

Sermon for the Second Sunday of Easter

April 19, 2020

By the Reverend Emilie Smith, St. Barnabas

Rejoicing with an indescribable and glorious joy!

Beloved friends,

Again, how strange it is to stand here, in this nearly empty church. I miss you all! How strange it is to be the whole people of God, in isolation, separate from one another. It goes against our very natures! Even when it was a dangerous thing to be a Christian, when lions loomed on the horizon, the faithful still gathered. Even when they were afraid, like the disciples in today's gospel, they gathered. How strange-- (and how absolutely necessary!)

But strange days call for more determination, more faith. It is time to dig in our heels and sink deep into our faith. It is time to let that Peace of Christ which passes all understanding sink deep into our hearts.

Every single year on this day, like a bad broken record, I put in the bulletin one of my favourite cartoons. It is an image of a little blue train engine – Thomas the Tank Engine – with the caption, “Doubting Thomas”. The train is facing an enormous track up a mountain. The little train is saying, “I don't think I can, I don't think I can.”

Now, the traditional “I THINK I CAN” thinking, I believe, is a good thing. If we see the cup half full, if we walk on the sunny side of the street, our own attitude towards the situations we face will make a whole world of difference. My mother was a big proponent of this: Look on the bright side.

But, actually, I don't think it is always helpful, or possible or even faithful. Our faith is not about powering through suffering to get to the other side. It is also not about wallowing in suffering. It is about looking at suffering square in the face, and saying, in the middle of the storm, we will not drown.

Have you been able to get out to walk a little? I hope you have. The world is absolutely beautiful! I think this is the most beautiful spring I have ever seen. The sky is clear and blue, there seem to be a million birds. The trees are blooming, here in the church courtyard – remember the big blossoming trees, Heart and Soul?

There are lovely signs on trees all around my neighbourhood...

This Too Shall Pass

Thank you Grocery Workers

Patience

Love

And one not so helpful one: We All Got This! You know that's an encouraging expression, usually. Maybe not so much right now!

These are all good and encouraging. But walking on the sunny side, without acknowledging the suffering side, can do some harm. Don't worry, be happy, isn't really the right message in the middle of a crisis. And there can be no doubt, we have never faced a crisis like this one.

So, what might be a better, more faithful, response to suffering?

How about just acknowledging it? Yeah, we are worried, things are uncertain, we don't know exactly how the world will come out of this, or what the country will look like, or especially, how long all of this will take. When will you be able to come to church? We have to talk honestly and realistically about these things. We have to follow the rules of our (thanks be to God) trustworthy leaders.

So yes, let's acknowledge the suffering.

Let's stand (as we are able) with the sufferers and with those directly supporting those affected by this pandemic.

And in any way we are able, let us be involved in alleviating the suffering of others. How should we do that? Jesus will tell us in a few weeks: Feed my sheep. Feed our bodies. And nourish our souls.

St. Barnabas has, of course, a long history of feeding our neighbours. How awful and strange not to be able to do this now. We know, and we worry, the disaster has stopped our ability to provide food to the most needy in our neighbourhood. Hunger and need has not stopped.

It is a bit too early to announce anything right now, but I want you to know that the Venerable Mavis Brownlee, who has been here for the past few months, and our City Councillor Chuck Puchmayr together with the City of New Westminster, the Key West Ford company, and Archbishop Melissa and the leadership of our church, have been working on a plan. We can't say exactly how it will work out, but stay tuned to our website. It is vitally important that we find a way to reach out to those who most need it. Please let us know if you, or any one you are close to is in need of assistance.

The other way we need to take care of one another is by nourishing our souls. We can do that in a couple of ways. Song! Let's keep singing together, even though we desperately miss our musicians, Jason, Janet, Sathia. We have been able to keep a little singing going. Thanks to Caitlin . . . and Patti. Next Sunday Caitlin and Patti will be hosting our monthly Sacred Singing Circle. Stay tuned for details. And if you have the internet, and are on the dreaded Facebook, many – not all – nights, we have been livestreaming Patti singing with her guitar on our front porch. And today, in this service, we are hoping you will be able to sing a long, a little bit even, in the privacy of your own home – you can even belt the songs out!

And then there's spiritual communion. We four are lucky, here we are in the church, and we can break a tiny bit of bread together – while physically distancing! But you who are at home – you can share with us too. Your bread, your food, is filled with God's love, and with the love of all the hands who made it. With our love too. Remember the love of God which is everywhere and in everything. Remember our love, from this community, and be in peace. You have everything you need.

The letter that we read today, attributed to Peter, reminds us to rejoice, even if we are in the midst of various trials. Although we can't see the physical face of Jesus, we know that he is here. Although we cannot see each other's faces, we know that God's love thrives between us. If we know these things, we will be alright.

I have always said: Doubting is okay. We all doubt. We have a whole trunk load of unanswerable questions. To end the service today we are going to sing that wonderful African hymn, "Now he sends us all out, strong in faith free of doubt." But I say, it's okay to doubt. But never forget that deeper than your doubt we have a living hope, an inheritance that cannot be destroyed. Thanks be to God!