

“New Life in a Time of Pandemic” – Matthew 28:1-10 – April 12, 2020

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This Easter Sunday is unlike any Easter any of us have ever before experienced. Not to say that we haven't celebrated Easter in times of national crisis, because we certainly have. But to be advised against coming together, coming into close, physical proximity to one another as the community of faith, in any of our lifetimes, that is an astounding restriction. To have to miss the traditions, the pageantry, the triumphant music, the white lilies and colorful, aromatic spring flowers, the warmth of being together, the Easter suits and dresses, the laughter, the hugs, the warm wishes, the Easter Egg hunt in the church parlor, and the meal with family and friends afterwards. This Easter Sunday is unlike any Easter any of us have ever before experienced.

This Easter Sunday is closer in similarity to the very first Easter than any of us have ever before experienced. Consider this. The disciples were huddled in a home, behind locked doors. Their hopes were dashed – Jesus was not the conquering hero type of Messiah they had expected. They were devastated and grieving, having lost their beloved teacher and friend. And they feared for their own lives – wondering if they ventured out into public would they too be arrested and risk death at the hands of the religious leaders or the Roman governor. The disciples were bewildered – their lives had seemed so certain when Jesus was with them, but now each day would bring questions about their futures. They didn't know what would come next. The disciples were alone, huddled behind their closed doors, no longer bringers of truth and light – the cheering crowds became a mocking mob, Jesus was fake news, nothing but a hoax, he was no big deal – he couldn't even heal himself. The people all went home, looking for the next big news story.

This Easter Sunday finds us huddled in our homes, cautious about going outside, unsure of what will happen next week, let alone next month. The stability of a normal life, a life to which we had grown accustomed, is now gone. All due to a tiny virus we cannot see, and we don't even know if we are carriers of it.

With the instability that has become the new normal, we are faced with fears that would have seemed, just a few months ago, like the plot of a Hollywood disaster movie. We face fears of loneliness and isolation. We may worry about catching the disease, maybe even dying, or losing someone we love. We are separated from members of our own families and dear friends. We fear what the economic repercussions will be with so many people out of work, small businesses having to shut down. We wonder if we will ever again be able to find toilet paper and hand sanitizer at the grocery store. We may even entertain concerns about the shortage of food. We agonize over how long this may last.

The one thing this coronavirus has done is help us to experience not only the uncertainty of life that Jesus' early followers experienced, but also what many people around the world experience as a normal way of life. And if we follow that thought, we may wonder how this pandemic is hurting those who already had so little.

This pandemic has helped us to remember that God doesn't promise us things like material wealth or a strong economy, magnificent worship in elaborate spaces, good health and happiness, a life without struggle, or even that fairy tale ending for which we may sometimes wish.

What God does promise us is this – to love us without condition, to be with us always, and to assure us that pain, suffering and death do not nor never will have the last word. In the midst of fear and uncertainty, God promises to be with us.

When the two women arrived at the tomb, an earthquake struck and an angel came and rolled away the stone. The soldiers fainted in their fear, but the angel addressed the women, saying, "Do not be afraid. You are looking for Jesus, but he has been raised." He showed them the empty tomb and instructed them to tell the disciples that Jesus was going ahead of them and would meet them in Galilee.

The women, feeling both fear and great joy, hurried back, but on the way, Jesus appeared to them. They fell at his feet and worshipped him. With his greeting, he also told them "Do not be afraid," and he repeated the message about going ahead to Galilee, and to tell the disciples to meet him there.

I love this image of the paradoxical emotions that the two Marys feel – fear and great joy mingled together. Fear and joy – I imagine that's what the disciples felt too, when they heard the message to go meet Jesus in Galilee. It's sort of like "I'm not really sure what's going on, but I trust Jesus, so I know that it's going to be amazing!" The disciples of Jesus, including those women, had gone from the pit of despair to unimaginable joy and hope. That there was more yet to come. They just needed to go after Jesus – to not be afraid and to trust.

And that is and always has been a huge part of the message of the gospel – that Jesus' love for us is beyond imagining and nothing can ever change that, not even death. Jesus understands the fear that we have, but he wants us to trust him and follow him.

This resurrection story gives us the image of Jesus already out ahead of us, aware of our needs, and beckoning us forward, to follow him, and to trust that his light and his love is more powerful than darkness and hate.

In the midst of our fear and uncertainty about whatever comes next, in the frustration and confoundedness of life in the midst of pandemic, the story of Easter invites us to experience the great joy of the life of love undeserved yet unconditional that we have with Jesus Christ. Wherever love and kindness and compassion exist, he is there. Christ is the source of all love and goodness, and his desire for us is for us to experience the fulness of life that can be found in him.

He calls us forward into the unknown, asking only for us to step out in faith and trust that he walks with us. The road forward is not without its pitfalls and hurdles, but the path to Christ is always paved with his love and tender care. May we heed the words of the angel who told the women, do not be afraid, he is going ahead of you, let us go, and meet him there.