

You're the Witnesses

Guest Preacher: Rev. Darren Liepold

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Bloor Street United Church

Sunday, April 26, 2009 – 3rd of Easter – United for Peace Sunday

Reading:

Acts 3.12 – 19

When Peter saw it, he addressed the people, “You Israelites, why do you wonder at this, or why do you stare at us, as though by our own power or piety we had made him walk? The God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, the God of our ancestors has glorified his servant Jesus, whom you handed over and rejected in the presence of Pilate, though he had decided to release him. But you rejected the Holy and Righteous One and asked to have a murderer given to you, and you killed the Author of life, whom God raised from the dead. To this we are witnesses. And by faith in his name, his name itself has made this man strong, whom you see and know; and the faith that is through Jesus has given him this perfect health in the presence of all of you.

“And now, friends, I know that you acted in ignorance, as did also your rulers. In this way God fulfilled what he had foretold through all the prophets, that his Messiah would suffer. Repent therefore, and turn to God so that your sins may be wiped out.

Luke 24.36b – 48

Jesus himself stood among them and said to them, “Peace be with you.” They were startled and terrified, and thought that they were seeing a ghost. He said to them, “Why are you frightened, and why do doubts arise in your hearts? Look at my hands and my feet; see that it is I myself. Touch me and see; for a ghost does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have.” And when he had said this, he showed them his hands and his feet. While in their joy they were disbelieving and still wondering; he said to them, “Have you anything here to eat?” They gave him a piece of broiled fish, and he took it and ate in their presence.

Then he said to them, “These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you – that everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled. Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, and he said to them, “Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things.

Surprises. A surprise is defined as a brief emotional state that is the result of experiencing an unexpected relevant event. Surprise can have any valence; that is, it can be neutral, pleasant, or unpleasant. Accordingly, some would not categorize surprise in itself as an emotion.

Surprise is expressed in the face by the following features: raised eyebrows, stretched skin below the eyebrows, horizontal wrinkles across the forehead, open eyelids, dropped jaws. Spontaneous, involuntary surprise is often expressed for only a fraction of a second. It may be followed immediately by the emotion of fear, joy or confusion. The intensity of the surprise is associated with how much the jaw drops, but the mouth may not open at all in some cases. The raising of the eyebrows, at least momentarily, is the most distinctive and predictable sign of surprise.^[1]

Sometimes they are good, others are bad. Sometimes they scare us. Other times we are very touched. Surprises can be the spice of life. Surprises keep us on our toes. A person leaping out of a corner and tapping us on the shoulder is an unwelcome surprise. A phone call or an email from a friend out of the blue is a pleasant surprise.

In the stories that we have heard and will hear from the gospels the past few weeks, we have heard about the disciples post Easter surprise. The women are surprised to find the tomb empty. Thomas is surprised to find Christ in the midst and gets the poor title of doubter - even though everyone else seems to need convincing that he is alive as well. The disciples today are sure they are seeing a ghost as Christ stands in their midst. At first they have fear and disbelief and then suddenly new understanding. Progressive scholars debate whether Christ was actually there or whether it was just like he was there as they share their memories. Whether he is actually there or not, may or may not be important. But what is important is that the gathered church becomes the body of Christ – we, the church, are the body and we are called to act. The surprise to the Romans, to Jesus' other opponents is that crucifying Jesus did not end his ministry, but really began it. I think that's what the disciples discover in the gospel today. Together, they are the Christ. That would have been their surprise.

I was surprised but should not have been. I was attending a continuing education event put on by the United Methodist Church in Atlanta in April of 1995. The event was held at the Omni Hotel, which was part of the CNN complex there. I had been there all of two hours, when the news came out of Oklahoma City that the Alfred P. Murrah building had been bombed and that nearly 70 people had died. I watched the news for a bit on the television and then decided to go out for a walk and just think about how people could do this to other people.

It was shocking news. Who would do such a thing? Why hurt a day care? What was the point? I wandered around the hotel complex, listening to the radio on my walkman in kind of a daze. I stumbled upon an Atrium in the complex where they were filming one of the public forum talk shows that CNN was known for at the time. People were

talking about the bombing. Within seconds of coming onto the air, people were convinced that it was muslim terrorists were behind the plot. The eagerness to blame the other so quickly shocked me. The fear of the stranger shocked me. The hate in the room shocked me. How so many in the room could be convinced that the other was always wrong and could so easily find a scapegoat was mind boggling. Later that evening there was a report on the local news saying that both mosques and synagogues were damaged in Atlanta that night.

People in my con-ed class were also shocked by the news. One woman from Raleigh made the comment that we never had such problems in the country when it was just Americans here. Her comments and the comments of a few others just made me shudder. As a foreigner to the US, I began to feel less than welcome by some people in the room. Another woman was a minister in Oklahoma City. She was worried that some of her parishoners had been killed or lost friends and family members in the bombing. She said, "Why would anyone want to bomb us? We don't have anything special in Oklahoma City?"

The next day, it was reported on the news that it was home grown terrorists who had bombed the building. People were shocked. How could it have been "one of us" who did this? The woman from Raleigh did not say much at all. But I was shocked how quickly the irrational fear of the other could turn into hate and violence.

I just began my job as the Mission and Service Fund Officer for the United Church of Canada. On the day before I started a job, I received an email. "Do you have a passport?" It mentioned how I had been invited to attend a peace and justice event put on by two United Church overseas partners- Peace for Life- a global justice organization

centred in the Philippines, and the Justice and Life Project, a Colombian based human rights organization. I would be one of 50 international guests that had been invited to take part in the People's Forum, where about 200 representatives from various Colombian agencies would speak. After the conference, I was invited to travel up to Barrancabermeja in the Magdalena Medio region of Colombia to meet with several groups struggling for justice.

I really did not know much about Colombia before I left. I knew it was famous for the drug trade. I knew it was famous for coffee and Juan Valdez. And as a former chair of the Peace Education Working Unit of BC Conference, I had read some about its years of civil wars and its oppressive right wing government, guerrillas, and paramilitaries. I had heard of massacres of people and how people have disappeared. But other than that I did not know very much.

The first thing that shocked me, was the overwhelming presence of the military. Soldiers were all over at the airport. That was nothing new- I had seen that before. But also soldiers were all over the streets. Our first full night in Bogota we went on a protest march to the Zocola and on every corner there was a soldier with a machine gun. This intimidation is a way of life for the people of Colombia. If they speak out, if they differ from the norm, if they rebel in anyway, they face the prospect of receiving threatening letters from the military or paramilitaries, saying that they are on the list and they might be next on their action list. Every so often, one of these armed groups takes actions and murders people on the list, or makes them disappear.

This intimidation has meant that there is little co-operation between the opposition groups in the country. People are unsure of who to trust. You speak up only when you are with people you feel you can trust.

That is why this peoples forum was so important. It brought together all of these different opposition groups. For some of the parties at the forum, it would have been there first time to realize that they were not alone- others felt the same way they felt. Security had to be very tight for this forum. ID's were checked to make sure only the right people were there. The secret police upon hearing of these meetings were ever present and tried to identify who was there and who they represented. They tried to ask people many questions. But these meetings were important- assembling all of these opposition groups together. The people shared how they had been victimized by empire- economically, militarily, etc. Their country with the richest reserves of gold in the world, with the richest biodiversity in the world has become a debtor nation, having to import food and being ruled by the multi-nationals. The unending war that the country has faced has meant that Americans have put bases in the country, and that Israelis train the paramilitaries to protect their economic interest.

Other groups spoke to us as well. Farmers talked of how they were constantly under threat. In Colombia 0.006 percent of the population owns 53% of the land. They want more. Farmers are being pushed off the land for the huge multinationals that want to extract mineral rights. Also, farmers are facing a bleak future, as the government constantly fumigates the land, trying to end coca production. Food crops are being destroyed at the same time. Indigenous people are also being threatened. They are being pushed off their traditional lands and are forced to flee to the city. Women's groups talked about working for equal rights in a macho society. Peace groups talked

about forced conscription. Contrary to the human rights legislation already adopted by Colombia, Gays and Lesbians are murdered and have no job security.

The Colombian groups that I heard from though did not just merely see themselves to be part of a national problem. They related their struggles to the people of Mindanao, Palestine, Afghanistan. "Their struggles are our struggle." As people shared their struggles against empire from around the globe- Indonesia, the Philippines, Nepal, Palestine, you could see the Colombian groups nodding in agreement. They were keenly aware of the global economic meltdown and how this might signal the end of the empire. But they also were aware that a sick and wounded empire though might be more vicious and how they would likely face even greater persecution.

In the midst of all this heavy talk of economic genocide, murders, violence, and oppression, it might be easy to be bogged down. But in the midst of these talks I found hope. In the people's worship, the people showed in their faith that there was a better way. It was not "pie in the sky by and by theology." But it was an active faith- telling us that in solidarity we can make and are making a difference. One worship service, which will be featured on a United Church of Canada Mission and Service placemat that will be available to you in June- had us write down those words that held us down in society- words such as militarism, economic injustice, violence against women, racism, empire. We burned those words in a fire saying that together we could overcome these things. Then a huge 8 foot long rainbow banner was brought out. Underneath it we had balloons on which were written things such as hope, love, equality- all those things that we can celebrate together as a people. We were told that if we can concentrate on these life giving things, there will be abundance for all. In the

midst of Andean pan flutes, these banners and balloons were danced around the room. There is life for all- there is abundance for all.

My trip to Colombia, taught me about the importance of the United for Peace campaign. Although began as strictly a mid-east peace initiative, the campaign has been expanded to include countries like Colombia and the Philippines. As the people from around the globe began to share their stories, I found more and more similarity in their struggles then differences. The struggles for peace in Barrancabermeja are the same as Palestine, are the same as mine as I struggled to teach about peace in BC. As long as someone lives with injustice we all do. I also learned about what a valuable contribution our United Church does in struggling to bring about justice to a hurting world. It was through the support of the United Church of Canada, United for Peace, and the Mission and Service Fund that the people's forum was able to take place, and these estranged opposition groups could come together and realize that they were not alone in their struggles. It is through support of our church, that hope was able to come to a troubled country. As we sang and danced under that banner I realized that there could be hope in the midst of such darkness. Amen.