I wonder how many of you are familiar with the phrase “Today is the first day of the rest of your life.” Sometimes it is used for very good and deep meaning, and sometimes it's just a throwaway phrase by self-help experts. I want us to sit with this for just a little bit, in case you're not familiar with the phrase.

I'm just going to say that again and let it run through your brain in a new way as you listen:

“Today is the first day of the rest of your life.”

It's one of those phrases that is obviously true and simply and literally factual. But if we bother to think it through, it has some pretty deep meaning. Sometimes it's really hard for us to notice when new beginnings are going on in our lives. Sometimes it's not until much, much later when we look back and realize, where and when pivotal moments occurred for us.

We look back and think “I didn't really know it at the time”, or “I was really changing through that process or through that through that experience.” And it wasn't until later that we could really see the difference. But our two scriptures today are talking about beginnings. To be more specific, they're both beginning *again* in their own way. They're rethinking, reshaping, renewing, revitalizing, ut they are beginning.

Neither are from scratch, ut the people in both of these stories, were experiencing that “today is the first day of the rest of their lives.” And I think that a lot of us in our churches, and maybe in our own lives as well, are in a bit of that phase and that mode as well. And sometimes this is really, really good and sometimes it's heartbreaking.

And I really enjoy that in our reading from Ezra, the writer was very careful for us to be aware that along with the joyful shouts, there were many people who were grieving the change, grieving what was going on, frustrated, annoyed, sad, and brokenhearted at all that was being left behind even in the midst of new, of renewal, of rebirth.

I think maybe some of our churches are experiencing that whole collection of feelings as well. Some of us are churches that have really, really struggled over the last few years. I mean, COVID pandemic lock-downs had deep impacts on large numbers of Communities of Faith. Some don't exist anymore, or some are existing in totally brand new ways.

All that can be a joyful thing, but it can be a very grief-filled thing as well. And so I wonder how many of us in our congregations and our communities of faith find parallels with the story in Ezra? We are having to start almost from scratch. Sure, we know how we *used* to do church, but the people are gone, and there are pressures from all around that are making it harder for us to do what we do. We might be going through the steps of the rituals and the traditions, but somehow they feel different and they look different and they're just not the same. And some of us are celebrating and singing and praising and shouting for joy, and others are grieving and processing and brokenhearted.

The story from Ezra really does a good job of holding those two things in careful but healthy contrast. We can be both, both as a community of faith, and individually. It's totally fine for me to celebrate that we have a new altar and we have laid a new foundation for this building; this temple that is going to be the place of worship from now on, while also being heartbroken and missing everything that once was.

If we think a little bit about the historical context of those ancient Hebrews who were rebuilding the temple, this was mostly an upsetting thing. For 50 years they had been out of their lands. Who knows what all had happened in the place where they used to live. Other people had come and gone. A few of their family members had stayed behind and lived and died in that space.

50 years is a long time for a culture to be completely separated from its homeland. And over that time, the people have changed. The young people have grown up in a different culture, in a different way of doing things. The old people remember what it used to be like. But of course it can't be like that anymore because they're aging and they don't have the energy or the effort to be able to just do what they used to do. And so they have to count on the new generation to do the rebuilding. But the new generation doesn't know how it used to be.

I can't decide if I'm describing the story in Ezra or describing many of our churches. Even today, there is a lot of hope and a lot of growth and a lot of new. And it's some of the beautiful ways that we are learning how to do church and be church and live together in this moment. And yet there is a lot of grief to be processed in the midst.

Our story from Acts has some parallels with our modern churches as well. Perhaps you're part of a congregation that did okay through the pandemic. Certainly there were some people who just stopped coming and you've never seen them again. Some people have moved to other places, but maybe you're in a new growth mode.

But now you have to figure out how to do this again. And those early followers of Christ immediately following Pentecost that we read about in Acts 2 were in exactly that. They know that every thing is different, but many things still feel the same.

We know from history that this group of people, especially for that first couple of hundred years of early Christianity, (even before they would have used the word Christian to describe themselves)

were known in the community as being people who cared for the orphans, widows, and the alien among them. They were folks who were still listening to the messages from Genesis and Deuteronomy. They were listening to the old laws about how they should live their lives. But it was mapped together in a different way because they had all of these beautiful teachings of Jesus and the stories and the experiences of his life and death and resurrection that was informing them too.

They were somehow taking these two different ideas, the before and the new, and trying to figure out how to do and be church in this new time in space, trying to figure out how to live together, how to be a community. I wonder what your experiences of church have been like over the last 3 or 4 years, and how much they have changed from what you might have experienced before.

Now, perhaps you are new to church and so this is all just the joyful, hey, this is a great thing and I haven't experienced it before and that is a beautiful and a marvelous thing. Or perhaps you're a person who has been part of church for many decades, and you also struggle to piece together what used to be and what is now.

And in the midst of this, whether we read from Ezra or read from acts, we are all called into this new work of life together, not just in our congregations and communities of faith, but also as the whole church. If we look for a moment at the United Church of Canada, it is also in a very transitional time.

We're only about 5 years past drastic change of our church structure. And that has led to many differences as well.

We had that change. We had COVID. We are rebuilding at all layers of our church. We are relearning how to do life together. And I think it's a beautiful and special time. And it absolutely is the “first day of the rest of our lives.”

The work that we are doing right now in each of our congregations, the work that we are doing right now at regional levels and at national levels, these are defining what is going to look like to be church for the next little while. We're taking the old that we knew. We are weaving it carefully together with the new that is still growing and becoming, and is very unknown and often quite scary.

And we are mapping out a plan for how it is that we as communities of faith, as the broader church, as Christians, as followers of Jesus, are going to live into our call today. I am both thrilled and worried, and I think that's okay. I am mostly a fairly optimistic person, though I lean more towards hope than just raw, naive optimism.

But there are certainly times when I look around at the shape of our churches and the number of congregations that are that are going through transitions, whether they are closing and wrapping up worship services, whether they are amalgamating with others. These are all difficult and complicated and grief filled things, and I grieve alongside, and I hope that you do too.

When you see the church down the road or around the corner going through struggles. I hope that you take the time to grieve with them, to recognize that the transitions they are going through are very difficult. And I hope that if that is you right now, that you take the time to grieve and recognize that today is the first day of the rest of your life, and it's going to look different from here on.

And while different can be difficult, different can be filled with hope. That's why these two scriptures, when held next to each other and we find these parallels, we see that there is a thread of hope in both of them, and that hope stems mostly from the act of community, of living together, of working together, of joining resources. In the reading from Ezra, we get many more details about how exactly they went about it, who they hired to do what work, and where the wood was coming from.

I love that we get this little bit of a blueprint. It becomes very visceral and real, and we get the human story of what they were going through. It took many, many different people for them to do the work of rebuilding their temple. And the temple was so much more than just a building. It was definitely a political centre. It was an education centre. And maybe most importantly, it was a spiritual centre. It was something that drew them together in community for all those different reasons. And in that working together, they created something new. The Second Temple time lasted for just more than 500 years. It was quite a long period of time that this new thing they created, it built and it lasted.

They, in fact, if it weren't for the work of what happened in the Book of Ezra, we wouldn't even have the stories, the gospels of Jesus and what he was doing around the temple that they were building. Way back then, if we look at it that way, we can find so much hope, because it's the same thing that happened within that group of people following Jesus death and resurrection. They were completely confused. They didn't know. They thought that this guy was going to lead them into some revolution that threw off the chains of the Roman overlords, and yet he died. And then many of them saw him alive again afterwards. And the conversation about his resurrection was hot on the lips of every one of the followers. But that didn't help explain how they were going to do the work.

And so they kind of went back to basics, I think, in ways that many of we have done the same. We go back to basics. We take a look at the resources we have. We see what we can share. We see how we can take the resources, the experiences, the stuff that is available to us and use it in new and creative ways.

I think about all of the church buildings, some of which are having rebirth stories as they're being used in very creative and interesting new ways. Some are getting renting out, making more sources of income. Some of it is opening doors so that people who have needs can find those needs met. That's one sharing of resource that, to me, matches so closely with the early story in Acts of those followers of Jesus who were selling their possessions and sharing among everybody who needed it.

Friends, this is a special time that we are in right now. It is difficult. It is heartbreaking. It is bittersweet and it is full of joy and hope. All of those things altogether. And the hopeful part is, we're not the first humans ever to have gone through this. I only shared two stories with you, but the Bible is full of these rebirth and resurrection stories.

Not just The Resurrection story, but all throughout the Bible. We have these stories of communities that when they draw together, when they care for each other, when they share in healthy and beautiful ways, true rebirth and regrowth happens. My prayer for each and every one of us throughout the United Church of Canada, throughout the Christian Church, all around the world, that we would experience this renewed rebirth and regrowth.

Yes, it will have grief. It will have pain. It will have wailing. And it will also have joy and hope and rejoicing. May it ever be so. Amen.