of life, no matter what life has dealt them. They never seem to be able to get on with life, for they lack vision, self-confidence and personal value. They are devoid of the hope of Easter.

She then goes on to write about others who can surmount almost anything: "It is not so much a matter of strength, as a way of seeing; not so much a matter of experience, but how we respond to our experience."

Such people are not buried by the no's they experience, but continue on with perseverance and with determination...the way Jesus' disciples ultimately faced that first Easter morn.

How do you want your life to be changed this Easter Sunday? That is an open question I leave with you, but I cannot think of a better way to change that to listen to Henri Nouwen:

- 1) seek compassion, not fame;
- 2) seek community, not individual accolades;
- 3) seek the power of being present with and for others, and not be blinded by so worrying about the future that you are never present with others in meaningful and uplifting ways.

Maybe we wish to respond to the insights of the mystic Rumi, and wish that somehow God could send us back, anew, to the basic teachings that were shared by the holy ones, including Jesus.

Or maybe we want to accept the insight of Ann Weems, that our lives are filled with many who want to drag us down by the many "no's" of life offered our way, but we need to find the strength and courage to disregard those "no's," and affirm life as an Easter people.

How you want to change and be changed this Easter is your journey, your quest, your life. But each of us can do much worse than accept the insights of a Henri Nouwen, who knew that in community I may find the fullness of myself; in sharing ministry I may find wholeness and purpose for one and all; in humility I may find the courage I need to live a life of faith, fairly and completely.