



St. Philip Anglican Church

A Spacious Place of Welcome

Sermon transcript

St Philip Oak Bay

9.30 am Eucharist, 26 March, Lent 5

Rev Allen Doerksen

Sermon begins 39:08 : <https://youtu.be/-7XvX-SJngw?t=2347>

Thank you for your understanding when I just burst out and say something at the wrong time in the service. It's almost like 'don't do what Doerksen is doing' - but eventually it'll be the other way around.

So, I promise to resist, but every now and then you'll manage to wrench from me – see how easily I've offloaded responsibility already? - a golf story, so here's one.

Did you know that the greatest golfer of them all - you probably all have your own ideas if you're golfers, but clearly it's Jack Nicklaus, there's only one right answer to that question - would take a break every winter, and then when spring had sprung, he'd go back to his childhood teacher, golf instructor, a man named Jack Grout, and ask him to go over everything from the beginning. And he meant it: "Teach me, Jack, how to grip the club, how to aim, how to stand, how to start the swing again from the beginning."

Now, any children left in here in the circle? Do you guys play, what sports do you play?

- Soccer.

Now you know what a soccer ball is, right? Right. Every year when you start playing, you don't have to be shown that soccer ball again and be told this is soccer ball, do you? No, right! So this is crazy, you think, right? He might have won the greatest golf tournaments in the world, the Masters, the US Open, the British, the - sorry, I made a mistake there - the Open Championship and others. And yet he would do this year after year. It's kind of equivalent to Stephen Hawking revelling in the sheer beauty of the times tables every year before the Michaelmas term, or da Vinci learning how to mix pigments as if he'd never done it before. Or maybe there's a master gardener or two here in the house. Maybe

you're too shy to admit it. But you know, every year you go over what are the the perennials and the annuals that work best in this microclimate. No - it's something, you know, it's something you could recite in your sleep. So why would Nicklaus do this? It wasn't because he didn't know how to play. Then why?

He had actually discovered a great secret, the difference between knowing something and continually discovering or learning it. Continually discovering it. And we see this same dynamic at work in our famous gospel text.

And I know Lent in Year A is a bit taxing to read these long gospel texts, so great job to the two readers the last couple of weeks. The raising of Lazarus is the 6th great sign in John's gospel, and the only one in which all the explaining takes place before the event. The actual raising of Lazarus is just a couple of verses at the end of the chapter. The prelude, however, all the rest, brims with longing, with pensive expectation and sorrow. But perhaps the greatest, most interesting feature of it is the way John describes Jesus's experience in and through it all. Which is characterized not by an objective knowing, in the sense of having it all figured out, but in terms of a subjective, childlike learning; wonder, and allowing the emotions to come to him as the setting sees fit.

Now contrast this to so much popular religion, which is about learning the right things and getting it right. And of course, once you're right and convinced that you're right, you're proud of that. Got this thing figured out, got 'er sussed. What's there left to learn, to experience? Not a whole lot - except to point out all the people who don't get it right, who don't know what you know. No wonder churchgoers are often bored to sleep, or bored of their faith, or wonder what the relevance of Christianity is. No wonder we look for "the new" outside of our faith. We've come to think of faith as a kind of moral control, a fixed body of knowledge, rather than growth in life and experience, which leads us further into the heart of God, further into the heart of the mystery of the world.

But with Jesus, and you'll see this starting from Chapter 2 onward in John's gospel, the miracle of turning the water into wine at Cana: it's as if he's operating from scratch in each new situation, reacting and responding to what people are going through, what they're saying, as he listens to them and learns to see what God is up to in each situation. Here in this text, we see him experience unfolding insight in real time. It's one of John's genius bits. He writes in very simple Greek that sounds simple when it's translated into English, but he's a beautiful existentialist.

First, we see Jesus understanding that this illness will not lead to death, he says. It's not going to lead to death. This combines in that moment with an inner sense that he is to stay put, even though some of his best friends are imploring him to help in a desperate situation. Now I can't even - I'm too much of a people pleaser to imagine the courageous inner "no" that he had to exercise in that moment. What a sense he must have had of not trying to please, but staying alert, attentive and responsive. He showed, incredible sense of self, strength of self, in that moment. Then, this is followed by his comments on sleep, which slide into the clanging finality of "Lazarus has died". Oh, so it does end in death. I mean, the Jews were pretty clear. Once you'd been dead for three days, you were dead-dead. Like, you were dead. There's no in between phase there: you're dead. So Lazarus has died.

He then starts to talk to his disciples about learning to believe. By which he doesn't mean, "capture a bunch of new information in this setting". But they don't understand. And, you know, maybe most of us don't get this. It's hard to get. They begin to walk towards Bethany, in what I could only think of as a kind of cauldron of fear and confusion. I mean, they understand that there's people there that want to kill Jesus and by extension, them. This is just the thing. They know, it's happened, and they're not wrong. And then there's this cup-half full pessimism. I can relate. I come from good Germanic stock, right. It's Thomas, it's always Thomas in John's gospel: "Come on, then, let us go and die with him." I just picture Eeyore. Whenever Thomas speaks, that's the the image.

So there's this strong sense of foreboding and confusion. But now the physical and emotional reality of Lazarus's death is about to land on Jesus in full force. Before this, it's all been kind of theorizing, words, playing with words. Confusing, yes, but still just words. And as Martha and Mary greet Jesus, they say the same thing to him: "If you had been here, this wouldn't have happened." It's an accusation, but not really, for Jesus didn't cause Lazarus's death. It's really a front for their secret hope, and Martha kind gives this away when she says, "But, you know, even now, we know that God will give you whatever you ask." What she's really saying - she doesn't really know, she's too shy to say it clearly, but really, they have this secret hope that somehow Jesus' superpower is life itself. And so even as they say what they say, kind of in this accusatory way, it's undergirded by a desperate longing.

And then just like a child, in that moment, Jesus feels. He just lets it come. He feels their pain, all their hopes on him, the enormity of the moment, which is really the human moment. You know the Christmas carol, right? "The hopes and

dreams [sic, i.e. fears] of all the years are met in thee". And he weeps. God's tears for the whole sprawling, confusing evolutionary beauty that is creation, and humans trying to make sense of it. Martha has tried what religion as a system always tries. She tries this rational, doctrinal approach: You are the Christ, the son of God, the one who is coming to the world. Perfect response, perfectly right. She knows she's missing something. Jesus says in response to that: I am the resurrection and the life. Belief in a future promise is fine, necessary, and part of God's good news. Martha has said that she knows that Lazarus will be raised in the resurrection. But it also allows us to offload paying attention to the learning and discovery of the present moment. But if Jesus' superpower is life itself, then this future resurrection promise comes crashing into our here and now. Then Christ is someone for every time, for every moment and every place and the implied call within that is to stay present, to stay childlike, to learn to believe, all over again.

If last week's sermon could have been titled "The Second Sight," this week's can be called "The Second Naïveté". We think we need the new or the different to quell our boredom, and so we plan holidays to exotic locales we've never been - right, Joan and Larry? Love it. Fine. It's beautiful to do. (I can bug my warden, he bugs me. That's what friends do.) But when it comes to the most important things in life, our faith being the number one thing, we don't need new things. We need old things, the most important things experienced with fresh wonder. We need, as Nicklaus would say, to start from the beginning, or as Jesus would say, learn to believe. This is what we need at each stage. Sure, we know, but will we keep wondering?

So here we are, in an old place that is new. We have an opportunity, over the next years, months and years, to listen to each other as if for the first time - for me, it will be the first time, I guess - to bring our most cherished beliefs into conversation with the one who is both the resurrection and the life. What if we paid attention with an inner courage that allowed our childlike wonder to be more important than the need to please? What if we allowed our learning to be less certain, but always growing? I wonder if some of our graveclothes might drop off too. //