

## **“The Honour (and Demands) of Independence”**

A Sermon Shared with St. Andrew’s United Church  
on April 8, 2018 at 10:30 a.m. (Easter 2)

Scripture Readings: Psalm 133

John 20:19-23. 30-31

(The Rev. Dr. Bill Steadman)

Surprise – this is still the season of Easter. We have a way of making events and dates so big that the rest of life is diminished. Celebrate a special birthday (depending on who you are it may be 13 or 18 or 50 or 65 or 80 or 90 or even more) and we rarely think: “This is not a one day event – I will be this age for a whole year!” And the work that goes into a graduation belies the truth that: “This is not a one day event – I will be a grade school or high school or college or university graduate for the rest of my life.”

And so the season of Easter may not be a whole year long, but in a real way the message of Easter – hope and new life and renewed purpose—lasts a lifetime when we receive it openly and thankfully. A whole life.

And so today I want to reflect on how Easter would be if it were seen not just as a one day event, or the promise of spring-like temperatures and growth in the weeks ahead (look how well that worked this year).

- 1) One principle comes from the Psalmist and the reading for today: Easter can lead to peace and unity, and it came be as pleasant and as wonderful as the oil anointed on the head, running down on your beard.

What’s that all about? Any men want oil running down their beards? (I won’t embarrass any woman to ask if you want oil running down your beard).

You see the Psalmist speaks about a very countercultural experience. Beards were to be cared for and kept clean – in an age where people did not shower every day a beard was something to care for. Hard to keep a beard in order without washing it, and anointing with oil meant one may have oil dripping off the head down onto the beard. But the point is that when people work together in God’s way, life is so amazingly wild and ridiculous when compared to our normal expectations – indeed, anything celebratory and joyful may be seen as a welcomed gift.

Had the Psalmist written something like the following, it may be even more understandable – the spirit of unity among the people of God is as amazing as the taste of candy floss at the fall fair after waiting in line almost 15 minutes to get some, and there is floss in your hair, on your teeth, all over your hands, and your parents don’t care and say: “Enjoy.”

The life of unity and peace is like splurging on tickets for a favourite movie, and going in to get the super deal on candies, large pop and popcorn, settling into your favourite seat and munching away as you watch the movie, not worried about anything at all for the next 2 hours.

If we truly lived the Easter message, we would more obviously live with joy in our hearts, and in our daily life.

- 2) The Psalmist gives us the second truth about Easter – if we live in unity, peace, and hope we will honour life all the more every day.

The tragedy of the Humboldt Broncos Junior Hockey Team Friday night has many worried about the dangers we face on the roads in Canada, and large trips by students or teams or other travel in group excursions.

We should always affirm life to everyone we meet, and it is a tragedy when it takes a tragedy to get us to think about how precious life is.

Yet sometimes we miss the tragedy when we cannot relate to the circumstances. Rohingya Muslims are being herded into camps by the thousands and even hundreds of thousands as they leave Myanmar, and their refugee status is more like life in a concentration camp without adequate water and sanitation, but that does not touch us in the way the deaths of 15 in a hockey team bus touches us. Syrians have been attacked by nerve gas, some say by their own government, and 14 alone died trying to get into the hospital for treatment, yet that hardly causes a whimper in our world.

Even so, we need to be thinking about life at every opportunity, and struggles others face, including those children being gassed in Syria and facing horrendous pains and scarring.

Easter tells us that God created us for a full life, a valuable life, a life of service and of purpose. As long as we focus on that life we have got the message of Easter.

- 3) John speaks about an appearance of Jesus to the disciples – it is a story that follows similar experiences to several women, but for some reason they are not in the lectionary readings – only Mark's version where the woman froze out of fear is in the lectionary readings for the season of Easter.

In short, it is Easter when we can face death, and still affirm life.

Historian Earl Pilgrim is well known in Newfoundland-Labrador as a local historian, keeper of stories and writer of significant local histories. He had a library of 8,000 books, many of them one of a kind books, long out of print, of local history of the area around where he lived. He was working on a follow up to a history he completed in 2017, just back from a hiatus in writing after the death of his wife of almost 50 years in 2016. He was just getting back into a writing groove when the 78 year old lost everything in a house fire on March 31<sup>st</sup> that started in the basement and quickly spread throughout the house, engulfing everything. He barely made it out unscathed himself, but he had no time to save anything – his papers, manuscripts, books, interviews and tapings of personal media appearances – all gone.

How do you begin again with nothing after a career of painstakingly building up a library and expertise, and how do you rebuild a home you have lived in since being married 49 years ago, a home with memories of a spouse now gone, and children who grew up there?

I do not know, but it takes a real Easter experience to do it – it is beyond the normal, but that is what Easter is all about.

Many have said that the death of so many young men on the Humboldt hockey team is a reminder of a parent's worst nightmare – losing a child to tragedy.

Whenever we face a loss and tragedy, there is a real adjustment to get on with life. In many ways, life is never the same when a loved one dies, but we need to find a way to rebuild our lives, our actions, our interests, and rediscover our purpose.

Easter is finding a way forward when circumstances seem to be blocking us or even providing us with an unwelcomed curve.

- 4) Finally, Easter is about knowing what experiences to hold deeply in your heart, and which help define your life story which eventually will be seen in your actions and beliefs each and every new day.

John tells us there were many other things that Jesus did, healings and miracles that were not recorded in the gospel, but what was recorded is there to help us believe and live by faith. Easter faith means we need to know all that is of value, and what can be overlooked or ignored or even cast away.

Easter faith involves a spiritual housecleaning every few years.

I have started sorting and packing in preparation for a move later this spring, but I must admit, thought this is my fourth move in the last 7½ years, I am doing more packing than sorting. I can count the significant number of large garbage bags that have been delivered to the dump, or the recyclables (cardboard and paper) that have been dropped into appropriate bins, but the need to sort the full extent of old files and books and mementoes that I have accumulated and as of yet not let go of will come later. It always seems to come later.

Easter tells us the time to sort out our priorities is now. Do not wait. Do not delay. Do not procrastinate. Do it now, and be clear about what is important to you. Be clear as to what is important, and celebrate that whenever you can.