

How do we find words and ways to share with others an experience that is beyond the limits of human life as we have known it?

The astronauts who first gave us the iconic view of earth from space, shared their understanding from this new perspective - that there are no lines, no borders on our fragile planet earth.

The translators of the New Testament into the Inuktitut language who worked on the gospel passage we heard this morning, could find no word in Inuktitut for 'joy', so they used the word that describes the dogs' behaviour when food is brought to them. And so, the story in Inuktitut is: "the disciples couldn't believe what was happening and wagged their tails in wonderment."

Jesus said "you are **witnesses** of these things". Not explainers. Not defenders. Simply witnesses. Storytellers.

What did those gathered in the room witness?

The story the disciples tell about Jesus points toward a larger reality. It's like the story of Peter trying to walk on water, and sinking when he sees the waves and grows afraid. We humans have learned to live in fear of death. But the story of Jesus' presence after his death points towards the larger reality that we are living sons and daughters of the living God.

The gospel writer John speaks of the 'fullness of life' that Jesus taught and embodied, as 'eternal life'. The good news of the gospel is that Jesus came so we might have fullness of life and live now in eternal life.

Our relationship with indigenous disciples of Jesus has taught us to speak of how we are connected with all living creatures, with all of creation, and with our ancestors: all my relations. This is very similar to the New Testament witness that we are connected with all living beings, seen and unseen, who are alive in God. We are surrounded by what scripture refers to as a great cloud of witnesses. When we are gathered at the table giving thanks and receiving communion, we are linked with all those who have gone before us, who are alive in God.

It may take us a lifetime, and longer, to learn this about ourselves. That's why we need witnesses. We need to hear the story. We need to tell the story. We need our community of faith, our Baptism and Eucharist, to learn who we truly are, and who we are destined to be. Creator sets us free to live beyond death's limits.

Today's gospel also witnesses to the depth of the reality of human suffering: the wounds of crucifixion on the body of Jesus and the wounds of grief and loss in the hearts of Jesus' friends. We know these wounds only too well.

The gospel witness to the resurrection is not one of doctrinal certainty and triumphalism, but rather one of vulnerability and love in the midst of grief and suffering.

What was it that allowed those first disciples to perceive through their grief, the larger reality of eternal life, to let it sink deep into their souls,

and empower them to go out as witnesses? I think it was Jesus' presence with them in their grief.

Into their broken, traumatized community, came one who bore all the marks of his own trauma – the trauma of betrayal, of mockery and scourging, of hands and feet nailed to a tree, of a violent death. He wasn't all 'cleaned up'. The evidence of the suffering was still there.

There is a story of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a Lutheran Pastor who was part of the resistance in Germany in WW2. He was arrested and put to death shortly before the end of the war. After his death, a prison guard found a piece of paper in his cell. On it was scribbled: "Only a suffering God can help."

The wounded, risen Jesus spoke a healing word to his disciples: "Peace be with you".

And he asked that most familiar and familial of questions, perhaps to break the ice – is there anything to eat? And they gave him a piece of broiled fish. We don't have fish on Sunday mornings when we gather, we have bread and wine; but there are other elements of this story that are continued when we gather: the greeting of peace, the reading of the law and the prophets and the psalms, and the opening of our understanding of the scriptures.

What about our own situation, here and now, and the story that we are witnessing?

Just over a week ago, the community of Humboldt, Saskatchewan, suffered the devastating tragedy that has taken, so far, the lives of 16 of its players, coaches, radio announcer, trainer and bus driver of their beloved hockey team. Parents, billet families, brothers, sisters, relatives, friends, lost loved ones.

Through the days that have followed, people across Canada, and around the world, have shared in the vigil being kept in that small prairie community. We have heard heart-warming stories of compassion: professional hockey teams wearing the Humboldt Broncos team logo; moments of silence before their games; the go fund me campaign started by a few young women in the community that has raised millions of dollars beyond all expectation; the visits of former hockey players of the Swift Current Broncos team who 30 years ago suffered their own tragic bus crash; the placing of hockey sticks on front porches and the wearing of sports jerseys, as far away as a young boy in Uganda, as a sign of solidarity. The outpouring of care, and prayer, has been like an unimaginably large prayer shawl wrapped around the suffering families.

In the midst of all the trauma, there has been witness to a larger reality. One powerful witness is that given by grieving mother Celeste Leray-Leicht, whose 19 year old son Jacob played left wing with the Broncos and died in the crash.

A Hockey News reporter met with Celeste and her husband Kurt, and wrote:

“You see the pain - in their faces and their words and their tears. And you wonder, how they can even function in the face of such devastating tragedy. But they do.

Last Sunday morning, less than two days after the crash, Celeste and her husband Kurt, were preparing to go to Saskatoon to view Jacob’s body, and visit the players who were in the hospital. Celeste was crying at her kitchen table.

And the reporter quotes what Celeste told him:

“I just said, ‘God, you’d better give me a purpose here, because I fear the dark moments that lie ahead.’ I said, ‘Jacob, help me out.’ And at that moment I just felt him and I knew.”

The article goes on: And that’s what prompted her to try to make something of this tragedy, to try to use it to help others.

Celeste said, “I want to be part of something bigger. There is so much hurt in this province in so many ways, particularly with the First Nations community. There is so much tragedy and affliction in this world and they don’t get the attention they deserve sometimes. I have no idea what this is going to look like, but I want to start a movement of some sort. People are hurting in this province with the whole Colten Boushie trial and it’s time that people reach out. From hurt can come good.

“.... It’s not going to be about Jacob, but Jacob is going to be instrumental in it. He might be my guide. I have to shelve that for a little while, but I’m going to get going on that at some point.”

At the funeral for Jacob, Celeste said:

"I do know we are going to have a lot of dark moments. I know we have a long hard road ahead of us and for that reason we need something to cling to."

And then she said to the hundreds of people gathered there:

"You're here to provide your respects to truly honour our son. I ask you to commit yourself to making connections and building relationships."

For me, Celeste is a witness into that larger reality beyond the limits of death.

That is the ground out of which Peace springs: out of a willingness to live with trauma, in a way that admits death hurts. In a way that admits we need each other to find our bearings. In a way that allows us to experience hurt, and yet trust that we are part of a larger reality.

Jesus came to his disciples then, and he comes to his disciples now, helping us in our grief and loss.

He is present with us still. He is the wounded one, who sets us free.

Thanks be to God

Broncos strong!