



Sermon by the Right Reverend John R Stephens

St. Anselm's Church April 18, 2021

It is so great to be with you here at St. Anselm's... well sort of with you here at St. Anselm's, as best as we can be under the circumstances. I have been to this church building numerous times over the years and so despite this being a pandemic it is great to be able to join you as you honour St. Anselm. I am so grateful to your vicar, Alex, for his ministry here at St. Anselm's and the incredible work of this parish. I am grateful to Alex for his leadership in the Neighbourhood Ministry and serving on Diocesan Council and other places within the diocese. You are blessed to have him as your Vicar, he is blessed by the ministry of so many people here. I do hope that you are all keeping safe, and that some of you are already vaccinated and others will soon be vaccinated. God willing this pandemic will soon be behind us.

Let me begin with a portion of a prayer attributed to St. Anslem of Canterbury: *O Lord my God. Teach my heart this day, where and how to find you. You have made me and re-made me, and you have bestowed on me all the good things I possess, and still I do not know you. I have not yet done that for which I was made. Amen.*

Most of us have had those days or moments or experiences where time just seems to stand still. Oh, the hands on the clock are still moving, if people still look at hands on a clock anymore. The spinning of the earth on its axis and the rotation of the planet around the sun has not stopped... but it just feels that way. All else that is happening around us becomes unimportant, insignificant, removed from our attention and focus. Time stands still. This can be a joyous event like a birth or a wedding or a celebration that you want to go on forever. A great party, a great evening with intimate friends, a time on vacation where you simply do not want the day to end and you do not want to be anywhere else... It could also be a time of much less joy and optimism. At the time in a hospital bed or the death of a loved one or a moment where tears are flowing and it is hard to know where to turn or how to change what is unfolding. Moments where time just seems to stand still and linger instead of spinning out of control, filled with things that seem of little significance. I am guessing that you know of such times.

In the gospel of Luke, the evangelist, the writer of the gospel, describes this sort of day when we connect with the passage linked with this third Sunday of Easter. The words "time stood still" do not appear in the 24th chapter of Luke but they might as well have. You see it is still that day, that first Easter day, that day of resurrection of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, when all that we just heard in the gospel reading took place. Most of us who have joined together this morning have moved on, Easter Day was two weeks ago. The

chocolate eggs are all consumed, the lilies are looking a little stale, the bonnets are all boxed up ready for another year. But Luke still dwells on that day as if time has stood still. And perhaps that is a good way to look at it.

It was the first day of the week, the day had begun at early dawn with several women going to the tomb with their spices; ready to properly prepare the body of Jesus. Instead they were met inside the empty tomb by two people wondering why they were looking for the living among the dead. A good question that puzzled those faithful women at first. They tried to tell the other disciples about this encounter but those other ones could not see the possibility of what they were describing. They doubted, they brushed it off, they denied it, for they knew about time and Jesus' time had ended, they had seen it with their own eyes. But for those women, time was standing still.

And still on that same time-avoiding-day of long ago, in Luke's gospel there is a scene change. Suddenly two of them are on the road to a town called Emmaus. Not that far from Jerusalem but far enough to get away from idle tales and the questions about how God might work. Those two were making good time towards their destination when they were joined on the road by a stranger. A stranger who seems to know very little about what is going on but then seems to be able to explain the meaning of the coming of God into this world. A stranger who seems to know quite intimately that the distance between God and humanity has been erased and replaced with an intimacy that touches our soul and our purposes and our hope. This stranger takes a loaf of bread and blesses it and breaks it. Suddenly time stood still for them too. They knew that it is Jesus.

Once more a scene change which brings us to the passage we just heard, still on that day where time has a very different meaning and purpose. A scene change to the place

where all of Jesus' closest friends have gathered. Gathered to wonder and try to understand and pray and hope, much as we have gathered on this day. And Jesus is known amongst them. The resurrected and fully alive Jesus is amongst them. And listen to his first words to them for they are just as significant to us now as they were to the followers of that timeless day long ago. "Peace be with you," he said. Words that we might know well from our liturgy but hear them anew. They are once more words that make time stand still. Peace be with you. They were Jesus' prayer for his followers that day and for our day. Peace be with you. Let those words roll off your tongue and revive your faith and slow down time for you. Discover the peace of God that you have been craving for your entire life. Discover the kind of peace that touches your very soul. Know the peace that calms your troubled mind. This kind of peace Jesus prayed for his followers on that time standing still day long ago and continues to pray for us on this day.

But those are not the only words that should peak your curiosity on this day. Jesus' words to his followers of long ago and of today did not end there. More was said that are just as relevant for our time as it was then. Perhaps you noticed them as well in the reading of the gospel.

The timeless Son of God, Jesus, said: You are my witnesses to these things. These are important words for us to consider. They are not words chosen only for a small band of troubled and confused followers of long ago. They are Jesus' words to us here and now as well. You are my witnesses. You are my witnesses. What does it mean to be a witness of Jesus?

There are perhaps many ways to answer that question. But when we discover the peace of Christ in our heart and soul, when we discover peace is what we desire most in

this world, and desire that it take control of our priorities, we are discovering what it means to be a witness to Jesus.

At a Baptism some of the questions asked to all in attendance are these peace and witness searching words: Will you continue in the apostles' teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of the bread, and in the prayers? A little later we also ask, Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbour as yourself? We also ask Will you strive to safeguard the integrity of God's creation, and respect, sustain and renew the life of the Earth?

You see those words of Jesus asking us to be witnesses are a challenge to us. A challenge to look at the world differently because we are Easter people, resurrection people. We look at the world differently and recognize the fingerprints of God in all things, in the face of another, in the creatures of this planet, in our own soul. We are witnesses affirming that we are called to see time in a whole new way, as a gift from God to be transformed and to transform this world.

Long ago, too long ago for our own personal memory, the resurrected Jesus came and stood among his confused and worried followers and said to them: Peace be with you. Be people who bring that peace with you. Hold this gift from Jesus carefully and gently in your life. Treasure it, caress it, experience it, let it touch you, change you and transform you. Let it be that moment of time standing still for you, a holy moment of receiving the gift that so many of us crave. Peace be with you... in your soul, in your heart, in your mind. The peace of God, the peace of the risen Christ, the peace of the Holy Spirit be with you.

But as St. Anselm reminded us in the prayer I quoted, it does not end there. Time does not simply remain standing still. Time does not stop because we have received the

peace of God, much as we might like it to. Time moves forward, the earth still rotates around the sun. This peace calls us forward to service. We are changed by these words and called to be witnesses in ways that renew this world.

Reaching out to those in need. Offering the ministry of the neighbourhood ministry. Even in a pandemic offering worship that deepens our trust and hope in God's grace and love. Being a presence in this area and this region, a presence that says more than we are here but have been changed because on a day where time stood still, our Saviour came and said Peace be with you and invited us to be witnesses.

May it be so in and through us on this St. Anselm's Day.