

Carol's reflection – April 11

When the pandemic began, Edgewood Congregational Church in Cranston Rhode Island, changed their outdoor sign to read – Services Cancelled – God making House Calls.

How true are those words as we read today's Gospel.

On reflecting on the Gospel, Joseph Donders, a Dutch priest who served for years as a professor of philosophy at the University of Nairobi poetically wrote:

Jesus appeared to them
Over and over,
Again and again.
In the one Gospel reading of today
He does it twice.
 Every time he appeared,
 He disappeared,
 And that is why
 He had to appear
 Again.
Take the case
of Thomas.
 First he appeared to the other ten.
 Thomas was not there.
 Thomas did not believe them.
 Thomas wanted to make up his own mind.
 Thomas had to see him first,
 Thomas had to see him
 In his presence,
 Before he would believe in his absence.
...
It was
As if Jesus wanted to tell them:
 "All right,
 I am alive,
 Do not have any doubt
about that,
not even you,
Thomas, dear.
But I will be absent,
I will be absent
All the rest of your time,
It will be
Up to you!"

Those words are from the poem 'In His Absence'.

Jesus appeared to them,

Over and over,
Again and again.

Presence and absence intertwined.

We get that. It's a timely image today. We get the idea that we can be together even when we are apart. It is the story of this past year. It is the story of willing those whom we cannot be with to know that they are loved – to feel our presence through our phone calls, our FaceTimes, our ZOOMs. It is presence and absence intertwined.

It was the experience of the disciples throughout the Gospel. Jesus was there with them, teaching, and healing, travelling, breaking bread, lifting a cup, completely present. And then he was absent – he wanted and needed to be alone -- he was off to pray, up a mountain, in a garden. Presence and absence.

But, when he was absent, the disciples still had a sense of his presence. They remembered his teachings, they remembered his stories, when he sent them away to share the work of preaching and healing, they were still connected to him. And, when they were absent, when the disciples were off on their travels, when they were in the boat fishing, when they were getting a room ready for a last supper, Jesus must have known a sense of their presence around him.

That's the mystery, how the intertwining of presence and absence can give us a sense of connection that nothing, not even death, can take from us. The resurrection of Jesus, the great defeat of death, was the great turning around of the world. It meant that the Word would continue. It meant that the Spirit would be loose among them. It meant that mission and ministry were theirs.

And ours.

For indeed, it is over and over, again and again, that we celebrate Christ is Risen, Christ is Risen, indeed.

But where does that leave us? How are we to live in the interconnectedness of presence and absence? How are we to live our faith in the risen Christ?

In writing about the United Church's appeal for a Guaranteed Livable Income in Canada, both past Moderator Marion Pardy, and Hal Llewellyn reached for the same image from the United Church's 'Mending the World':

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, famous Jewish philosopher and activist, used to tell the story that when God, the Holy One, gets up in the morning, God gathers the angels of heaven around and asks this simple question: "Where does my creation need mending today?" And then Rabbi Heschel would continue, "Theology consists of worrying about what God worries about when God gets up in the morning".

Perhaps it leaves us as theologians. Perhaps we are called to worry about what God worries about when God gets up in the morning.

How do we become a part of the healing of a pandemic?
How do we become a part of the healing of a hurting planet?
How do we ensure the wellbeing of all people?
How do we share respect with others, how do we work for the dignity of all?

On Thursday, the United Church was a part of a national call for a Guaranteed Livable Income. We lit candles and prayed. Some wrote letters and encouraged political leaders.

A few weeks ago it was Earth Hour and some of us turned off the lights in our homes to symbolize our attempts to walk gently on the earth, to live with respect for creation.

Regularly we are reminded of the work of 1JustCity, loving the underloved and working towards reconciliation. We see people making and delivering food through Gifts of Grace Street Mission. The ministry of our own Food Bank is all about dignity and respect.

Again and again we are being asked to take care in this pandemic – to wear our masks, to wave through windows instead of visiting, to live into the intertwining of presence and absence.

To live Christ's ministry in the world is to live in the midst of Christ's Easter mystery.

Donders ends his poem:

We should never forget
The message he gave us
After his resurrection:
 "It is up
 To you!"
That is why he blew
Over them,
Giving his Spirit
To them,
before he left,
Leaving us
In his absence,
As long as we will be
Here in this world.

Thanks Be to God,
Mystery, ministry, presence, absence intertwined. Amen.