

Christ Is Risen and Alive Among Us

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Many of you know that I thought that our *Daily Devotional Guide* for Lent was not only our best yet, but flat out inspirational. So many of our members were surprising in their willingness to share so freely of themselves and their lives to let us know why they love the Lord and why they love our church. When I received Shirley Yoder's card in the mail just days after she received her copy, her note read "confirmation" all over it. I included parts of her letter in the April edition of *The Zion Herald*. Allow me to repeat those words here: "Your Lenten devotional booklet was a welcome and much-appreciated surprise. Anything that gives me a closer connection to Zion is very special. The messages are always inspiring and this year's booklet was especially so because I was able to relate to the issues concerning walking and mobility, stemming from a struggle with polio dating back to 1955, major spinal surgery three years ago, and continuing problems today."

I love that letter, not because it calls attention to Shirley, but because it calls attention to the miracles of God's strength and peace members and friends are living every day. It calls attention to the daily ways in which members and friends experience God's presence and power. It calls attention to how alive we are with the gifts of faith and love and gratitude. These are the key to what we celebrate today. With the Empty Tomb, we proclaim that Christ is risen; and the proof of Christ's life is found in the love of God alive among us. It is not so simple a proof as love's presence means God's power; but it is like what the Apostle John says in his first epistle. "Beloved, let us love one another; for God is love, and everyone who loves is born of God and knows God." (1 John 4:7)

I know that this sounds like John is simply saying that what we know about love gives us knowledge of God. But John is really saying the exact opposite. What we know about God teaches us about the meaning of love. "In this is love," John writes in this same epistle, "not that we love God but that God loves us, and gave His Son in death that we might find our lives through his love." (1 John 4:10) We hear this same point in a much more familiar verse, one that is found in John 3:16. "God so loved the world that He gave His only Son that whoever believes in him should not perish but find true life, eternal life, God's life." This love can change lives. It has changed lives. That's what our *Lenten Devotional Guide* attests to, and that's why we're here, to celebrate the Good News that because he lives, we, too, have found the life God gives through Christ our Lord.

Another of our members discovered the joy and peace that comes with knowing this truth about God's love in our lives. It happened just last week. Gregg Evanoff, who wrote the meditation in our *Daily Devotional Guide* for April 2nd, found himself in the Coronary Care Unit of Mercy Medical Center the very next day. Gregg and Cyndi had just driven to the home of their son, and granddaughter, to do what "great" grandparents often do,

namely, help our kids by watching their kids. In this case, they had some errands to run. But before Gregg could catch his breath, he found himself short of breath, and his face turned an ashen gray. It wasn't a heart attack, but his heart, for all intents and purposes, had stopped beating. They called 9-1-1. Thank God, Mercy was only blocks away. Thank God, Gregg wasn't behind the wheel of his car, running their next errand. Thank God, the paramedics stumbled upon the solution to Gregg's electrical circuitry anomaly. Thank God, the Emergency Room Crew knew exactly what to do.

As Gregg described it, the lower half of his heart wasn't getting an impulse signal. As his heart underperformed, he lost the capacity to respond to those around him; but he could hear everyone plainly, and he could hear when the paramedics agreed they thought they were losing him. It wasn't panic but peace that claimed the moment, God's peace, the peace that Jesus promises and talks about in the Gospel of John when he tells his disciples, "Peace, I leave with you. My peace I give you. Not as the world gives do I give to you." (John 14:27) Jesus is making the point that the world doesn't know how to give this peace that he gives – true peace, peace within, peace with God, peace with others. The world doesn't know how to give this gift, nor can the world take it away. It is a gift that comes with God's love, with God's promise. It is a gift that comes with God's assurance to love us with a love that will never let us go, to love us with a love that goes to the Cross for us, that leaves the tomb empty, walks out of the grave, and into our hearts as Risen Lord. That's what Gregg experienced at Mercy Medical Center, and that's what we celebrate this Easter morning.

At that same table where Jesus promised the gift of God's peace, he also shared the good news that we are not just strangers and servants to God, but we are friends with God and family with one another because of the love God gives and the bond we share in Christ. (John 15:15) "Who are my brothers and sisters?" Jesus asked in the Gospel of Mark; and looking around him, he said, "Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother, and sister, and mother." (Mark 3:35) This verse from Mark is the verse Gregg was reflecting on with the daily meditation for Thursday, April 2. "I feel blessed," Gregg writes, "with the family I have – a terrific mother, a brother and sister who mean the world to me, a loving wife, three great kids, five wonderful grand-daughters. What man could expect more in his life?" And yet God does, indeed, give us more, much more! "Imagine how I feel as my 'other' family has grown in my heart – this 'other' family at church with plenty of 'moms', dozens of 'brothers and sisters', and scores of kids ... that have also been here to watch me grow in the Spirit under the watchful eyes of our heavenly Father."

This gets right to the heart of the matter, God with us, right where we are, here in the world we live in, working through the people we live with. I know that there are many times when we would like the Good News of the Gospel to come complete with the miracle of new life as a *fait accompli*, a finished product, or close to it, complete with a whole new world, a brand new me, with a fresh start and a clean break. We want the

miracle promised with faith complete, without the struggle along the way. We want Steve Dague running and jumping and leaping for joy without the muscle spasms and the chronic pain and the daily rehab. We want Rick Riffle healed new. And, when it comes to Gregg Evanoff's recent experience, why settle for a pace-maker? We want a perfectly healthy heart for Gregg, without any lingering evidence of a heart that's seen more than its share of cardiac crises, and quite a history of coronary care. In other words, we want Easter without Good Friday. We want the gift of new life of Easter without having to walk through the suffering of Good Friday. We want the Good News of *new creation* without the daily dose of realism we get with Good Friday. If we must remember Good Friday, then let it be nothing more than a momentary blip, seen through the rearview mirror as we coast headlong into the greener pastures that have been promised with the victory of our Resurrected Lord.

That's the Christ we want, the Christ of glory, the King of kings who wields unparalleled power as the triumphant Lord of all. I've got to admit, speaking both personally as a believer and professionally as your Pastor, that's a pretty impressive picture of everything we desire. But that's not the Christ God sends. That's not the Christ who goes by the name of Jesus. Easter doesn't erase the reality of Good Friday. The Good News of Easter does not mean that Good Friday was a mistake. Sure, we would like a God who saves us from this mess we've created. But as long as we're here, as long as our lives are bound up with the mortality of flesh and blood we call our bodies, as long as our world is filled with sin, as long as we're surrounded by sinners – fellow sinners, I might add – then God wants us to know that He's come to us where we are. He's here with us. His love will sustain us, surround us, and never, ever leave us.

Jim Fidler said it so clearly at our Tenebrae Service on Good Friday. God hadn't left Jesus to suffer and die alone on the Cross. God transformed the Cross into the defining moment of His compassion. With that picture of Christ on the Cross we now know that God enters into our agony, into our daily struggles, into the circumstances that cause us to suffer. God joins us right in the midst of the pain we are too often forced to endure. This underside of life, with all the earthly limits that make suffering unavoidable, will never again serve as a sign that announces God's displeasure of us, or His rejection of us. The Cross of Christ shows us what God's love looks like, and makes it clear that nothing can ever separate us from the embrace of God's love and the power of God's presence.

This is precisely what Easter proclaims. The Good News of God's love alive among us is what we have proclaimed on the many pages of our *Daily Devotional Guide* for Lent. The presence of God's love alive among us is proclaimed in the lives we lead, with the hopes we embrace, through the struggles we endure, and the challenges we overcome. In short, God chooses – and uses – the ordinary lives we lead as a canvas, a living canvas that reveals the depth and breadth of a love that won't let us go, won't let us down, won't give in or ever give up on our Lord's commitment to open our eyes, to open our hearts, and to open our lives to the life that is ours ... here and now ... in Jesus' Name. Amen



Thursday, April 2: A Meditation by Gregg Evanoff



Scripture, Mark 3.34-35: *“And Jesus replied, ‘Who are my mother and my brothers?’ And looking at those who sat around him, he said, ‘Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother.’”*

FAMILY ... they say that you can't pick your family. I feel blessed with the one that I have: a terrific mother who has supported me all my life; a brother and sister who mean the world to me; a loving wife and three great kids; and to round it all off, five wonderful granddaughters. What man could expect more in his life?

Imagine how I feel as my “other” family has grown in my heart more and more as time passes. There are plenty of “mom’s”, dozen’s of “brothers and sisters”, and scores of “kids” to watch grow in this “other” family that has also been there to watch me grow in the Spirit under the eyes of our heavenly “Father.”

My family here at Zion has become an important part of my life. I enjoy the camaraderie and I enjoy the fellowship that we all share. Spending time at church brings a smile to my face every time I'm there. Truly, I am not sure if I picked my Zion “family”; but I am glad that they have let me be a part of theirs.

[Editor's Note: One of the oddities of the Gospel of Mark is that there is no role for the church in the mission to proclaim the Good News of Christ's Resurrection to the ends of the earth. Matthew has the Great Commission. Luke has the Book of Acts. John offers an open-ended prayer for all generations yet to come who will learn to believe without the proof that Thomas enjoyed. “Blessed are they who have not seen, and yet will come to believe” that Jesus is the Christ. (John 20:29) In the Gospel of Mark, there are many references to a new kind of family, which forms the basis for a new community that Jesus is creating. Our text in Mark 3:34-35 is one such example, as is Mark 6:1-13, Mark 10:23-31, and Mark 14:12-16.

“Family” is a very important connection in Mark's Gospel for entering into a relationship with Jesus that leads to discipleship, producing faith and faithfulness. We cannot underestimate how important it was for the earliest generation of Christians to grow in faith with the support of fellow believers who were learning how to walk past false understandings of who Jesus was and what it might mean to follow him. Such a connection with our “other” family is still important today. In other words, this “other” family that we have with the church continues to keep our hearts and our minds focused on true faith, the faith that sees the connection between the Cross of Good Friday and the Good News of Easter.]

Prayer: God of all compassion – You have assured the human family of eternal life through the death and resurrection of your Son, Jesus Christ. Deliver us from death and sin, and raise us to new life through the power that is ours in Christ our Lord. Amen

