

## **Is There Anything Astonishing About How Your Live?**

Acton Congregational Church (UCC)

14 April 2024

Rev. Paulo Gustavo França

Texts: 1 John 3:1-7

Luke 24:36b-48

*“You are witnesses of these things.”*

~ Luke 24:48

### **Prayer**

**Spirit of the Living God,**

**Fall afresh on us during this time of meditation.**

**Give us the strength to hear your word for the church**

**And the courage to live as faithful followers of Jesus Christ. Amen.**

Last fall, the Strategic Planning Task Force held a meeting after the worship service to give us a report on what the task force had found out about the state of the Church in America. I don't know how many of you still remember Bree Dietly's stellar and eye-opening presentation, but it is fair to say that if I had to boil down Bree's points, the gist is that these are turbulent times for faith communities. This is most likely the message you also heard and took home with you. And that's perfectly understandable. Evolutionarily speaking, the human brain has a tendency to latch on to bad news. Psychologists call this inherited propensity the brain's positive-negative asymmetry or simply the brain's negative bias.<sup>1</sup> What this means is that bad news gets our attention more quickly and sticks with us longer than good news. I suppose this is the reason one brief but significant point in Bree's presentation did not capture our imagination as much as the unsettling data about membership decline or church closings, and it may have actually vanished from our collective memory. But if you reach deep into your memory bank, I hope you will remember that Bree also said that the crucial piece in congregational revitalization is having a clear understanding of the church's original "why." In other words, knowing our "why" – the underlying reason why we come to this church and give money and volunteer and sing in the choir and hire a Director of Youth and Families Ministries and are passionate about Acton Congregational Church's mission in the world – is of utmost importance for the vitality and future of our congregation. Every single one of us should be able to articulate without thinking too hard or too long the core belief, cause or purpose that inspires us to be involved in and stay committed to the Church.

The Gospel of according to St. Luke goes to great lengths to remind the Church Universal that Jesus Christ – his life, his teachings, his faith, his story, his death and his resurrection – is and will always be "the why" of the Christian community. In today's lesson, the Risen Christ appears unexpectedly, surprisingly, uninvited and in a very real

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Sermons are meant to be preached and, therefore, all sermons are prepared with the emphasis on verbal presentation rather than on proper grammar and punctuation required of written documents.

life form among the frightened disciples and opens the disciples' minds and hearts to God's Word and truth.

This is a fascinating passage because the disciples' reaction to the presence of the Risen Christ according to Luke is a beautiful commingling of joy, disbelief and wonder. Theologian Matthew Myers Boulton calls verse 41, "***While in their joy they were disbelieving and still wondering,***" the best verse in the New Testament because Christ should leave all of us continually "***taken aback***" by God's power to do the impossible rather than settled into certainties of mere belief or disbelief.<sup>2</sup> We all have to keep our hearts, minds and eyes open to this Christ who shows up whenever and wherever he is least expected and astonishes us and invites us into a spiritual space where deep joy, doubts, reverence, amazement and awe become fundamental elements of the faith that empowers us to be witnesses of the Easter faith. And if the Risen Christ is our "why," then our only mission is to give a face and a body to the Gospel and to carry on with the works of healing love, reconciling grace and transforming hope that Jesus of Nazareth set into motion. As St. Teresa of Ávila put it so elegantly in one of her prayers, to embrace our Christian mission means that we become fully aware of the responsibility and the freedom we share as followers of Christ to be "christs" – with the small "c" - in the world. "***Christ has no body but yours,***" St. Teresa said prayerfully, "***no hands, no feet on earth but yours; yours are the eyes with which he looks with compassion on this world; yours are the feet with which he walks to do good; yours are the hands, with which he blesses the world... Christ has no body now on earth but yours.***"<sup>3</sup>

When we take the wise words of this prayer to heart, we begin to understand that each one of us has a calling, a vocation, and a ministry grounded in Christ that is unique and, if lost, would be irreplaceable, because when Christ whispers our names and calls us to follow, God knows that each one of us will give a different kind of response to Christ. Each one of us will embody the Easter faith in very distinct and personal ways. Each one of us will live out the "why" at the heart of our faith in a very singular manner.

Rowan Williams, former Archbishop of Canterbury, believes that God comes to us not with a broad and nonspecific calling to follow, but instead God approaches us and gives us a very personal invitation to walk with Christ. This means that God comes to each person knowing fully well that each one of us has an unrepeated genetic composition, a particular life story, a certain social status, a clear set of capabilities and God gives us the freedom to respond to our calling as we are. It is up to us, Rev. Williams believes, to discover and nurture that form of life that will make us most alert, most responsive, most open to the reality of our calling, our vocation and our role within the Christian community.<sup>4</sup> Each of us has to give the local habitation to God's calling. We have to find our own particular following of Christ. You and I have to mirror in our own way the vocation and mission Jesus has given us to become children of God, messengers of repentance and forgiveness, doers of what is right and followers of the Risen Christ.

Author Kathleen Norris wrote about the resurrected life of Christ as a mystery that in the Gospel is celebrated as story but that, in real life, she said, it is meant to be lived by those who have faith. Then she said: ***“I am a Christian by inheritance, in my blood and bones... by that I mean that I look at the local, the particular, the specific, to determine how to express my Christian faith. It’s always a humbling exercise, because I can point to any number of people... who are much better Christians than I, in the sense that they devote themselves to the love and service of others in ways that put me to shame.”***<sup>5</sup>

Over the last 5 years, 6 months and roughly 10 days, I have experienced many of you who are here in this sanctuary this morning as some of the most dedicated followers of the Living Christ. You have inspired me with your loving care for this church. You have reminded me that there is no person without a talent; no human being that is without a call; and there is no place that is absent of the presence of the Living Christ and that each of us has something to contribute to the Church and the world that no one else can do. Whether it is meeting on Zoom to discuss relevant matters to the future of this congregation or teaching Confirmation Class or planning the meal-packing event in Hartman Hall or huddling together in prayer or celebrating our collective “why” in worship, you have expressed your Christian vocation in blood and bones and you have looked bravely for opportunities to practice your faith in very local, particular, and specific ways that are indeed life-saving. You are a congregation filled with talented, bright, and generous people, each with very unique gifts, each with a very specific calling, each having the privilege and the responsibility to listen to the Risen Christ and to accept this amazing mission to be a witness of his astonishing life, death and resurrection.

There is a great line in a popular song entitled “*Change*,” which singer Tracy Chapman recorded that asks: ***“If you saw the face of God and love, would you change?”***<sup>6</sup>

The Gospel lesson this morning asks us the same question. Only two Sundays ago, we celebrated Easter, the moment when the stone holding back life was rolled away and the Risen Christ was unloosened in the world. Today, the Living Christ surprises us with a calling and a ministry. He shows up uninvited in our midst and tells us that we have to come out of our hiding places where we have been holding on to bad news and let go of our diminished hopes so we may live our “why” more boldly, more hopefully, more confidently, more faithfully and with a willingness to be taken aback by the power of God to do more than we can ask or imagine. The real question for us is whether we are ready and willing to be everything that Christ calls us to become. Will you find in yourself the form of life, the expression of faith that can make this church most responsive to Christ? Are you ready to let the Risen Christ empower you to be “christ” for our church and the world? If Christ is the Church’s only “why,” are you willing to live the same kind of astonishing life Jesus lived?

Last week, I attended Yale's inaugural Public Theology and Public Policy Conference and one of the panelists, Latosha Brown – the co-founder of the Black Voters Matter Fund – made a comment that immediately captured my attention. She said that part of our responsibility as people of faith is to make people believe again. But to take on that responsibility, we have to be able to speak about our faith. We have to know who is our spiritual, theological and moral compass. Our faith has to be in line with the life and teachings of Jesus. The Christ of the Gospels has to be our inspiration, the driving force in our life, the reason why we remain active in the Church. Christ has to be the One who motivates us to live the astonishing message of the Gospel.

For some time now, these questions have been on my mind: does my faith in Christ make anything in the way I live astonishing? Does having Christ as our “why” make people outside these walls notice that there is something astonishing, surprising, life-transforming and even unbelievable about our faith, our church, our desire to witness to the Gospel?

Of course, we know there are people who live out their “why” with so much more courage, selflessness, integrity, compassion and devotion than most of us here today will ever do and, yes, they put us to shame. This vocation and mission to be witnesses of the Risen Christ can feel like a tall order for people like you and me who approach the Easter faith with wonder and joy and also with lots of questions and doubt. But, perhaps, what the Living Christ hopes we will do is not something bigger than life to prove that we are faithful followers, but that we will live in a such a way that we will encourage humanity to believe that there is a power, a kind of love, a timeless truth, a grounding “why,” a life-saving wisdom bigger than ourselves at work in the universe.

At last week's conference, Marc Elias – a lawyer who has dedicated his life to protecting civil rights, especially voting rights in the United States, shared a story that made me reconsider what it means to be a witness of the Gospel rooted in the teachings of Christ. Mr. Elias recounted an encounter he had while preparing for his Bar Mitzvah. He met a Jewish-American man who fought in the Second World War and was captured by the Nazis. The man was sent to a working camp along with other Jewish-American soldiers where they spent most of the day harvesting and bagging potatoes. Despite no longer being on the battlefield, the POW's decided to take a stand against the evil of Nazism. They broke small pieces of barbed wire off the fence that held them prisoners while the camp guards were distracted. They often cut their own hands and fingers, but they were determined to poke tiny holes in as many potatoes as they possibly could, hoping that the potatoes would be more likely to rot, and the Nazi army would not have enough fresh potatoes to feed their troops. Bloody fingers and tiny holes in potatoes against the evil of Nazism sounds risible, but the Jewish-American POW's knew why they had to take a stand against Nazi Germany. They knew that every little defiant act of hope and faith could take humanity a step closer to peace and a better world.

When the Church stays faithful to Christ, we encourage, instigate, goad, persuade, and energize each other to poke even tiny little holes in the sinful ideologies, structures, and systems of the world to let the light of God’s redemptive love shine into human history. Every time, we choose to let our hands, our feet, our voices, our eyes, our ears, our actions and our lives witness to the words and works of Christ, we give shape to our foundational “why” and we do what we can to poke even tiny holes in the darkness of human sin – and I hope you remember one of the most theologically accurate definitions of sin I have shared with you, which is that sin is the human addiction to being less than the whole person God created us to be,<sup>7</sup> and we do our bit to move humankind, however slowly, closer to the light of God’s love where we are free to reclaim the very best of our humanness.

Friends, my prayer is that we will never forget that our “why” in this church is Christ; and our mission first and foremost is to witness to Christ’s life and teachings and, in some incredibly beautiful and humbling way, to be “christs” to one another, sharing God’s peace, affirming love where there is hatred, offering words of forgiveness where people are wronged, and holding on to hope for life in a broken and violent world. And if anyone ever wonders if there is anything astonishing about our church, I hope you will feel confident enough to say, yes, there is... because, here, we are determined to let the Risen Christ use everything we are and have to poke tiny holes in the fabric of history so the Good News of God’s love may come in and stick with us longer than any bad news the powers of this world can throw at us and humanity may be taken aback by the Risen Christ who comes offering peace along with a message of repentance, forgiveness, transformation and new life.

Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> APA Dictionary of Psychology, “*Positive-Negative Asymmetry*” – American Psychological Association [<https://dictionary.apa.org/positive-negative-asymmetry>].

<sup>2</sup> By Matthew Myers Boulton in *Touch: SALT’s Lectionary Commentary for Easter 3*, 08 April 2024 [<https://www.saltproject.org/progressive-christian-blog/2018/4/10/faith-and-doubt-salts-lectionary-commentary-for-easter-3>].

<sup>3</sup> Journey with Jesus: Poems and Prayers – “*Christ Has No Body*,” Teresa of Avila (1515-1585) – (<http://www.journeywithjesus.net>)

<sup>4</sup> Rowan Williams in *A Ray of Darkness*, p. 159.

<sup>5</sup> Kathleen Norris in *Amazing Grace*, p. 238.

<sup>6</sup> Change, song by Tracy Chapman, release in 2005.

<sup>7</sup> See *In The Shelter* by Pádraig Ó Tuama, p. 135 [Kindle edition].