

SERMON: “Here We Go Loop-de-Loop”

First United Church, Waterloo – EASTER SUNDAY, April 4, 2021

PRAYER: “Holy God, you give us hope beyond our wildest imaginings and love beyond our deserving. You give us grace and peace and truth and transforming power and fullness of life. You allow us time and space to absorb and receive your gifts in faith. Today is a good day to reaffirm such faith or to feel it fresh, fresh as Spring. In the name of the risen Jesus, so be it.

What is the nature and shape of things to come? Have you, at times, wondered about that? One long-standing projection that still has some measure of popularity runs: “Will the circle be unbroken in the sweet ol’ by and by? There’s a better place a comin’ in the sky, God, in the sky.” Lovely. But I’m not sure God’s vision is that limited. God is also out to renew this world. God’s vision is bigger than a promise of a personal afterlife for everyone who believes. And, frankly, circles are rather boring: tidy, neat, and repetitive. Circles are orderly and fixed like a planet’s orbit held in place by electro-magnetism and gravity. They fit the notion some folks tag onto life’s experiences: “What goes around, comes around.” But, I don’t find that life is often that neat, nor is it seldom that simple. Life is variable and evolving, and, at times, messy and complex. So is faith. So is God. Sure, our earth is round. We live, move, and travel in curved space despite illusions of flatness. I perceive that the patterns that emerge in our paths of life are more often like spirals and loops. We pass through series after series of similar situations, but we don’t quite come out the same as when we first entered them or experienced them. And then, there are times when life tosses us an unforeseen curve ball, throws us “for a loop”. Yet, even then, a pattern emerges as we find ourselves travelling on some different track. Round and round we go onwards through ups and downs, ins and outs, and tos and fros. And I, for one, am truly okay with that because ... I love roller-coasters. Get me a one-day pass for Canada’s Wonderland or Cedar Point Park in Sandusky, Ohio, and I’m kind of in heaven. Ooo-eee!!! How crazy is that for man already over age 70? I find riding roller-coasters is only partially escapism; there’s another part that’s therapy. Hanging on, enduring a roller-coaster ride is testimony that one can cope with life as it runs around curves and through spirals and loops. Admittedly, some of you may find a roller-coaster image too jarring, too intense and frightful. So ... substitute in your mind something similar, maybe a wee bit slower: like repeated trips around the Cabot Trail in Cape Breton, a mountain odyssey on Pike’s Peak, or an around-the-world ocean voyage. As life and faith follow their spiraling course, bad news always comes like a derailing, but good news is perpetually restorative, so that we wind up back on track with renewed confidence and vigour. And, here is the best news: God is in charge of the roller-coasters of life. Here we go loop-de-loop.

I TAKE TWO MARYS FOR EXAMPLE

Let's consider the life- and world-changing experiences of two Marys for instance. Let us imagine hearing their story first-hand, lifting it off the pages of the gospel of Matthew. Let us feel free to add some of our own embellishments. One of them is Mary Magdalene, the second is "the other Mary", Jesus' mother perhaps? I believe it's fair to presume they had no concept of Good Friday as they followed after Jesus. Witnessing his death by crucifixion was shocking and horrid, and nothing but bad news. The worst news. The wheels beneath their roller-coaster cart fell off. They, along with the rest of Jesus' closest followers crashed. Fled in fear. Huddled in hiding. And yet, the burial of Jesus' body was done in haste. There was only time to wrap it in a sheet. No anointing with embalming oils, no other customary Jewish burial practices that women traditionally took care of happened. And the next day was a Sabbath. No work allowed. So, early on the Sunday after, in the dull mist of a breaking dawn, they gather their nerve head to the tomb intent on offering those last rites. We may infer that Mary Magdalene was accustomed to travelling dark streets alone. Perhaps she had acquired her own arsenal of self-defense skills. The other Mary risks keeping company with her. Heart-sore, they can no longer sit still with their grief. One of them goes to pay respects to a beloved son. Mary Magdalene is intent on honouring the one man who loved her like no other man ever had. Did they have enough strength between them to roll back the tomb's stone cover? Not sure. En route, according to Matthew's version, there was an earthquake tremor. Problem solved. They arrive at the open tomb and find the Roman guards have been shocked into a statue-like stupor. More amazing was the appearance of a white-frosted angel, glowing like a flash of lightning. Just before the two Marys also lapse into a fear-drenched stupor, the angel addresses them: *"Do not be afraid; I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. He is not here. He has been raised, as he said. Come and see the place where he lay."*(28:5b-6) That's a huge loop-de-loop!! And we can presume they looked and saw nothing inside the tomb except discarded burial linens. After that pause, the angel continues: *"Now, go quickly and tell his disciples 'He has been raised from the dead, and indeed, he is going ahead of you to Galilee: there you will see him!'"* (Matthew 28:7) And they did. They left that tomb with hearts fluttering and flip-flopping between fear and joy. Before they get too far along, they are met by the risen Jesus himself. "Greetings" he says in our English translation. The Greek word is "Χαίρετε"; a somewhat stronger form of "Hello" meaning "Peace be with you!" Both Marys fall down, noses to the ground and reach out worshipfully to grab his feet. He repeats the angel's message: *"Don't be afraid. Tell the others to go to Galilee"*. Their race then becomes an amazing race to tell the others that Jesus has been raised

There you go, if you aren't fussy about roller-coasters,
consider that life is like being a participant in "The Amazing Race".|
Far-fetched?? Frightfully fanciful?? Yes, it is.
Could be the two Marys went found the tomb empty
and conjured up the rest in the imagination of their own hearts
because they remembered him talking about all this while they were with him:
"The Son of Humanity will be rejected and suffer and die, but ... three days later...."
Whatever actually happened, both Marys had their Black Friday
hearts and minds radically altered with Easter eyes. Jesus lost is now Jesus re-found.
Jesus dead is Jesus risen from the dead.
In one story Matthew's gospel fuses an empty tomb experience
with an encounter with the risen One.
However we might otherwise spin or seek to understand it,
after their early dawn loop-de-loop experience, both Marys found their lives altered,
running along a whole new track that would be utterly exhilarating
And somehow, that also happened for all those others with they share their news.

II CURRENT COURIERS

Life and faith still travel in such tracks. Take it from a couple of contemporary couriers.

If she had lingered in the darkness in which she was raised,
Lillian Smith's life would be missing a few groups of friends.
Lillian was born and raised in Georgia when it was clear in her family
that certain people were inferior and unfit to keep company with white folks.
Conversing with "Negroes" as they called them then was unthinkable enough.
Don't even dare to consider sitting at table with them and sharing a meal.
Yet, as Lillian grew older and travelled about, she began to think for herself.
One day she just decided to swap her Good Friday lenses for a new pair of Easter glasses.
She put it all on paper in a book that startled the southern United States
when it first saw publication: Killers of the Dream.
Her book opens with an exploration of the psyche of the South that impacted her childhood.
Then she moves on to describe her first risky? venture of eating with an African-American.
Her head told her she wasn't doing anything wrong, though her gut became nauseous.
The conversation was stilted and difficult. She couldn't keep her food down.
She persisted, following that new track of dining with Blacks.
Slowly but surely, her awkward, uncomfortable feelings dissipated.
In their place, friendship and warmth rushed into the vacuum. /
The dream that had been killed re-awakened, became reborn.
Did God have a hand in giving Lillian those new Easter eyes?

Was that the same God that gave the big Dream of mutually supportive, loving whole human community to Martin Luther King Jr.?
Oh, whenever any form of killing stops, physical, psychic, emotional, or spiritual and becomes life-promoting instead: we hop onto a resurrection loop-de-loop.

I'm guessing a number of you have read the autobiographical book, or caught re-runs of the CBC documentary based on it: "Shake Hands With the Devil". I've watched it and re-read the book a couple of times.
I convinced that we know enough of General Romeo Dallaire's story to be deeply affected and find ourselves challenged.
We have some sense of how overwhelmed he became by the atrocities he witnessed in Rwanda and his inability to effect positive changes.
We may know he remains haunted, suffering horrific flashbacks that are part and parcel of his struggle back home in Canada with post-traumatic stress disorder. I wonder if we too might marvel that in 2004, ten years after he witnessed genocide in Rwanda, he returned to that nation and confessed in public both his own failures and the failures of the United Nations initiatives.
Maybe we know about the unflagging support his family continues to offer him. We might be enlightened to know that his faith has also served greatly to carry and sustain him. When he returned to those scenes of unconscionable crimes against humanity, re-living the horrors, flashbacks still riddling him with sleeplessness and psychic pain, Dallaire could still speak words of hope and grace.
Here's a slice of his loop-de-loop:
He considers Rwanda as a paradise; a decimated paradise that is yet recoverable. He even entertains the hope that he and his wife might return there and live there. "*God may travel the world by day,*" he said, "*but, come night, God sleeps in Rwanda*" 2
There's still instability there to this day. The ruling government eliminates opponents. Some former genocide engineers have been tracked down and executed. A human rights watch on Rwanda is still in place and freedom of the press is limited. But it's better than it used to be.
And Rwanda has become a safe haven for thousands of refugees from other African nation and a partner in helping restore some them safely back to their homeland. Someday, there may yet be a reawakening to a whole new possibility of restored community, not just a dream, but a brand new for-real deal.
Romeo Dallaire refuses to get mired in a Black Friday swamp. He keeps striding on more solid ground with Easter steps.

CONCLUSION

So, how about us?

Might we also stroll, walk, amble, run, race, ride, and/or soar likewise through all our days?

A circle may yet symbolize eternity: a concept without any visible beginning or end.

But for eternal life, for that wholeness and fullness of life God has in store for all creation,

I'm suggesting we envision spirals and loop-de-loops

as our lives of faith travel onwards, mostly forwards, but sometimes back.

Sometimes, life, evil, trouble, and setbacks derail us;

but by God's grace and power through faith, we can find ourselves re-routed on a new track.

Sometimes, our lives of faith take us deeper inwardly as we grow outwardly

and become more broadly loving.

Often, that happens in slow motion. Sometimes ... hang on, 'cause it's full speed ahead.

We live, move and have our being upward and outward,

however we imagine becoming closer to God.

We seek to move with the Spirit of risen Jesus within us.

As Gordon Wray has phrased it in one of his Easter hymns:

"You've heard the Easter story -- of cross, and tomb laid bare.

You've heard through generations the record of my care...

Look out! You'll find me active in all the world abroad.

You'll see me near the sick-bed, you'll find me on the road.

With food and vital service, supporting everyone

I seek to serve my people, as I have always done." ³

And there may come a day for all us when we soar beyond the limits of electro-magnetism,

burst the confines of gravity,

pass beyond the life-diminishing strictures of self-centredness and evil powers and systems

into some timeless whole place and experience where our daily loop-de-loops

will be exchanged for exuberant whoop-de-dooos and whoo-hoos and non-stop Hallelujahs.

Thanksgiving, praise, honour, and glory ever be to our wondrous God who lifts us through.

Good Friday times to experiences of Easter until we enjoy the unceasing rapture of Eternity.

"May the spirals keep unfolding into the sweet new by and by ...[hum]"

Notes

1 Lillian Smith's story is recounted briefly by Rev. Edward McNulty in LectionAid, (Vol. 14, No. 2), (LectionAid Inc., Boulder, CO: March 2006-May 2006 edition), pages 29-30.

2 If you haven't read the autobiography or watched the documentary, a brief recap of Romeo Dallaire's story is recounted by Sandra Severs, Living Covenant: Water as Metaphor in Lenten Worship, (United Church Publishing House, Toronto, ON: 2005), page 56.

3 © Gordon Wray 2020 with inspiration from Carolyn Winfrey Gillette.

