

Last Easter was a momentous time for our parish in many ways. In addition to the church's beautiful worship and powerful message about our Lord's Resurrection, we were nearing the end of our yearlong construction project. I was about to begin my sabbatical. Beloved members of the parish were coming to the close of their earthly lives. There was a lot going on emotionally and physically in our congregation last Easter.

One particular example of that was that we worshiped with other churches on Maundy Thursday and Good Friday. We did that so the construction work could continue during the week and so our Altar Guild would not have to set up and break down three days in a row. So St. Columba and Christ the King Lutheran were very gracious in welcoming us to join them during these important holy days.

One result, you may remember, is that I had a Good Friday sermon without a place to preach it. I had thought about it and even written it in my mind before the decision was made to not have services here that day. So what I did was use it, at least in part, for my Easter sermon last year. The sermon reminded us there is no Easter without Good Friday. Remembering that connection helps us to understand the full power of our Christian faith.

This year, even without the same reason to do it, I reflected on my Good Friday sermon again as I prepared the sermon for this Easter morning. I will not preach it again—you will only get one sermon this morning. But here is the gist of it—in life, we often feel stuck. Not stuck in the sense of inconvenienced, like being stuck in traffic. But stuck when we consider the overwhelming issues of life—such as the great harm done by our ancestors that directly or indirectly benefit us today. Or the harm we have done ourselves. We may not know what to do or how to respond. So we feel stuck.

You can read or hear that Good Friday sermon and its full message on our website. But here is how its message sets the stage for the good news of Easter: We do not need to stay stuck no matter what we face. God has changed our world through the death and resurrection of Jesus. God has broken open the tomb of sin and death in which we and all of humanity have been stuck. Because of Christ's death and resurrection, we have access to the freedom and justice of the new life of grace.

That first Easter morning, Matthew tells the story of "a great earthquake" and of an angel descending from heaven that rolled back the stone on our Lord's tomb. And like they often do in Scripture, this angel said, "Do not be afraid." The world has changed. Your life will change forever in joyful and scary ways. But this change is what is needed to restore the world to a loving relationship with God-- and itself. The change is needed so that humanity can become the good and caring community that God intended for us.

Our Lord's resurrection caused the Spirit to escape into the world. The Spirit that raised Christ from the dead is working now to bring repentance, forgiveness, healing, and new life. It does not depend on us alone to change ourselves much less the whole world (thank goodness!). Our cleverness, hard work, and persuasiveness may be part of the solution, but it is the Spirit that will bring the change we so desperately need in the world today.

We see that in the story from Acts. Peter is preaching to a group of Gentiles—previous outsiders. It is a powerful example of the Spirit bringing radical change shortly after our Lord's resurrection. The Spirit broke open the understanding of the first believers in Jesus and let them know that this new life of grace was not about "us and them" thinking. People that were feared or ostracized or kept from being full members of the early church would be included now, whether the leaders understood it or liked it. Change was coming.

In history, we hear stories of how the Spirit broke loose in people like St. Francis and John Wesley and other less well known people. The Spirit worked through them to bring change, despite how church leaders tried to control how things should work. Religious leaders like rules that describe who is in and who is out and why. The Spirit is concerned with bringing people together and healing them in ways they did not expect. Some religious folks see the problem as "out there"—what is wrong with "those people." But the Spirit lets us know that we are all more alike than different. And even the ways we are different can be a source of grace for our healing.

In our country's history, we have a powerful example of this in how we treated African people brought to our shores as slaves. Back then, some religious leaders were not sure about sharing the Christian faith with slaves. They knew doing that would change the dynamic between master and slave. Of course, there are verses that told slaves to obey masters. But there are also verses that said that in Christ there is no slave nor free. The Spirit could get loose and problems could start for the masters and the way things were back then.

Of course that is what happened. The Christian faith took hold among the African people brought here. The church became a source of grace for them in spite of the people in power even in the church. It inspired people like Harriet Tubman to seek freedom and to stay strong until the freedom came. And as the country started to make things right, their faith helped them to endure. The Spirit continued to work as people in power resisted change and as too many people looked away from what was wrong in our world.

The Spirit is still loose among us, stirring things up, bringing needed change in unexpected ways. When that happens, it brings great joy—and it can be a little scary for us, too. We may not want to face what is wrong. We may spend our energy in defending and justifying the wrong that the Spirit points out among us.

As the power of the Spirit breaks out in our world bringing change, how will we respond? There are at least three ways for us to hold on as the Spirit works among us. The first way is for us to be honest. Honesty is important because, without it, we are less likely to be

blessed by the work of the Spirit. Instead we can get stuck in defending the old way and holding on to what we have instead of being open to what the Spirit will bring to us.

What does it mean to be honest? Start with our own lives. Through prayer, reflection, study, and good counsel, learn about the ways we participate in what is wrong with our world. Things like judging others who are different from us. Or supporting people in power who harm others. Or admitting that we do not understand complex problems and—if we are real honest—we do not care enough to learn about them. It is easier to look away. Honesty changes us because we begin to question those things that we use to protect us against the movement of the Spirit. Honesty is hard but needed work.

The next two ways to hold on are great blessings from God for our work of honesty. First is our HEALING. Christ's death and resurrection and the Spirit's power released into the world brings healing in and among us. We can own what we have done wrong, be forgiven, and then live differently through grace. We become less defensive. We become open to others. We can share the grace we have received with the people around us who so desperately need it. We can be part of God's healing of the world.

The other way for us to hold on is HOPE. The Good News of Jesus brings hope despite the "stuckness" we feel. The pain and suffering experienced by so many in our world is not the last word. As Mary sang in the Magnificat, the powerful who exploit and harm people will lose their place one day. The Spirit is loose and the Spirit is working in ways we do not fully understand or see. And that gives us hope.

As long as we have hope, we can be inspired to take part in the Spirit's work. We can feed the hungry—and challenge the system that makes it hard for people to have food. We can care for prisoners-- and challenge the system that puts too many people behind bars. Hope expands our good works of care for others into a community that challenges the powers that make our care needed.

Christ is risen and the Spirit is loose and at work among us. When Christ left the tomb that first Easter morning, the world was changed. The Roman Empire was still in power—but it would be changed one day. Throughout history, and still today, the powerful do not know that change is coming. For us who know, our choice is clear-- will we be part of the change that the Spirit is working in the world today? The Lord calls us—let us respond with all our hearts. Amen. Alleluia, Christ is risen.