Resurrected Church?

Easter Sunday, Yr C

April 17, 2022

John 20: 1-18

Luke 24: 1-10

I was at the Fresh Expressions Conference in Richmond Virginia a few weeks ago where many speakers were addressing how we be church into this time and culture, as we move into a new normal. Fresh Expressions is an organization that supports churches being innovative and creative in developing new or fresh expressions of church and worship outside of Sunday morning, often, outside of the church building. One of the speakers, was Dave Male of the Church of England, an early pioneer of Fresh Expressions in England. He presented on Ministry in a Post-Christian Age and the rate of changing religious affiliations in Britain, similar trends of which we are seeing in North America. Many of you have heard this before. The number of those who identify as having no religious affiliation is increasing, while they are not attending church, many still say they believe in God and pray. Dave identified that for every British convert from no religion to Christianity, there are 26 British converts from a Christian identity to no religion. We are no longer refilling the church – the pool is getting smaller and smaller to replace people who die or leave the church. It could be said that the church is dying. Some would say the church as we knew it is dead. As people of faith, however, we know that is not the end of the story

Jesus was dead and buried in a tomb. In both the stories from the gospels of John and Luke, it is the women who are the first witnesses, who go to the tomb to anoint the body with spices. They go at the break of dawn, because it wasn’t safe for them to go in the night, and they were waiting for the Sabbath to be over. They arrive at the tomb, surprised, shocked, confused and afraid, to find the stone rolled away from the tomb and the body missing. Body stealing was a common thing at the time. The women in Luke’s story has an appearance of angels asking them why do you look for the living among the dead, and reminds them that Jesus told them that he would suffer and die and on the third day rise again. They then go and tell this incredible news to the eleven apostles and the other disciples and followers. Christ is Risen! Jesus is alive!

Why do you seek the living among the dead? Is this a question, a message for the church as well? Too often we keep trying the same old things or even a few new things to try and renew the church to boost attendance, to bring the church back to life. What if our mission is not about the church, the building, or Sunday morning attendance, but to be open to what God is doing outside the church, out in the neighbourhood. Many of you have heard me talk about this message and that God is doing a new thing. I have said that whatever we do that is a new ministry or program may not bring more bums into the pews. But that doesn’t mean it won’t bring new life to the church. I have learned that we need to look outside our doors, and into the neighbourhood to see what the Spirit is up to. God’s spirit of love and action is alive and at work in communities, and maybe it is our job to find out where, and join in. Maybe as well it is our job to find out and discern what the needs or interests are in our neighbourhood and offer ministries that meet those needs.

Michael Beck is the minister at a small church in Wildwood that was dying when he arrived there in 2012 and they now run over 13 Fresh Expressions of church, including a number of digital ministries started during the pandemic. Many of these initiatives came from the people of the community, or from an idea within the congregation like the senior who started a dog park ministry with his friends he made when walking his dog there. I share this video that gives a sense of the new life found through a Fresh Expression, that Kayleigh got invited to.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XLfjQUfIwIg>

Kayleigh was at rock bottom when she was invited to Bibles and Burritos and the journey she started brought her back to life. A resurrection story for today.

So as we seek to grow our ministries, we are applying for a growth grant for our Community Dinner, to work in partnership with Munch Café, here in the building, to provide the meals. However, it won’t be just a grant for the Community Dinner, but will explore providing opportunities for linking or making connections with other programs, experimenting with new initiatives to reach out to the neighbourhood and explore ways of finding out what the community, the neighbourhood might want and need. Exploring ways to see what the Spirit is up to and ways to explore bringing new life.

Dave Male told us at the conference that most British folk say they know a Christian. Most of them are family or friends. The question for those of us who are Christian, is how are we witnessing to others in our day to day lives? How are we sharing the Good News of God’s love and hope for new life? How are we contributing to resurrection? Male says that most people are willing to attend an event at the church, but that no one is asking them. Recognizing the challenges of the last two years, when was the last time you invited someone outside of the church to come to worship, to our Community Dinner, to Film and Faith, to our Craft/Study group,? The women were witnesses to Christ’s resurrection but they didn’t keep it to themselves. They shared it with those around them. Even if they didn’t believe the women at first, eventually they saw and experienced the truth, and experienced resurrection as well.

God is alive in our communities and our neighbourhoods. Jesus’ resurrection is God’s affirmation that his life and ministry was right and good. All he did to support the poor, and challenge the status quo, was affirmed and we are called to do the same. There is hope for new life that comes out of death and suffering. May we embrace this message of affirming love and grace, and look for new life in our communities, and see where the Spirit is alive and active, that the church may be resurrected! Christ is Risen! He is Risen Indeed!