

WE ARE NOT ALONE

Order of Service (bulletin)

<https://www.spiritofhope.ca/news-and-events>

Video (recorded live stream)

<https://www.youtube.com/@spiritofhopeunitedchurch791>

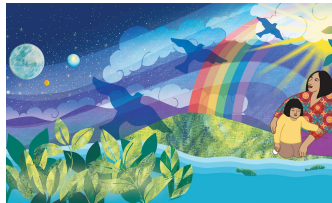
April 26, 2026
Easter 4

Acts 2:42-47

They devoted themselves to the apostles' instructions and the communal life, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. A reverent fear overtook them all, for many wonders and signs were being performed by the apostles. Those who believed lived together, shared all things in common; they would sell their property and goods, sharing the proceeds with one another as each had need. They met in the Temple and they broke bread together in their homes every day. With joyful and sincere hearts they took their meals in common, praising God and winning the approval of all the people. Day by day, God added to their number those who were being saved.

John 10:1-5

The truth of the matter is, whoever doesn't enter the sheepfold through the gate but climbs in some other way is a thief and a robber. The one who enters through the gate is the shepherd of the sheep, the one for whom the keeper opens the gate. The sheep knows the shepherd's voice; the shepherd calls them by name and leads them out. Having led them all out of the fold, the shepherd walks in front of them and they follow because they recognize the shepherd's voice. They simply won't follow strangers - they'll flee from them because they don't recognize the voice of strangers.



You may have noticed on the uh screen during the announcements that today can be described as the fourth Sunday of Easter. The Easter season starts with Easter. So that's Easter 1. And so this is three weeks after Easter. On these first three Sundays, including Easter itself, the gospel readings that were suggested through the Revised Common Lectionary all told stories of followers of Jesus having physical encounters with the risen Christ, mostly on the day of Easter itself, either in the morning or the evening. Last Sunday, a resurrection appearance was paired with a speech given by Peter seven weeks later. And Peter's speech marks a real transition from knowing resurrection through sight and through touch to knowing resurrection by proclamation, hearing about it. It introduces the idea of the need to believe without seeing. In other words, it introduces faith.

Today the gospel reading has left Easter day and it's going back into the stories of Jesus' life to times when Jesus offered words on the theme of future opportunities and expectations going forward. Jesus would tell stories with meanings, tales with a moral, parables with a lesson in hopes that people would behave in a good and just way moving forward, regardless of where they were up to that point. These were words that Jesus hoped his followers would take to heart and make real as time marched forward. The Gospel of John records Jesus describing this good shepherd who establishes a trusting relationship with the flock. The sheep hear their shepherd's voice and recognize it and they follow that familiar voice. Last week, I pointed out that except

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for Mary (exclusively in the Gospel of John, where she's alone in the garden), all of the other resurrection appearances described in the Gospels are all group experiences. These were pre-existing groups that already had a relationship with each other. Whether they knew each other through shared experiences, shared ideals prior to being able to witness and be amongst the risen Christ.

There is strength in numbers. Misery loves company. Together we can do great things. That's something Mother Teresa said. Margaret Mead reminded us that *don't ever think that small groups of people can't change the world. They're the only ones that ever do. The strength of one is the start. The strength of many is a force that can't be stopped.* And my favorite saying on the topic, *in the cookie of life, friends are like the chocolate chips.*

They devoted themselves to a communal life. All who believed were together and they held things in common. They would sell and distribute the proceeds of property and goods to each other as any had need. And they spent time together in the temple and they shared meals together. A defining characteristic of the early church was its focus on community and on relationship. And others noticed and they were impressed. The reading from Acts today says that they won approval of all of the people. The obvious goal was that everyone in the early church would know that they were not in this by themselves, that they were not alone. And they practiced a compassionate relationship with each other that was emblematic of their relationship with God. Alongside their proximity, alongside the care was a focus on deepening their relationship with each other and deepening their relationship with God. They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching. The text says they went regularly to the house of worship. They praised God. The 23rd Psalm famously begins, "The Lord is my shepherd. I shall not want. The Lord makes me lie down in green pastures and leads me beside still waters and restores my soul." And Jesus used that exact same metaphor saying, "Because of our relationship with the divine, a relationship that we trust, we are not alone."

We are not alone. We live in God's world. We are not alone. Thanks be to God.

Since the late 1960s, those phrases have bookended this document that has guided and inspired people of the United Church of Canada and beyond. It's officially called A New Creed, but it's commonly known as the United Church Creed or within the United Church just The Creed. I prefer to parallel the first person plural language of the creed, and call it Our Creed. Our creed bookended with *we are not alone, we live in God's world and thanks be to God.* It can be seen as having four sections between those books on the shelf. There's a section about **belief**, a section about **trust**, a section about **calling**, and a **proclamation**.

There is a trinitarian format to the belief section. *We believe in God. God who has created and is created. God who has come in Jesus, the word made flesh, to reconcile and make new. God who works in us and others by the spirit.* Those simple words are a testimony that beliefs span the fullness of time. There's past language (has created; has come). There is present language (works in us and others). And there's future language (to reconcile to make new). And all of that couched in the language of relationship. We are not alone.

Our creed's second section is only a four-word sentence. *We trust in God.* They know the shepherd's voice who calls them by name. They follow because they recognize the shepherd's voice. We trust in God.

Belief and trust become action into the third section of our creed. *We are called to be the church.* And like the first people of the earliest Christian group of followers, being the church was to be in active relationship with each other, with the community, with the world, and with God, and all that the church is part of. Not an isolated little pocket. They didn't meet only in the house of one of their disciples. They met in the temple courtyard.

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They praised God together. They had community meals and they had open doors welcoming: welcoming new people into that community all the time. So what is our creed calling the church to be? *We are called to celebrate God's presence.* Exactly what the early church did. It's one of our first callings. We praise God. We come in worship. We sing songs of prayer and praise. We take moments in silence. We appreciate visual symbols and auditory symbols. It's our first call to celebrate God's presence in our midst.

And we are called *to live with respect in creation.* Harkening back to the creation story in Genesis chapter 2 where the Lord God took the human and put it in the garden of Eden to work the garden and to tend it. We are called to live with respect in creation. I was a commissioner to the 35th General Council in Fergus, Ontario in 1994 when we voted to add something like this to our creed. It was the first edit to our creed in more than a decade. A desire to express as our calling as a church, our relationship with the God of the creation we live a part of with the God who we believe not only has created but is created. This was (as I said) the second amendment to the creed since it was first approved in 1968. The other changes were made in the 1980s to remove the male centered language that was dominant in the 60s. Male-centered language that was intended to refer to all people. It wasn't intended to only refer to man. The creed originally started off *Man is not alone. He lives in God's word.* It also described Jesus not as word made flesh but *Jesus the true man.* We are not alone is much more obviously inclusive of everyone. And word made flesh is a great biblical phrase and is at least as understandable as at the true man (which is not a phrase that we use a lot in the life of the church but maybe was meaningful for the compilers of this creed in the 60s). I love those 46-year-old edits. The first makes it obvious that when I look at the creed, I am included and those around me who don't share the characteristics of this body are included as well.

The next callings are also straight out of the Bible just like "word made flesh". *We are to love and serve others. We are to seek justice and resist evil.* When asked about the greatest commandments, Jesus was sure to include what we would call Leviticus 19:18. *Love your neighbor as yourself.* And when offering an example for faithful prayer, which we will sing later this morning, Jesus invited prayers that included, "Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil." The Old Testament prophet Micah who was an 8th century BCE - a contemporary actually of Amos who we've been studying on Wednesdays this month. Micah spoke against a focus on just the physical offerings and the moment of offering in the moment but the offering and towards a relationship which transcends the time. *What does the Lord require of you?* Micah wrote, *but to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God.*

The final calling in our United Church is for us to be, and it's central to our being as followers of Jesus, that we proclaim *Jesus crucified and risen, our judge, and our hope.* What makes us unique in terms of our faith expression and experience and practice is that we are followers of this great rabbi, this teacher who inspired all of those in the first century and continue to inspire through the memory of their words and actions.

In this post Easter season, we are reminded that we are a posteaster church. That Jesus story did not end with a sealed tomb. And it did not even end with his close followers' betrayal and denial. We are the people who remember *I have seen the Lord and peace be with you and receive the Holy Spirit. And weren't our hearts burning as we walked and talked along the road?* We are followers of the one who said that we who we are is going to be defined by feeding the hungry and giving drink to the thirsty, clothing the naked, visiting the sick and prisoners. That doing those acts for each other is actually part of our relationship with God, Jesus would preach.

And we are people of hope. A statement that this congregation boldly embodied in our very name: Spirit of Hope United Church. The final of the four parts of our creed is this proclamation of hope that we are not limited

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to one time or one place or one plane of existence. that in life and death and life beyond death, God is with us. This is a statement that God's presence is for the long - the longest of halls.

We are not alone. We live in God's world. We are not alone. Thanks be to God.
Amen.

#79MV Spirit, Open My Heart

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