

Homily by Rev. Dr. Roger Jones

The story of Easter happens over 2,000 years ago, and it's in the New Testament. Jesus of Nazareth undertakes a ministry of healing, preaching, teaching and making trouble. He questions conventional human rules--and human rulers. Because of the trouble-making part of his ministry, Jesus is tried and executed. On the Sunday after his burial, his body is gone.

Word quickly spreads among his followers that he has been raised from the tomb. A bodily resurrection. Even though his disciples, family and friends are heartbroken with grief, they pull together. In his memory, they take up the ministry he has left them and take it out into the world. That's my short version of the Easter narratives.

For me, one of the striking themes about the life and ministry of Jesus is that he is present with other people, face to face, in the flesh--and it's all kinds of people. He spends time with women to whom he's not related and with tax collectors of the empire—the Roman Empire. In two separate stories, the power of his presence is a source of healing energy for a man with leprosy and a woman with chronic hemorrhaging. As Jesus goes along the roads and coastlines, he's recruiting strangers to be his disciples. "Follow me," he calls to people--people of all genders-- "follow me." He calls to poor people, wealthy people, lazy people and hardworking ones.

He calls to a pair of guys hauling up fishing nets full of the day's catch: "Follow me. I'll show you how to fish for people." They drop their nets, leave their job, and join the team. His team of disciples is a made up of people who would never be seen together, never associate with each other, in normal life.

In one story, Jesus is asked to name the greatest of the Jewish commandments. He gives a two-part answer: 1) love your God with all your mind and all your soul/ and 2) love your neighbor as yourself. His whole ministry is an ethical challenge motivated by this commandment. What does that word mean—*neighbor*? It means not only someone in the next apartment or down the street. It means not only someone who worships like you, loves like you, votes like you or smells like you. These questions are an ethical touchstone: Who is my neighbor? How can I be a good neighbor? These questions drove his ministry and his movement.

After Jesus was killed and his ministry was crushed, the movement rose again as his followers gave new life to these questions.

Whether or not we follow Jesus, whether or not we believe anything about him, we also can give new life to these questions.

We can do it by our actions. We can do it, for example, by responding with compassion to stressed and suffering people, which of course includes many of us. By feeding the hungry. By giving a word of welcome to the newcomer, the immigrant, the refugee. By resisting the habits and rules which divide us from one another as neighbors. By resisting the *rulers* who seek to divide us from one another.

For me, the Easter questions are not about the resurrection of Jesus, they're about how we live together: What kind of neighbor am I? Who is my neighbor? And, of course, for which good neighbors am I grateful?

For starters, let's be grateful for one another, for everyone here at this moment. If this is your first virtual service with us, I'd like to explain to you that we end our service with a gesture of blessing. As Lucy or I say the benediction, those on the telephone put one hand on their heart or they reach it forward, as if toward everyone else. Those who are online put one hand on the heart and, if able, they

reach another hand out to the camera, like this. Let's try it now. All of us from our separate locations will make this gesture of blessing and connection at the end of the service.

Many of you have told us that you feel the energy of our connections as you make this gesture in our virtual services. This gesture, this action, renews our sense of presence/ together, even though we are separate physically.

I think about this experience of ours as I think about the followers and friends of Jesus after his death. According to the New Testament, they felt his presence among them. As the followers of Jesus drew together for comfort and support, they felt a connection with him. Some of them believed they saw him. Some heard him speaking. In their songs, prayers, and rituals of remembrance during their services, his presence became real to them. As they carried forward their ministries, the ministries to which he had called them, they sensed his energy, leading them. They felt that he was in their midst, holding them with love.

In these times of ours, in these trying times, I can appreciate the love and energy they felt from him, even in their physical separation from him. In these times of ours, I can understand how, by their works of compassion, prayer, service and love, their sense of connection was renewed. It was reborn. Their sense of purpose rose up again, and their courage returned. May we be so blessed.

On this Easter, and on each day ahead of us, may we be blessed/with connection, purpose and courage. May we be grateful for good neighbors. As neighbors to everyone, as neighbors to the whole world, let us give thanks for the blessings we receive and those we can give and share. So may it be. Amen.

Closing Prayer

Please join me now in the space of intention and aspiration, as I offer these words of prayer.

O Spirit of Life, in these troubling times, hold us in tenderness.
In these times of actual physical distance, hold us together in spirit.

For all of us who are worried or anxious, may we be grounded by an awareness of our breath, in and out, and by noticing the sensation of our bodies where we sit, rest or move.

For all of us living with grief or sadness, may we feel the energy of care that everyone sends our way right now. For those of us who are lonely, may we recognize how many people share this feeling with us. May we hold one another in our hearts.

For those of us who feel aimless or overwhelmed, may our sense of purpose be renewed in simple ways—by making one choice, taking one action for this new day. For those of us feeling stress, chaos, and too much noise where we find ourselves, may moments of stillness bless us. May we feel peace with each breath, in and out.

May we feel blessed by the support and work of so many. May we remember those who need our blessings and thanks—the health care providers, first responders and nursing home workers. The farmers, food preparers, grocery and pharmacy workers, and store owners. The scientists, journalists and public health workers. The parents and caregivers, at home all the time. May they all be safe and well. May they all be blessed. For all those we know who are without work during this time of crisis. We remember you and we are holding you in our hearts. May you be well. May you be blessed.

On each day ahead of us, may we be blessed, with connection, purpose and courage. May we be grateful for good neighbors. As we are neighbors to everyone, neighbors to the whole world, let us give thanks for the blessings we receive and those we can give and share. Amen.