

Christ is Alive! Where do we find Christ in times of conflict or crisis?

Address by Bishop Dr. Munib Younan Anglican-Lutheran Society, Durham, England August 2018

John 20:19, 24-29

When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, 'Peace be with you.'

But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, 'We have seen the Lord.' But he said to them, 'Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe.'

A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, 'Peace be with you.' Then he said to Thomas, 'Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe.' Thomas answered him, 'My Lord and my God!' Jesus said to him, 'Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.'

Dear sisters and brothers in Christ,

It is good to be with you today in Durham. As an Arab Palestinian Christian Evangelical Lutheran, and a Palestinian refugee from Jerusalem, I am pleased to have been asked to speak about finding Christ in times of conflict and crisis.

Christ is alive indeed, and he is in our midst! We do encounter him today, even in times of crisis, and even in the midst of a 51-year military occupation. My presentation today will address four places where I have encountered Christ alive and at work in my life, and in the life of this broken world.

Before I delve into this topic, let us first consider the story of the disciple Thomas, often called "Doubting Thomas". The disciples informed Thomas of the appearance of Jesus, saying: "We have seen the Lord!"

But Thomas was doubtful, insisting: "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe."

We might assume that faith came easily to the disciples of Jesus. But the story of Thomas shows that it did not. Thomas, like the other disciples, insists on more than hearing only. He is thoughtful and discerning, and in that way, Thomas represents all of us. I personally do not blame Thomas for his doubt. If I were in his place, living in fear, conflict, insecure and undecided, I would do the same.

What does it take to become a believer in the Risen Lord in our contemporary age? It's impossible to establish the factuality of the resurrection to everyone's satisfaction. Jesus' resurrection goes beyond the usual evidence or logic. Even Jesus himself asks, "When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?" (Luke 18:8) It might be that religious people are creating more Thomases in our world than believing Magdalenes. It may be that there is too much religion and too little faith. Or it may be, like Thomas, that we don't simply get the core of faith, saying:

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his side, I will not believe.”

But a week later, Jesus’ disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you!”

Jesus did not blame Thomas for his questions. Jesus well understood that faith cannot grow unless at some point there is serious doubt. Faith is not certainty. Faith is not physical perception, but is grounded inside. Faith is about what God is capable of doing, not what humans are capable of doing.

When Thomas saw the risen Lord and professed his faith, saying: “My Lord and my God!” it was a climax in the Gospel of John. This confession is climactic not only as part of the resurrection story but as an expression of John’s witness to Jesus in the Gospel. Thomas confesses Jesus as God when he sees the crucified one is alive. It is in the crucifixion that God makes himself known to us in suffering, for God is love—and love is laying down one’s life for one’s friends. (Luke 4:8-15)

God is seen perfectly in the death and suffering of the Son, but this death would be nothing without the life. When Thomas encounters the Risen Christ in that locked room, appearing even in the midst of the disciples’ fear, he realizes who the one standing before him really is.

Today the church must address the many Thomas’ who sit in the pews, and the many more in society who wonder and doubt. The church cannot create faith through a triumphalist understanding of the resurrection. We must preach the Gospel of love, and teach that trust and action are linked together. There would not have been resurrection without crucifixion and suffering, nor crucifixion and suffering without resurrection. Jesus’ sacrificial love and influence are that which create faith and trust in the Living Christ. We need to share the Good News that Christ is not only present on Easter morning, but also on Easter evening, and a week later, and whenever we find ourselves locked in rooms of fear and doubt. The Risen Christ comes to us, and brings us peace, saying “Peace be with you!”

If we want to answer the question, “Where do we find Christ in times of conflict and crisis?” I think this Gospel lesson is a good place to start. Where is Christ? He is always coming to us in surprising ways. We are seeing him where we least expect him. He is challenging barriers and boundaries. And he is nearer to us than we could ever imagine.

Dear friends: Christ is indeed alive! Now I will reflect on four places where Christ may be found in times of conflict and crisis.

Christ is Alive: In the lives of the persecuted and oppressed

In our modern world, the issue of persecution of Christians is coming more to the fore. On 24-26 July 2018, the U.S. Department of State hosted the Ministerial to Advance Religious Freedom in Washington, D.C. The purpose of this conference was to focus on concrete outcomes that reaffirmed international commitments to promote religious freedom and produce real positive change. In his remarks at the conference where 80 countries were represented, Vice President Pence said:

“We will never lose sight of the true importance of religious freedom. It is about beliefs, it’s about faith, and discovering truth, and the ability to live out that truth in one’s life. It’s also about community and communal responsibility. It is about the unalienable right to believe what we wish and not be disturbed for that belief. It is in a very real sense the first freedom of everyone in the world.” (*Remark by VP Pence 26 July 2018*)

The non-profit group, Open Doors USA, states its mission is “Serving persecuted Christians worldwide.” They believe that they alone monitor such persecution. Their website lists one hundred

countries that violate the freedom of religion. Their focus is clearly freedom for Christians, not for others, especially in Muslim countries such as Nigeria, Egypt, Syria, Iraq and other places. When you read their reports, however, you may wonder where they get their information. Is this really religious persecution, or is there a political and apocalyptic agenda behind it?

This reminds me of another comment from Vice President Pence. In the same address of 26, he spoke to the Turkish government about an American pastor being held there, saying:

“I have a message on behalf of the President of the United States of America: Release Pastor Andrew Brunson or be prepared to face the consequences.”

When we hear comments like these, we must ask ourselves: “Is this really about religious freedom? Is this about the well-being of persecuted peoples? Or are such comments politically or even apocalyptically motivated? When leaders use the persecution of Christians for political gain, we must be very cautious. Often the struggles of our brothers and sisters in Christ are used as proof that our religion is good, and all others are bad, especially Islam. Their very real suffering is used to score points in a political battle that has nothing to do with them but has everything to do with preserving power and privilege.

There is yet another reason to be concerned about the persecution of Christians being used as a political tool. When preachers, politicians, and pundits speak of persecuted Christians only as victims, we forget that it endangers minority Christians, and they may be considered in their countries as agents of the Western power. We also miss the fact that they are powerful witnesses to the presence of Christ in the world. Christ is alive among those who suffer for the faith more than anywhere else!

When twenty Coptic Christians were martyred on a beach in Libya in 2015, Christ was alive with them. Christ was with them as they prayed the Lord’s Prayer. Christ was with them as they refused to renounce their faith. And Christ was with the 21st martyr, a Muslim who chose to die with his Christian brothers, although he could have saved himself had he said he was a Muslim.

As one Coptic priest said to me after this terrible event, “The blood of these martyrs is the seed of the growth of the church in the Middle East.” For this reason, even as we work for religious freedom and for the safety of our fellow Christians, we must never look upon them with pity. Christians who steadfastly maintain faith in the face of persecution must be our teachers. We have much to learn from their message, from their strength, and from their perseverance. They meet Christ where we cannot.

But we cannot stop at honoring persecuted Christians as modern-day saints! Our Lord Jesus’ suffering on the cross was not only for the sake of believers. Christ suffered in solidarity with all who suffer. For this reason, we can say with confidence that Christ is alive among the Rohingya people, with the Muslims of India, and indeed with the Muslims in Central Africa, who are persecuted by our fellow Christians, and other cases. The Living Christ may be encountered in the lives of all who are persecuted or oppressed in our world. Therefore, we must never allow politicians to use either Christ’s name or the suffering of his followers for political and apocalyptic purposes.

I had the occasion to discuss the issue of mission with top Muslim leaders in the Arab world, and we agreed together that freedom of conscience and belief are the rights of every human being. However, they must be convinced, not coerced to believe, or attracted by material gains. We Christians and Muslims have learned to live together in the Arab world for 1400 years, without any major problems or any kind of syncretism.

However, the issue of mission remains a difficult topic in the Muslim and Arab world. If we consider Christianity as a missionary religion, we forget that Islam is also a dawah missionary religion. Freedom of religion cannot mean that our civil societies become a battlefield among Christian missionaries and

dawah missionaries. This will only create conflict, religious war, bloodshed and dissension in our societies.

We will never abandon our missionary call in the Arab and Muslim world. We will continue to preach the living Christ, and every person is welcome to hear the Good News in our churches and its institutions. If someone asks for a Bible or for a prayer, or if they desire to hear the Good News, of course we will share it boldly. At the same time, we will respect the traditions of our neighbors. We never want mission work to be a tool of conflict in society. Maintaining peace in a holistic society is a key aspect of guaranteeing religious freedom.

Does this mean we do not raise our voices when there is a violation of religious freedom? No—Christ asks us to be bold and courageous in our faith, and in speaking truth to power! We must speak out against religious persecution of any kind, whether it is the Pakistani penal law, or the Malaysian parliament forbidding Christians to name the Triune God “Allah”, or some Western countries denying entry to immigrants based on their beliefs, or other examples.

It is important to say that as Middle Eastern Christians, we do not consider ourselves to be minorities in the Arab and Muslim world. We may be few in numbers, but we are an integral part of the fabric of our society. Our presence is in itself a living witness to the Living Christ. The Risen Christ is alive among us, wherever the Gospel of love is preached, and wherever the sacraments are administered. For this reason, Jesus tells us: “Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom.” *Luke 12:32*

When I first met Pope Francis a few years ago, along with a Lutheran World Federation delegation to the Vatican, the General Secretary and I took a small gift to His Holiness. It was a rusted teapot from Dadaab Refugee Camp in Kenya, which the LWF supports. This is the largest refugee camp in the world, serving more than half a million Somalis and LWF does it on behalf of the UN.

When we handed him this old rusted teapot, Pope Francis jumped off his throne to grab it and said, “This is so precious to me! I will put it in my office where I can always see it and remember the refugees.”

Praising the LWF work in Dadaab camp, he continued, “You see, this is what we need today. Now is the time for ecumenical martyrria.”

I asked him for clarification: “Do you mean the white martyrria—the martyrria of witnessing and sharing our faith? Or do you mean the red martyrria—the martyrria of giving our lives for the sake of the Gospel?”

At this point, Pope Francis replied, “We of course prefer the white. But if necessary, we are ready for the red.” To be a Christian is to be ready to be faithful to the theology of martyrria in its full sense.

Given the spiritual and political crises in our world today, the church really must be committed to just such a prophetic and sacrificial witness, which is part of ecumenical martyrria. The world has no use for a divided church. Our neighbors are not interested only in our theological dialogues and disagreements. The people in our pews are no longer satisfied to be part of churches that are social clubs with no influence on the problems of the world around them. They want to meet the Risen Lord! They want to see his hands and his side, encountering both his death and his life through the global and ecumenical church today. Is the church ready for this ecumenical martyrria?

2. Christ is alive: In the prophetic church

Lutheran pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer once wrote:

“It is part of the Church’s office of guardianship that she shall call sin by its name and that she shall warn men against sin; for “righteousness exalteth a nation,” both in time and in eternity, “but sin is perdition for the people,” both temporal and eternal perdition (Prov. 14.34). If the Church did not do this, she would be incurring part of the guilt for the blood of the wicked (Ezek. 3.17ff.). This warning against sin is delivered to the congregation openly and publicly, and whoever will not hear it passes judgment on himself.”

Today, we ask the church in our world to live into this office of guardianship. We ask her to be prophetic and to speak the truth to power, to work on peace based on justice and to work for reconciliation based on forgiveness. In the face of both religiously sanctioned extremism and popular secularism, we must reclaim space in the public sphere for the voice of politically moderate religious faith. This is the reason that the Lutheran World Federation has prepared a document on the “Church in the Public Space.”

There are many instances even in the Bible when religion has done nothing but legitimize the political power of the day. In return for support of their rulers, court theologian from biblical times until today have been rewarded with certain privileges and benefits.

On the other hand, from biblical times until now there have always been true prophets. Religious conviction has been the source of motivation to protest against social structures and political powers and social injustice. The Old Testament teaches us that such prophetic religion makes people unafraid to challenge the order of the day. Such religion is never static or pleasing. It is always dynamic, driven by a total commitment to live in a relationship of love with God and with all the people. The benefits sought by the prophetic are for all people, not just one portion of humanity, not just one nation, not for America first, or Sweden first, or Finland first, or London first, but for all countries.

When we speak truth to power we must address the structure of temporal government in our own countries. Indeed, there is much to address in every context. Even in the so-called “developed countries” of the world, there are still many inequalities and structural injustices to be addressed. The debates in Europe over immigrants and refugees who happen to be Muslim, or the debate in the US on DACA and the Dreamers provide a clear opportunity to ensure that both public rhetoric and public policy are seeking the flourishing of all human communities rather than reinforcing forms of male chauvinism and populism.

The prophetic response to foreign policy takes us further than ourselves and our interests. Our church must be asking if perceptions of national security or national interest truly justify the harm our actions in other countries may cause. How specifically could Christians more forcibly address the excesses of other global powers? How much can we address colonialism in our world? How much do we dare to work for peace based on justice in the midst of terrorism and threats of economic and military war?

It seems to me that all too often, some churches today choose the path of the court theologian rather than of the true prophets. We have properties and programs and privilege to protect, and so we often choose the path of least resistance. All too often we abdicate our prophetic role, choosing instead to say what the powerful want to hear.

As a Palestinian Christian who has lived in political conflict and under occupation for my whole adult life, I can say that I have personally suffered when some Christians have chosen such a path. I was just seventeen years old during the Six Day War of 1967. During those terrible days, my family hid in the basement of St. John’s Convent in the Old City along with twenty other families. When the war ended,

and we were facing the new reality of occupation, an American Alliance pastor came to visit us from West Jerusalem and brought some food for us.

I will never forget what he said to us. Speaking of the war and of the occupation, he told my parents: “Don’t be sad. You must understand that this was God’s will. This is a fulfillment of prophecy!” He was quoting Daniel chapter 7, in which the “small horn” has beaten the three “large horns.” In his interpretation, the small horn was Israel and the large horns were Syria, Jordan, and Egypt.

Now I was a young believer and would not think of contradicting the pastor. But inside myself there was a problem. I was in a spiritual crisis. Soon I went to Finland to study theology, and there I struggled to find the truth. I did not want to believe in a God who was one-sided, a real estate broker, a military general, or who stands with the powerful over and against the oppressed and occupied. In this, I represent many Palestinian Christians who wanted nothing to do with the Bible or God since 1948. The false interpretations we had been taught by the court theologians simply had no relevance for those living under occupation and helped me lose my faith and not believe in God.

For this reason, a number of years ago a group of Palestinian Christians crafted the Kairos Palestine document, to tell Palestinian Christians that the fulfillment of prophecy is Christ and him crucified. Fulfillment of prophecy does not equal oppression or occupation, dispensationalist scenarios, or any other extremist interpretation of the Bible.

The pastor who visited my parents that day thought he was being biblical, but in fact this is an example of the church choosing the side of the empire rather than of Christ. This is the church choosing to side with the powerful rather than with the oppressed. This is not the Spirit of the Living God. This is not the life of the Risen Christ. This is sick idolatry – using the Bible to oppress the poor.

In a recent article titled “Searching for God in the City of Angels”, Professor Cecilia Gonzalez-Andrieu writes of the prophetic role of the church:

“I have also heard that same voice in the early church community as they faced persecution. It is there again as Dietrich Bonhoeffer denounces the rise of Nazism in Germany and as Martin Luther King Jr. fights against racism in Birmingham, Ala.—both theologians writing from jail cells. The brokenness of the moment is heartbreakingly poignant in the sermons of Archbishop Óscar Romero and the voices of his murdered Jesuit friends in El Salvador.

I recognize that voice in me today. Maybe you do, too.

St. Teresa of Ávila repeatedly bemoans the difficulty of writing about a profound experience. She is clear that grace is needed to give us understanding and words to express what we have seen. I share her frustration and hope that grace may be present to us all, as we try to enter into each other’s worlds.” (*Searching for God in the City of Angels*, “*America Magazine*” 27 July 2018)

It is true that today we are living in uncertain times. Colonialism is reentering the world, not Jesus. Power is leading our world, not truth. Extremism and populism are occupying the world governments, not moderation. Discrimination and racism are replacing human rights. People are acting according to the logic of power, not the power of logic. The drums of war are resounding, louder than the trumpets of justice and peace. The warmongers are more promoted than peacemakers. And where are the Christians in all this?

Professor Gonzalez-Andrieu writes again:

“This uncompromising requirement of God’s vision for the building of God’s reign has divided Christians

throughout history. There are those who retire from the turmoil and speak of the kingdom of God as a future place, somewhere in “heaven,” where the wrongs will finally be righted. Getting there is just a matter of piety, patience and, well, dying. And then there are those who try to assuage their consciences by doing the minimum for others as “charity” while building spiritual spas: luxuriant parish complexes that reinforce their separateness from the vulnerable. The result is places of comfort and security that drown out the pain of the world with elevator music.

But there are also those who, like Mary, see God acting in the world for the lowly and vulnerable and boldly take up their cause, which is God’s cause. One could say that these are three different approaches to living as a Christian in a troubled world, all equally valid. One could, but one should not unless one is ready to walk away from the Gospel.”

Thanks be to God, although I have seen and have suffered when the church chooses power over the prophetic, I have also seen how the church can be a place where people encounter Christ in times of conflict and crisis, and where people see the image of God in the Other. This happens when the church speaks truth to power. This happens when, like the Risen Christ who walked through the locked door and appeared to Thomas, the church challenges every barrier to peace, justice, and wholeness. This happens when, like the Risen Christ, the church lets nothing stand in the way of life and life abundant for all people—no tomb, no wall, no occupation, no system of apartheid, no power or principality. When the church speaks and acts prophetically and boldly, choosing to be the guardian and conscience of the state rather than its puppet, then the world encounters Christ alive through us.

Being a prophetic church means we will have always to pay a price. Are we ready to pay this price for the sake of the Reign of God in our midst and in the world?

3. Christ is alive: In the ecumenical movement

In 2010, Anglican theologian Andrew McGowan relayed the sense that we are now in the midst of an “ecumenical winter,” where the movement toward visible Christian unity had reached a low point. However, recent events have pointed the way toward an ecumenical spring.

On 31 October 2016, at the beginning of the 500th anniversary year of the Reformation, an historic service of reconciliation was held in Lund, Sweden. His Holiness Pope Francis, along with myself and Dr. Martin Junge, General Secretary of the Lutheran World Federation, co-hosted a joint prayer. We began with thanksgiving for the loyalty and faithfulness to the Gospel in both churches. We confessed our past sins against one another and committed to continuing both ecumenical dialogue and diaconal collaboration. Instead of engaging in dialogue as a political activity to improve diplomatic relations or an academic exercise to please nobody but scholars sitting in a room, this event showed how dialogue can mutually strengthen the capacity of churches to respond to the world’s needs. We engage in dialogue so the world may believe and be healed, for what unites us is much greater than what divides us.

During the service in Lund, Pope Francis and I signed a joint declaration saying that “through dialogue and shared witness we are no longer strangers. Rather, we have learned that what unites us is greater than what divides us.” The declaration lamented that our division had “wounded the visible unity of the church” and rejected “all hatred and violence, past and present, especially that expressed in the name of religion.” I continue looking for the Holy Spirit to guide us through issues on which we still disagree: ecclesiology, ministry, and Eucharist. Honest disagreement is the foundation of dialogue; I am confident that we will be able to find convergence on many issues.

No matter how difficult and long it is, I encourage the global church to continue ecumenical dialogue, for

it is Christ's call that the church be one, as he and the Father are one. I also encourage us to continue this work because I believe that the ecumenical movement is one place where the world encounters the Living Christ.

Lund has created a positive energy, like the work of the Holy Spirit it has not remained in one place alone. I am confident that this energy will spread throughout our global churches. But the energy of Lund is not limited to Christian ecumenical relations. Al-Mayadeen television station in Lebanon interviewed me about our historic reconciliation; I was told that the interview was watched by 30 million people throughout the Arab and Muslim world.

Dr. Muhammad Al-Sammak, Secretary General of the Christian-Muslim Committee for Dialogue in Lebanon and Co-President of Religions for Peace, has offered several comments on Catholic-Lutheran reconciliation. Sammak, who has said that "the task of the Muslims today is to defend and purify our faith from the criminal exploitation of the jihadists," has also suggested that Sunni and Shi'a Muslims must learn from the energy of Lund to explore reconciliation between their communities as well as Lutherans and Catholics have done. The energy of Lund will create more energy and trust, and not just among Lutherans and Catholics.

For example, we have seen this same energy in Leipzig, when the World Communion of Reformed Churches, the Lutheran World Federation, and the Roman Catholic Church jointly subscribed to the Joint Declaration on Justification by Faith. And again, this energy was palpable on 31 October 2017 when Anglicans, Lutherans, and Catholics met at Westminster Abbey to mark the 500th anniversary of the Reformation and affirmed their mutual support for the Joint Declaration.

Surely, this is the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit! Christ is present in the ecumenical movement.

I want to share with you something that caught my attention in Lund even before we had the opportunity meet with Pope Francis. One day earlier, during regular Reformation Day worship at Lund Cathedral, following the liturgy of Holy Communion, something very special happened. Just before the closing hymn, we suddenly saw the Catholic Dean of St. Thomas Aquinas Parish in Lund entering the Lutheran cathedral with the Vatican flag, an icon of the Virgin Mary, and the entire Catholic congregation. Together, they processed to the front of this Lutheran cathedral and joined the Lutheran congregation in shared song and prayers.

As we gathered together around the altar, I have never seen faces so elevated and happy. It was as if we were dreaming. Many in the church were amazed; it reminded me of the Day of Pentecost when the disciples and the people were amazed with what was happening in front of their eyes. Many people were in tears, including myself.

This, my friends, is just one example of how Christ is alive in the ecumenical movement. But there are so many other stories! I think of the powerful moment when Lutheran and Mennonite church leaders washed each other's feet in Stuttgart in 2010, in a service of confession and forgiveness for the historic persecution of Anabaptists. I think also of the Porvoo Communion, which unites Anglicans and Lutherans in fifteen countries in pulpit and altar fellowship, and of the Amman Declaration of 2016 which was a mutual recognition agreement between the ELCJHL and the five Reformed Churches in the Middle East, the Waterloo Agreement that led to joint Assemblies in Canada, and many others. We are now in an ecumenical spring.

In a time when extremists threaten to hijack religion, and when populism, xenophobia, and even fascism are on the rise across the world, the church can offer a powerful antidote. When churches speak and act ecumenically as one Body, rather than focusing on historic and theological differences, then the

world encounters the Living Christ through us and say, 'Look how they love each other!' Can they say that today?

4. Christ is alive: In our love for the Other

Finally, I want to offer a word of encouragement. As a Christian who has lived under occupation for my entire adult life, I want to tell you that even when one's situation seems terrible, it doesn't mean Christ is not with us. On the contrary, it is often in these times when one's identity as a Christian is confirmed and strengthened. In times of conflict and crisis, I have seen Christ clearly, and have come to know that the God of justice and of peace is always at work wherever we find injustice and conflict. This work of God is always a surprising power.

In Arabic, we have a word "sumud" which can be translated in English as "steadfast resilience." Palestinian Christians are often said to possess "sumud", which means they are deeply rooted, not only in land, but also in the faith. Having "sumud" means that in times of crisis or conflict I look to God, and I find God in the conflict. I pray, asking God for forgiveness and guidance. I pray for the strength to work for justice and to live into my identity as a baptized Child of God. I always encounter Christ in every crisis I live through, and he is always faithful.

The answer I often receive through prayer, however, is that my duty is to love. In times of conflict and crisis, when I might like God to simply fix the situation, I find that Christ is at work in an unexpected way. Christ comes near to us through the otherness of the other. When I see the image of Christ in the occupier, I see Him in me. I believe we see Christ at work during conflict in the way we are always being turned away from our own concerns and turned toward the concerns of the other. We are always to see the enemy as a human being, with just as much right to dignity and equal rights as I have, who am occupied.

These are difficult times in my country. At the moment there is no way to peace. Israel has just passed a new Nation-State Law, which gives the right of self-determination in historical Palestine to the Jewish people only, leaving out both Christianity and Islam—as if we don't exist in the land! In the wake of this law's passage, some colleagues have said to me that it's time for Christians to emigrate. They wonder if it's time to pack up and leave the country, making our home elsewhere. But I say emphatically, "NO!"

Unjust laws may be passed and governments may change but this will never change our history and our belonging to our beloved land. Here I find that faith in the Risen Christ is very crucial. Christ, both crucified and risen, molds my faith and identity. Palestine is not just my home, it is the home of my Jesus. He lived there and he remains there still—as does the witness of the church. The Risen Lord has brought us this far by faith. He has never failed us yet, and will never abandon us even in this difficult situation!

When people ask, "How do you maintain your faith in Jesus Christ in a region as tumultuous as this one?" I answer in two ways:

First, I look to Polycarp, who said in the 1st Century: "86 years have I served him, [and I say 68 years I have served him] and he has never done me wrong. How can I now speak against my King and savior?"

In times of upheaval and conflict, the presence of the Risen Lord is felt more than in times of peace and tranquility! Not only does the Lord never abandon us, he teaches us by his presence that it is our duty to proclaim his unending love even in the midst of conflict and crisis – to both occupied and occupier!

Secondly, I maintain my faith even in occupation because it was in Jerusalem that hope was raised from the dead. Not in Washington, not in Berlin, not in London or in Paris. Yes, it may seem that my country

is heading in the direction of war, hatred, discrimination, possible apartheid, animosity, and extremism, but these are the very words and ideas that sent Jesus to the cross. And even so, it was in Jerusalem that God overcame them all by raising Jesus from the dead...and he will continue to do so

For this reason, the Risen Lord has been and continues to be our hope. The Risen Lord desires life for all people, and life abundant, life with dignity. God would never let injustice stand forever, just as God would never let Jesus remain in the tomb. This is my faith and this is my simple hope. I will continue to hold on to this hope, whatever the price and for as long as I have breath.

As it is written: "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."

Dear sisters and brothers, the Risen Christ has commissioned us to be disciples of hope in our hopeless world. The world is sick with hatred, racism, sexism, populism, xenophobia, anti-Semitism, Islamophobia, Christianophobia, occupation, imperialism, colonialism, white supremacy, and countless other sins. The Risen Lord has called us together in the face of all this to be witnesses for hope. We are called to work together with our different talents to transform and heal our world. With Christ, we the church can transform hatred to love, animosity to friendliness, oppression to justice, racism to seeing the image of God in the other, even the enemy, extremism to robust moderation and depression to hope. This is what it means to be the prophetic church. If Christ is living in us we will be willing to pay the price.

If we trust that the Living Lord appears to in this time, and in this place, as he did for Thomas and the other disciples, then we can confidently say, "Here we are Lord! Send us!" Send us as apostles of love in our broken world.

I will close with this prayer of St. Patrick, an ancient and eloquent answer to where we find Christ in times of conflict and crisis:

Christ with me, Christ before me, Christ behind me, Christ within me, Christ beneath me, Christ above me, Christ on my right, Christ on my left, Christ when I lie down, Christ when I sit down, Christ when I arise, Christ in the heart of every man who thinks of me, Christ in the mouth of everyone who speaks of me, Christ in every eye that sees me, Christ in every ear that hears me. I raise today through a mighty strength, the invocation of the Trinity, through belief in the Threeness, through confession of the Oneness of the Creator of creation. Amen.