**Why Christian?**

**Easter 2, April 8, 2018**

John 20:19-31

Last month I went to a conference called Why Christian? It was in Durham Chapel at Duke University in North Carolina. Hosted by Nadia Boltz Weber and Rachel Held Evans, they gathered all women speakers and invited them to share testimony as to why they are Christian in this day and age. Rachel Held Evans, a former evangelical conservative, who now is in the Episcopal church started of with asking the question, Why are we Christian in a church that is patriarchal, racist, sexist and homophobic? She named that we have seen in the US society an unholy trinity of patriarchy, white supremacy, and white nationalism supported by Christian sectors. We can experience a profound sense of betrayal as we see our faith family sell out. We have every right, she says, to feel sad, disappointed or angry. Held-Evans says that what gives her hope through these times and experiences, is other Christians who in spite of everything still believe the gospel is good news of peace and justice. It is those, for examplewho marched in Charlottesville arm in arm, singing gospel hymns as they protected the civil rights protestors from the white nationalist protestors. She says: I am Christian because the story of Jesus is still the story I'm willing to risk being wrong about. The gospel means that every small story is part of a sweeping story, a larger story all part of a truth on their own and a larger truth - We hear the gospel according to one another.

In the gospel reading today, the writer of the gospel of John ends the chapter with:

Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.

One might ask the question of what other stories are there that we have not heard that will help us know Jesus better and his message? Perhaps, some of the stories are our stories of how we live out our faith, live out the gospel and follow in the way of Jesus. Maybe the telling and sharing of our stories, the honouring and listening to each other’s stories is one way in which the gospel can be set free from the pages of history to continue enabling people to believe with integrity—to believe and question and wonder, all at the same time—and in so doing to “have life in his name.”

At the beginning of the passage, the disciples are gathered in a locked room, afraid that they might be next for crucifixion, now that Jesus was dead. They must have been lost, in despair, bewildered, and angry at what happened. They probably did not feel much like living life in his name. Into this mood, Jesus appears and says Peace be with you. When we are in the darkest, saddest place, Christ offers peace. To the community in Humbolt reeling with the great loss of young and vibrant lives, Christ comes offering peace. To any who are grieving, depressed, lost, suffering, he offers his peace. Sometimes that peace comes through the love and support of others.

Jesus also is encourages the disciples to forgive those who crucified him. In saying, ‘if you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven, if you retain them they are retained’, he is telling them to not hold on to the anger they have towards those who were so violent, but to forgive them. To live in a new way, of love and justice as he has lived. It is a huge challenge to them, but also an encouragement for them to move forward.

Now Thomas missed all this because he was out. He responds to the news that Jesus is alive with the response that he won’t believe it unless he feels the wounds. His doubting has been shamed over the years in the church, but Jesus does not shame him. Thomas actually proclaims Jesus as Lord when he sees him. An affirmation of his faith and the experience of being with Jesus. Jesus comments, blessed are those who believe without seeing. This blessing may also be more directed toward us who have not had any real physical opportunity to see Jesus, and yet we believe (in whatever form that may take). Doubt is a healthy part of our faith and the questioning that can be a part of doubt can actually help us to grow our faith and understandings. A problem can be when doubt or anger leads to cynicism.

This was one of Rachel Held Evans’ points. She said that she is not concerned about people’s anger at the church, she is concerned about people’s cynicism. Cynicism numbs us to anger as well as to joy and hope. We lose our ability to care. But there are stories of resilience and hope that can keep us from that Cynicism. Donna Coltrane Battle, a preacher, and advocate is a Christian because of grace and shared such a story at Why Christian. She says she is intimately connected with death, including the death of her dignity as a black woman day in and day out. She told the story of an incident in her community recently. Her family had gathered together for a Sunday evening dinner in her rural black community where she grew up when an ambulance goes by. Around the same time, the phone rang and her Father, who is a pastor in the community where he has lived his whole life, was called to facilitate the events as they unfold. A group of black children were walking in neighbourhood and a white neighbour did not like them walking by his driveway, so he fired a shot in their direction. 2 were shot, one in head. The police officer on the scene was not sure he needed to arrest the white farmer. Donna’s father challenged him. The man was arrested, but in the end was charged and fined $500 and a few months in jail. Donna shared the depth of doubt she experienced in that time, as it was the first time she considered not bringing children into this world. As she struggled through this time, she went to her elders for wisdom. She found herself always coming back to Christ and says we need a saviour because without Christ, there was no pathway for forgiveness for living in a black women's body, no forgiveness for bringing children into the world. In accepting and understanding Jesus’ forgiveness, she came to understand that Jesus was not just fully divine but was also fully human. He was not accepted in his community, he didn’t just go to the margins, he lived in the margins. His life and body was under attack simply because he was under attack. She sees a saviour willing to stand with me and my pain. She says, “every day something tries to kill me, and fails because I follow Jesus”. Donna reminded us of Ubuntu, the principle that we are inexplicably linked to one another, we can't fully be free until everyone is free. She says I can't just use the joy of my resurrection moment to drive my passion for the oppressed, I must hold in prayer and action and hold accountable those who are caught in cycle of oppressing.

So she tells us of the gathering in her community with the Reverend William Barber and her father leading the community in prayer for the situation- including praying for the shooter. Donna says we need to love people whether we feel it or not. We don't need to like enemies but we are called to love them. Liking them would be even more of a challenge. This is the message of forgiveness and love that Jesus died for, that God resurrecting him affirms. We are not to hold onto others’ sins but forgive. This is the challenge of our faith. This is the hope of our faith. This is the new life we are called to as we celebrate this Easter season, this Easter message, and seek to be faithful to the Risen One.