

# Getting Spiritually Into Shape

April 7, 2024

In March 2022, The United Church of Canada put out new vision and purpose statements. These outline what we are supposed to be as a church. There are three key phrases to these statements: Deep Spirituality, Bold Discipleship, and Daring Justice. That's what we are supposed to be aiming at. It sounds like a tall order.

When I hear "deep spirituality," I think of silent retreats, spiritual exercises and other things I've never done. When I hear "bold discipleship" I think of people like Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Oscar Romero or Sister Ita Ford, who were all killed because of their discipleship to Jesus. When I think of "daring justice," I wonder if I'm going to have to give away some of my stuff. I'm not sure I'm up to all this. But some of us might be thinking, "Sounds great! Let's go!"

Either way, whether we are daunted or eager at the thought of striving for Deep Spirituality, Bold Discipleship and Daring Justice, I have good news for you. There is a special bonus for all of us who came to church today, or who are tuning in online. We each get a free personal trainer who will help us get into shape to pursue these lofty goals. Now don't worry if you didn't put on spandex or yoga pants when you got dressed to come here today or to tune in. We're getting a spiritual personal trainer. They're not going to have us do pushups or yoga positions. Our trainer is going to guide us towards getting into shape spiritually. What's that? You're too old to train for anything? No you're not. You're too tired? This will give you energy. You're too busy? If God's got time, you've got time. In God's eyes we are all ideal candidates to get spiritually into shape. We just need a trainer. Who is our trainer? It's the person, or one of the people, who wrote John's gospel.

John's gospel has several layers. It seems to have been written in stages. It's not clear if one person wrote it over time, or if several people worked on it at different times. Regardless, the author, or one of the authors, is here to be our spiritual trainer. Where are they? Right there at the end of our reading from John's gospel.

"Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book" (John 20:30). That's the author, or one of the authors, of John's gospel talking. They continue: "But these things are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name." (John 20:31). So John's gospel was written to get us spiritually into shape, so that we can have life in Jesus' name. This person who wrote or helped write it is volunteering to be our spiritual trainer. What do they have for us today?

Our reading from John begins with the disciples in a house with the doors locked. The disciples are inside. They want to keep others out. That dynamic is about to be reversed. Instead of staying inside behind locked doors, the disciples will soon be heading out into the world.

Who are these disciples? They don't get named. Why not? There are too many of them. The boundary between past and present is blurry in these resurrection stories. Because these stories are about Jesus' resurrection, they don't just tell us about something that happened in the past. They also speak about how to follow Jesus in the

present.<sup>1</sup> The disciples in this passage were originally the group that followed Jesus around Galilee. Later they were the church that this gospel was written for. Now they are us. Our training begins.

In our reading, the risen Jesus appears to the disciples and says “Peace be with you.” Then he shows them his wounds. These establish that he is the same Jesus who was crucified. Now he has been resurrected to new life, beyond suffering and death and the limits of human finitude. Our training begins with a gift. To get into shape spiritually, all we have to do is receive it. As our trainer tells of what happened at the first Easter, he presents each of us with the gift of the crucified and risen Christ. The resurrection of Jesus reveals that God’s love is stronger than sin, evil and death.

For many of us, at the centre of our lives, underlying much of what we say and do, there is a question. When we love others, when we try to act for the common good, when we forgive others, when we step aside for others, when we try to help each other on the way, when we try to take care of ourselves, we wonder, is this worthwhile? Is there any meaning or purpose to what we are trying to be and do? Is there anything that death doesn’t sweep away? There’s a lot in life that says “No, there isn’t.” But the crucified and risen Jesus is the great proclamation, that answers this question at the centre of our lives with a “Yes.” This question underlying so much of what we do and hope for, this yearning, this seeking, this is the Holy Spirit, moving in our hearts, directing us toward God. When we encounter the crucified and risen Christ, God meets us, and this question at the centre of the best that we are and do finds an answer; an affirmation, an assurance, a promise of fulfillment (Karl Rahner). That’s why the first disciples rejoiced when the risen Jesus appeared to them.

That question deep within most of us is also a worry. To be human is to be anxious about what we care the most about. Jesus’ resurrection speaks to that worry. When the risen Jesus appears to the disciples, his first words are: “Peace be with you.” The risen Christ is a source of peace. As Julian of Norwich put it, one meaning of Jesus’ resurrection is that in the end, all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well. Julian sort of sums it up for us. The crucified and risen Christ can give us peace in the midst of the worst of our storms.

Getting spiritually into shape begins with receiving the message of Jesus’ resurrection. This message affirms his teaching and way of life as the truth. It validates our striving to love others, to follow him. It also affirms us, just as we are. Now we have something to carry us forward, to guide us, to pick us up when stumble and fall, to slow us down when we go too fast. We have something to share with others. But our spiritual training isn’t done yet.

The risen Jesus speaks to us again: “As God sent me, so I send you.” We’re right at the end of John’s gospel. But it turns out that its not the end after all. John’s gospel is about to end, but the story of Jesus isn’t finished. It remains incomplete unless we join in. Here Jesus calls us to complete it by joining in. We are to keep it going. We are to go out there and spread the message of God’s love. We’re to proclaim the good news of Jesus, crucified and risen. We’re to help spread the light of the world. And we get another gift to help us do this.

That peace Jesus gave us? It doesn’t let us sit still for long. It gives us assurance. We rest in it. But it also sets us in motion. This peace is the Holy Spirit. It’s a

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<sup>1</sup> William Placher, *Jesus the Savior* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 180.

hope and a joy, a sense of assurance, but also a hunger: a hunger for peace on earth, a hunger for justice, a hunger for the well being of others and ourselves.

Well, we've got the crucified and risen Christ, and all the assurance, hope and love that he brings. With that we've got the Holy Spirit, that gives us peace while urging us on. Okay, where do we go, what do we do? What's our trainer got for us next?

For now, this is all our trainer has for us. Its all we need. Where do we go? Well, where do you live? Where are you called to go? This is where it gets personal. Our trainer is a personal trainer, because they put us each in touch with Jesus and the Holy Spirit. They've got us ready, but where we go and what we do is worked out between God and us and each other. We might go home, put our feet up, and rest in the peace we're received. We might call someone who needs to hear our voice. We might go visit a neighbour next door. We might go across the city. We might go alone. We might go with others. We might write a big cheque. We might make a small donation. We might ask someone else for help.

This passage from John's gospel is a message of huge responsibility, great assurance, and great freedom. Once we've received the crucified and risen Christ and the Holy Spirit, we have a lot of room to maneuver. There are limits and guidelines. The ministry of Jesus and the hope of the reign of God map out a general orientation. But from here on, our training becomes more personal, because we each follow Jesus in our own way, in our own situation. Basically, wherever we see people being crucified, we can participate in Jesus' resurrection and continue his story, by helping those being crucified get down from their cross, by walking and working with them towards fullness of life (Ignacio Ellacuria). And if you are the one being crucified, call the rest of us to your side to help you get free of whatever is killing you, and stand on your own two feet.

Now there's a rhythm to all of this. Its starts in a closed room behind locked doors. Then it goes out into the world. But then we come back together again. That coming back together is what we do here Sunday mornings in worship. Then we go out again. We go out. Then we come back, and on it goes. Worship is one place where we encounter the crucified and risen Christ. There are others, like Thursday morning Bible study with Emily and the discussion group with Debra. But worship is really central. It keeps us connected to Jesus, whose story we continue. We don't do everything he did. None of us are called to be the Saviour of the world. We don't have to be. Jesus has done that. He's put our lives and the whole world on a new footing. Thanks to him, we and the rest of the world, everyone else and the whole creation: we have the assurance that come what may, we belong to God. Through the crucified and risen Christ, we have the hope that in the end, all will be well and all manner of things will be well.

We gather each week to celebrate that, to be renewed and corrected by that, to remember who we are, where we are going, and why and how. Then we go out – to where we work, to where we play, to our homes, to encounters with strangers. May we go with a bold, and a daring, and a tender love, that same love that God has first shown to us in Jesus. May we go in the power of the Holy Spirit that he has given us. And as we go, may we always remember: through Jesus' death and resurrection, we belong to God; both now and forever more. Amen.

Commissioning and Benediction

Let us go out from here filled with the Holy Spirit, trusting in God, committed to Christ. And may the grace of Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the peace of the Holy Spirit, go with each one of us, and bind us all together, now, and forever more. Amen.

Rev. Don Schweitzer

The Story Cannot Be Completed Unless We Join In  
(Morna Hooker, *Endings*, 74)