

New Life
First+Metropolitan United Church
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New life: it was always about new life. From the beginning, the gospel of Jesus was about new life – life lived within God’s realm, life lived by the grace of God. Long before the Easter morn and throughout his earthly ministry, Jesus was inviting people to come, taste and see that this new life is good.

The woman at the well, Zaccheus in the tree, the fishermen at their nets, the woman with the flow of blood, Mary Magdalene and Lazarus and his sisters, Martha and Mary – they all were invited to step into this new life, long before the light of the Easter morn declared the extent to which new life had dawned..

In your own experience, when have you encountered new life like that?

Early on Easter morning, 31 years ago, I went to an outdoor sunrise service in Toronto. A couple of hours later, I was flying out of Pearson Airport to Japan for a visit that would change my life. I went to see a young widow I had known a year earlier when she was studying in Canada. I also would meet her 3 ½ year-old daughter for the first time, along with the rest of the family. They lived in the home of the little girl’s grandparents; she was just 5 months old when her father had died. Now, I was visiting to propose marriage and instant fatherhood. Quite an assignment for a 23 year-old’s first visit to Japan!

At the conclusion of my three-week stay in their home, Ogechan and Obachan (Grandpa and Grandma) Matsuo gave their blessing and it was decided that 4 months later, there would be a wedding. Our new life as a family in Canada would begin. My world suddenly had become so much bigger, not only through encountering a very different culture that was rich with meaning and history, but especially in the new relationships and roles I was to grow into – those of husband and father. Life was fresh and new; life was exciting and expanding.

Perhaps it was something like that for Peter and John and Mary and the others when they first responded to Jesus’ invitation to come and follow him. Perhaps it was something like that you, when you first responded to the same invitation. And in deciding to follow him – even somewhat hesitantly – we experienced new life.

Jesus had brought such hope and meaning and new life into the existence of his first followers. What a shock it must have been, then, to see him crucified and buried. Mary especially must have felt that grief. I would imagine that just about everyone here has grieved the death of someone they love. For some, the pain is still fresh and tender. For others, the ache of loss has receded after a time. We get up and go on. But still, sometimes when we least expect it, grief will reach out to grip us. Yet, those whom we have known and loved keep leaving; keep going on journeys from which no one returns.

Did you hear the story of this week? Jesus really died. He did not just appear to die. He was not asleep. He died a death more cruel and horrible than can be imagined. He wasn’t dead for a moment on the operating table having an out-of-body experience. He was absolutely, undeniably dead, sealed in his grave for three days. And there is a stark sense of finality whenever death occurs.

Two weeks ago - thirty-one years after my first visit to Japan, I once again was in Japan and in the home of the Matsuos. This time, because Ogechan – Grandpa – had died.

As it was with Jesus' disciples that first Easter morn, there was no denying the presence of death. Following Japanese custom, Ogechan's body was brought back from the hospital and remained in the family home for the days and nights before the funeral. Loved ones and close friends could come and pay their respects; we could be in the presence of a face once so animated, now absolutely stilled. Yet, even then, one might fool oneself to think "he is only sleeping."

Then, the evening before the funeral, the body was taken to the funeral home for a wake. That night, four young men of the immediate family, including our son and son-in-law, were given the traditional honour of keeping watch over the body throughout the night. In the morning was the funeral, and at its conclusion the family accompanied the casket and watched as it entered the crematorium's furnace.

In our culture, we can understand if people might question if a loved one really is dead. After all, they may have seen the dead person for only a brief moment in the hospital before the body was whisked away, or perhaps they never saw their loved one after death at all. In Japan, however, it becomes near impossible to deny that death has occurred.

You see, with cremation in Japan, the flesh is consumed but the bones, although very brittle, the bones remain. At the conclusion of the cremation, the Matsuo family gathered once again at the crematorium, as the cart returned with only Ogechan's skeletal remains.

And then, in a final act of caring, each family member took chop sticks and picked up the bones and gently placed them into the urn. It is hard to deny the reality and finality of death, when you have seen and handled the bones and skull that a short time before had been part of your loved one. The power of death and our own mortality will not be sidestepped at a Japanese crematorium.

On Good Friday, the power and reality of death also were very real and final. Peter Short writes:

Good Friday in all its manifestations has more power to destroy than even the longest Canadian winter. Almighty Death casts its inscrutable shadow over us, over the hospital room, over Palestine, over the reserve, over the boardroom; a shadow cast upon us as surely as sin is cast within us; darkness over the land from the sixth to the ninth hour; darkness upon the face of the deep. If life is to emerge from this, it will not come forth inevitably as the spring emerges inevitably from the winter. There will be a mortal struggle. Almighty Death. Almighty God.

And then, the great good news of Easter, coming as it did with the Risen Christ calling out a name, Mary" just as he calls out your name and mine, even in this hour. Jesus had outgrown the tomb; it was no longer large enough to hold him. Now only the world and the human soul would be big enough to hold him. No need to bother looking for him in an empty tomb. The Risen One had people to see and things to do. He appeared to people, many times, and as he did, they became wiser, kinder, stronger, more daring. And they grew in their ability to love and be willing to sacrifice for the sake of others.

That's the thing about this new life in Christ – it is inextricably connected to sacrificial love. Outside of the cross of Christ, where in your life have you seen sacrificial love? In my own journey, one of the greatest examples I have witnessed took place in a distant land 31 years ago.

This was in a very traditional part of Japan, the cultural heart-land near the ancient capital of Nara.

A temple in the neighbourhood was established 1300 years ago. Ancient traditions such as sumo originated here. Even now, you could spend days here, see thousands of people here, but not a single one of them would be a non-Japanese.

In this very traditional area, people do not venture off to live in other countries. They do not marry foreigners. Nor do they allow their daughter and only grand-child to move far away to another country, especially when that 3 ½ year old is more than just a grandchild. She also was like a daughter, having been raised in her grandparents' home to that point. What this 23 year-old was asking was far beyond the traditional practices.

Yet, the all-important blessing of the grandparents was given for our marriage. And please understand, without the blessing of Megumi's parents, our wedding would not have proceeded. It is a culture like that of the Bible, where the blessings of the elders carry great significance.

I have thought often about the personal sacrifice they were making as grandparents. It meant they would see their daughter and grand-daughter only occasionally. Yet, they chose to bless the marriage. They believe it was in the best interests of their daughter and grand-daughter. It offered them a new start, a new opportunity, that simply was not available in Japan but it came accompanied by a great personal sacrifice by the grandparents.

Ogeechan, Dr. Katsumi Matsuo, was one of most Christ-like persons I have ever known. He served his church and community in countless ways, and saw this service simply as part of his discipleship. He studied scriptures and theology, and though he worked full time as a dentist, he also taught biblical studies both at church and in the seminary.

He was Director of a nursing home for some 40 years, continuing even when he himself became older than most of the residents. He was well-known for his integrity and sense of fairness. For his community work, he received the Emperor's medal, similar to the Order of Canada. Yet, he was a very humble man, with great wit and humour. At 93, though almost all of his contemporaries had preceded him, 700 people attended his funeral.

For all his good works and community service, however, what I will remember most about my father-in-law are his words of blessing 31 years ago, and what they taught me: Love - if it is genuine - must be prepared to make personal sacrifice for the sake of the other.

Friends, whenever you and I have been privileged to witness some act of sacrificial love, it can help us grow in appreciating the height and depth and breadth of God's love shown to us on Calvary.

New life and sacrificial love –they are intricately connected. Once again, Peter Short writes – and he refers to the resurrection of Jesus as “the rising”:

Death ends a life, but not a relationship. The rising continues to happen. Here shy, there bold, always wild, the rising appears now and again because after all, God has taken the plunge. And the taking of it has riddled the earth with heaven. The taking of it has impregnated death with life.

The rising is not the stunning accomplishment of an individual but the rebirth of a relationship across a terrible divide. Jesus always appears to people, with people, for people....

The witness of the sacred texts do not speak of the risen Christ in isolation. So ...The rising is all about relationship. We look for its wild and shy presence not in the mirror of the mind but in the faces of others.

And when the faces of those others go beyond our seeing and into the nearer presence of their Maker, we can entrust them to God's keeping. For the essence and character of our God have been revealed in the new life and sacrificial love of Christ - Christ crucified and risen.

Thanks be to God! Amen.