

April 5, 2026
Matthew 28:1-10

Easter Sunday
Pastor Jeff Laustsen

“Resurrection and Reconciliation”

“Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me.”

Among the many people buried in Avondale Cemetery is Richard Manuel, a Stratford native who gained fame as a member of The Band, one of the most influential musical groups of the 20th Century. Manuel was born in Stratford on April 3, 1943, and began singing with his brothers in his church choir at an early age. He began taking piano lessons at age nine and in 1957 joined the Revels, a local band that played many establishments in southern Ontario. In 1960, the Revels opened for Ronnie Hawkins in Port Dover, and Hawkins was so impressed with Manuel’s talent that he recruited the young man to join the Hawks, his backing band which also included Robbie Robertson, Levon Helm, Rick Danko, and Garth Hudson, who would later change their name to The Band. The Band’s unique sound combined elements of traditional music, folk, rhythm and blues, jazz, and country to create what one person referred to as “a sound like never before.” Their album *Music from Big Pink* is considered a classic, and they influenced such prominent musicians as George Harrison, Elton John, the Grateful Dead, and Eric Clapton. The Band was inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in 1994 as have been ranked as one of the 100 Greatest Artists of All Time.

For all their fame and influence on modern music, the legacy of The Band also contains a tragic element of division and acrimony among its members. The members of the group lived together in a house in Woodstock, New York for many years (the “big pink” of their album title) and were so close that they considered themselves to be brothers. But years of artistic and ego classes, substance abuse, and health issues began taking its toll on the group’s cohesion, and after their final concert in 1976 (immortalized in the film *The Last Waltz*), The Band never played together again and remained estranged until every member (beginning with the death of Manuel in 1986) had passed away. The title of a documentary by Robbie Robertson sums up this sad ending to their brilliant career: the Band *Once Were Brothers but* died without the opportunity to experience reconciliation and live together as brothers again.

Many families – either families of origin or families of choice – experience estrangement and division that affects all its members. In my father’s family, my

grandmother's two brothers feuded for decades; it went on so long that no one remembered what started their dispute. They sat on opposite sides of the head table at my grandparents' fiftieth wedding anniversary celebration and died without every experiencing reconciliation. I have been with families in times of celebration and in times of mourning where even these special events are not an occasion for healing and forgiveness; the feuding parities sit on opposite sides of the sanctuary, with the aisle serving as a sort of "demilitarized zone." Many people go to their graves without experiencing the healing and restoration of relationships that were once so important but have been hopelessly broken. Like The Band, the "once were brothers and sisters" but are no more.

We have been walking with our Lord Jesus Christ in the Holy Week as he entered Jerusalem on Palm Sunday to begin the series of events that would lead to his crucifixion and death on the Cross on Good Friday. During his gathering with his disciples for the Seder meal in which our Lord institutes the Sacrament of Holy Communion on Maundy Thursday, Jesus predicts that "*you will all become deserters because of me this night; for it is written, 'I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep of my flock will be scattered.'*" (Matthew 26:31; Zechariah 13:7). They all promise Jesus that this will not happen, with Peter boasting that "*though all become deserters because of you, I will never desert you*" (26:33), when Jesus is betrayed and arrested "*all the disciples deserted him and fled.*" (26:56). In the end, those who Jesus had called to be his followers and had considered his brothers and friends all abandon our Lord in his hour of greatest need; none are present when he is condemned to death, is crucified, dies, and is buried in the tomb. In Matthew's Gospel, it is only two women – Mary Magdalene and a woman referred to as "the other Mary" – who are present with Jesus in the hour of his death, and it is only these two women who come to his tomb early on the Sunday morning following his burial. The Evangelist reports that "*after the sabbath, as the first day of the week was dawning, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb*" (28:1). Their presence at the tomb of Jesus was for the purpose of providing the necessary two witnesses in accordance with the commandment of the Torah ("*Only on the evidence of two or three witnesses shall a charge be sustained*" – Deuteronomy 19:15). There is no indication that they have come to complete the burial rituals of their faith, since Jesus had been anointed in Bethany and had declared that "*by pouring this ointment on my body she has prepared me for burial*" (26:12). They have no intention of entering the tomb and therefore do not ask who will roll away the stone; but as they are standing outside the tomb, "*suddenly there was a great earthquake; for an angel of the Lord, descending from heaven, came and rolled back the stone and sat on it.*" (28:2). The angel's appearance is described as "*like lightning, and his clothing white as snow*" (28:3), reflecting the description of divine beings in the Old Testament:

- “As I watched, thrones were set in place, and an Ancient One took his throne; his clothing was white as snow, and the hair of his head like pure wool; his throne was fiery flames, and its wheels were burning fire.” – Daniel 7:9.

In contrast to the soldiers at the crucifixion who mocked and taunted Jesus, the guards at the tomb “*shook and became like dead men*” (28:4), so awesome was the terror that seized them. While Matthew does not report on how the women responded to this series of events, the angel addresses them with words that are commonly expressed when people experience an angelic appearance: “*Do not be afraid; I know you are looking for Jesus who was crucified.*” (28:5). Referring to Jesus as the “*crucified one*” indicates that even as the one who has risen from the dead, Jesus bears the marks of his self-giving on the Cross as his permanent character and his call to discipleship. The angel announces that the power of death has been overpowered; for “*he is not here; for he has been raised, as he said*” (28:6a). The angel reminds the women of Jesus’ passion predictions in which our Lord told his followers that “*the Son of Man is going to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him, and on the third day he will be raised*” (17:23). The women are invited to “*come, see the place where he lay*” (28:6b), and then are commanded by the angel to “*go quickly and tell his disciples, ‘He has been raised from the dead, and indeed he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him*” (28:7). The women are called to be the “*apostles to the apostles,*” the first to bear the message of the resurrection to others. The women become not only the first witnesses to the empty tomb but the first bearers of the good news that “*he has been raised from the dead.*” Jesus had told his disciples that he would meet them in Galilee (“*But after I am raised up, I will go ahead of you to Galilee*” – 26:32), which in Matthew has significance because of his earlier reference to “*Galilee of the Gentiles*” (4:13), an indication that the mission of the apostles will be to “*go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit*” (28:19). The message of the resurrection of Jesus will be the fulfillment of the angel’s proclamation to the shepherds on the day of his birth that this message is “*good news of great joy for all people*” (Luke 2:10).

In obedience to the angel’s command, the two women “*left the tomb quickly with fear and great joy, and ran to tell his disciples*” (28:8) when they encounter the Risen Jesus who speaks to them with the word “*Greetings!*” (28:9). The women are not only the first witnesses to the empty tomb, but they also receive the first appearance of the Risen Christ. They are already *en route* in their mission when they are joined by the Risen Lord, a paradigm in Matthew’s understanding of the reassuring presence of the risen Christ in the missionary activity of the Church (“*And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age*” – 28:20). When Jesus meets them, the

women “*came to him, took hold of his feet, and worshipped him*” (28:9b); they bow in worship, take hold of his feet, and pay him homage, “*their hands confirming the flesh and blood physicality of the man standing before them.*” (Curtis Mitch and Edward Sri). Jesus continues to address the women, repeating the words of the angel to not be afraid and to carry a message to the disciples. But there is a significant element in the charge Jesus gives to the women: “*Do not be afraid; go and tell my **brothers** to go to Galilee; there they will see me.*” (28:10). The alienation that followed the disciples’ betrayal, denial, and abandonment of Jesus has now been healed from the divine side; the disciples may know that they again/still belong to the family of believers (“*Whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother*” – 12:50). The women become not only missionaries of the resurrection message, but also agents of reconciliation.

- “The disciples are called ‘brothers’ and are still called forth to form the spiritual family of Jesus’ brothers on earth. Jesus, now delivered from agony and death, is ready to praise the Lord and to proclaim his salvation to his ‘brothers.’ He never ceases to do this in the assembly of the church.” – Mitch and Sri.

The Risen Christ will appear to his disciples, the ones who had abandoned him and may have felt ashamed and unworthy of being in his presence and carrying his message to others. But the message of our Risen Lord to these followers is not that they “once were brothers” whose relationship with Jesus had been shattered by their cowardice and refusal to stand with him in his hour of need; instead, it is a message of the resurrection that leads to reconciliation with these first followers who will be called to carry the message of reconciliation with others. It is a message that Peter, the one who denied Jesus three times and sees himself as a failure, will receive when the Risen Jesus appears to his disciples along the shores of the Sea of Galilee in the Fourth Gospel. After providing these disciples with a miraculous catch of fish and making a breakfast for them on the shore, Jesus suddenly turns to Peter and asks him, “*Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?*” (John 21:15). Peter, undoubtedly shocked that Jesus is even speaking to him after his epic failure in standing with his Lord as he had promised, responds “*yes, Lord; you know that I love you,*” to which Jesus responds, “*feed my lambs.*” This exchange continues three times, effectively reversing the effects of the three denials that had caused estrangement between Peter and Jesus; again, reconciliation is initiated by our Lord. This was also the experience of Paul, who had been on route to Damascus to arrest persons who were worshiping Jesus Christ as Lord in his former life as Saul of Tarsus when he is struck blind and comes into the presence of Christ. When the blinded Saul is led into Damascus, he will be met by Ananias, who responds in obedience to

Christ's word that Saul will be "*an instrument whom I have chosen to bring my name before Gentiles and kings and before the people of Israel*" (Acts 9:15). The man who had been the enemy of the early followers of Jesus becomes the Apostle Paul, who will bring the Gospel message to all of the known world and whose legacy continues in his letters in the New Testament, include his message in his letter to the Ephesians that reminds us of the reconciliation that is available to us today as it was present among Jesus' disciples on the day of his resurrection:

- "... remember that you were at that time without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenant of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he is our peace; in his flesh he had made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us ... So he came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near; for through him both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father." – Ephesians 2:12-18.

The message that the women are called to carry to the disciples is one of resurrection and reconciliation. They are to share the good news that is at the heart of our Christian faith, the message we celebrate on this Easter Sunday and every Sunday that "*Christ the Lord is risen! He is risen indeed! Alleluia!*" As Christ died and rose again so that anything that would separate us from God and alienate us from others would no longer have any power over us, we have the blessed assurance that we are children of God born anew to a living hope through the resurrection of our Lord and Saviour. As we have received this gift of reconciliation, we are also given the "*ministry of reconciliation, that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us.*" (2 Corinthians 5:18-19). As we are called to proclaim the good news of Christ's resurrection and how we have been reconciled to God through him, we are also called to seek to be reconciled to one another so that we might once again be the brothers and sisters in Christ who have been brought together as our Lord's Church which is "*a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.*" (1 Peter 2:9).

- "We may be abominations, but we are still God's pride and joy. All of us in the church need 'grace-healed eyes' to see the potential in others for the same grace that God so lavishly bestowed on us. 'To love a person,' said Dostoevsky, 'means to see him as God intended him to be.'" – Philip Yancey.

As we celebrate the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ on this Easter Sunday, we hear the message of reconciliation that was good news for the disciples who had failed to meet Jesus' expectations that is good news for us as we consider the ways in which we have failed to be the church our Lord has entrusted with his message of reconciliation. As we hear the message of grace and restoration that is ours through Christ's glorious resurrection, let us consider the ways in which we have not loved the Lord with our whole heart and have not loved our neighbour as ourselves. As our Risen Lord Jesus Christ still addressed his followers as "brothers" even though they did not deserve such a designation, may we also hear the message of forgiveness that is ours not because of what we have done but because of what God has done through Jesus Christ. As we celebrate the resurrection and the message of reconciliation with God and with one another, may we endeavor to be "ambassadors of reconciliation" in the church, in our community, in our world, and in all our relationships.

- The church shall be a colony of heaven on earth, Paul says, the divine gene pool from which the world shall be recreated in God's image. From the heart of Christ's body shall flow all the transforming love of God – bestowing hope, Paul says, bestowing riches, immeasurable greatness. As God is in Christ, so shall the church be in the world – the means of filling the whole cosmos with the glory of God." – Barbara Brown Taylor.

Richard Manuel is remembered not only at his grave in Avondale Cemetery which is visited by fans of The Band who make the pilgrimage to his hometown, but also by a star on Ontario Street and a bench along the Avon River. Long after all five members of the group have died, the legacy of their unique sound and influence on modern music lives on. But the legacy of their estrangement and alienation that prevented them from being reconciled and playing music also serves as a cautionary tale of the affects of what can happen when we do not heed the call of Easter to be reconciled to one another as we have been reconciled to God through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Because of the message of resurrection and reconciliation on this day, may our legacy not be that we "once were brothers and sisters" but that we are "**once again**" brothers and sisters because of the good news of the Easter Gospel that we are once again children of God, born anew to a living hope so that nothing will ever again separate us from God or from one another because of the good news of this day that **Christ the Lord is risen! He is risen indeed! Alleluia!**

Amen.

