

SERMON FOR A DIFFERENT EASTER

Romans 8:35, 37-39; John 20:1-18

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Many of us are lamenting this morning that we are not having our “normal” Easter.

So many of the things we think of when we think of Easter are missing today, but we can picture them only-too-well: a sanctuary full of dressed-up people singing “Jesus Christ Is Risen Today,” amid a profusion of spring flowers and the sweet smell of Easter lilies, a big choir with a triumphal anthem, backed perhaps by a brass trio; maybe even a stirring and uplifting sermon. Followed, of course, by an Easter egg hunt for the children while the adults enjoy brunch and conversation. There are bright colors and happy noises; in our imaginations, if not in our Michigan reality, the air is warm and the sunshine is bright.

But were you listening closely to the scripture reading? The first Easter, as John describes it, was *nothing* like that. Nothing.

It began in darkness, as dark as the days we are living through. At a tomb as empty as the seats in our sanctuary and in thousands of other churches. There were no crowds, well-dressed or otherwise. No eloquent proclamation of the news. No stirring soundtrack. No happy laughter. No brunch. And definitely no Easter bunny.

Most of the people you might have expected to be there were in seclusion. Those who were present came one or two or three at a time. Looking at them through John’s eyes, we see their fear, their grief, the lingering trauma of the past week. When they find the tomb empty, they are bewildered, disoriented. They have questions. When they remember things Jesus said to them, we see a tiny bit of hesitant hope, but more skepticism, and then more fear. They don’t know what to do. No wonder Mary weeps!

It was into that reality that Easter came. Not much like our normal Easter, but kind of like *this* Easter.

Christ is risen. *Christ is risen, indeed!*

The good news of that first Easter revealed itself quietly, gradually, to a few people at a time – people who were almost too traumatized to comprehend it and too despairing to hope.

Peter and another disciple – John himself, perhaps – peer into the emptiness of the tomb and begin to believe -sort of - but go away, not knowing how to respond. Mary – one of Jesus’ most faithful disciples – doesn’t even recognize Jesus himself when he first speaks to her. What it meant – how it would change their lives and the world – would unfold little by little. These first witnesses will eventually find their voices and leave us their testimony. They will

share their story with others and the church will be born. The people who will come to be called Christians will understand and believe and proclaim (as one of them wrote) that, “the one who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus, and will bring us” with him into the presence of God. (2 Corinthians 4:14)

Christ is risen. *Christ is risen, indeed!*

But Easter is more than history. It’s more than a point of dogma to believe. It’s more even than a reason to have hope for eternal life with Christ.

I came across this quote: “Easter is not a passport to another world; it is a quality of perception for this one.” (W.P. Lemon, early 20th century preacher).

Easter isn’t for – or at least, isn’t *only* for days of sunshine and celebration, when faith comes easy. Easter is for days of fear and tombs and darkness and uncertainty about what comes next. Easter is for days like the days we are living in.

I pondered what it might mean to perceive this world with Easter eyes: Maintaining hope even when things look terrible? Having faith that God can bring good out of evil? Being able to discern God’s presence in the world? I came to the conclusion that it means all those things, but also the ability to see the world through the eyes of the risen Jesus, with his clarity and compassion.

Those of us who, like Mary, have heard Jesus, in some way or other, speak our name, have a story to tell and hope to offer and a way of seeing the world that is sorely needed.

You are probably familiar with these lines from a poem by Wendell Berry. It’s a fairly long poem, and the context is a plea that we not view ourselves, one another, our communities, or the earth in economic terms – thinking only about productivity and profits, consumption, dollar values and the like. In that context, Berry writes:

Every day do something that won’t compute.
Love the Lord. Love the world. Work for nothing....
Love someone who does not deserve it....
Be joyful though you have considered all the facts.
... Practice resurrection.

My friends, we are perhaps being asked to practice resurrection more than we ever have before.

We can practice resurrection by choosing forgiveness and grace over resentment and judgement, freeing ourselves as well as others.

We can practice resurrection by being open to changes and new ways of doing things – new ways of being church, even. Who knows what God will do that we did not expect? We can practice resurrection by asking what there is to learn in this time.

We can practice resurrection by cultivating attentiveness, wonder, gratitude, appreciation of beauty and nature, mystery, listening, laughter, ... everything that makes us open to recognizing God's presence around us.

We can practice resurrection by saying a word of encouragement to someone who is struggling, reaching out to someone alone, helping a friend resist the pull of addiction. We can practice resurrection by doing all we can to go on being the church, the body of Christ. We can practice resurrection by holding on to hope and faith for those who can't find hope and faith right now. We can practice resurrection by seeking out stories of hope transforming situations that seemed hopeless, and by telling our own stories of redemption, and grace.

We can practice resurrection by having courage to look beyond our own relative safety and our instinct for self-protection, to see the people who are at risk because their work is needed, the people who are sick and those who are devastated by the loss of a loved one, and all the folks who have lost jobs. We can look further, beyond our borders, to see the people in places like Yemen where the health care system was already destroyed by war, to see children and men and women in crowded refugee camps and detention centers and slums, to see the communities in places like sub-Saharan Africa, where lack of water access makes hand-washing a challenge. We can look beyond the headlines of the moment, and remember that all the problems that existed a month ago – substance abuse, domestic violence, inequality, mental illness, poverty, and so on – are still with us, still scarring people's lives. We can see all that, and not turn away. We can be the people who care about *all* those who are suffering, whether we know them or not, whether they look like us or not.

Why would we do those things? *How* can we do any of those things, when there is enough to do just to manage our own daily lives and our own fears? Because Jesus would do those things; because Jesus is alive; because Jesus is alive in us.

Christ is risen. *Christ is risen, indeed!*

We find ourselves asking, a lot, these days, "when will we go back to 'normal'?"

The answer is that we won't. *We can't.*

We will be changed by what we have witnessed and experienced in these days, much as Jesus' friends and followers were changed by Good Friday, much as anybody is changed by tragedy, sorrow, or struggle. Experiences like this leave memories, scars, an awareness of vulnerability that perhaps wasn't there before.

Hopefully, we also will be changed in ways that will bring good to us and to our world, changed to be more aware of our connectedness,

More compassionate,
More committed to community,
More interested in equity,
More careful about our priorities,
More grateful for our blessings.

Hopefully, we will have learned some things.

But it's not just that we *can't* be the same.

For us as people of faith, there is more to it than that. For Jesus' first disciples, there was no going back to before Good Friday, before the cross, before they met Jesus, before the good news of Easter began to take hold in their hearts. The cross and the resurrection changed them, as they change us, when we let ourselves be completely present to this holy week.

We are Easter people. And Easter was never, and is not now, about "getting back to normal." Easter is – always has been – about the transformative, life-giving love and power of God. God doesn't want "normal" for us. God wants *better* than that for us. Easter imagines a different future for us. Easter is a doorway out of the tomb into a new life. Easter is God's invitation to us to be part of Jesus' mission of healing and reconciling the world. Easter is Jesus meeting us in our brokenness and calling each one of us by name. Easter is God making holy, courageous, loving, faithful, *Christ-like* people out of Peter, and John, and Mary... and *us!*

Christ is risen. *Christ is risen, indeed!*
Alleluia, amen.

Resources:

Wendell Berry "Manifesto: The Mad Farmer Liberation Front" from *The Country of Marriage*, 1973.

Frederic and Mary Ann Brussat, "Easter: Resurrection as a Spiritual Practice"

Jim Wallis, "An Easter Sermon for Coronavirus" in *Sojourners*, April 9, 2020.

Jim Wallis, *Christ in Crisis*