



**“Easter Message”**  
**Scripture – Mark 16:1-8**  
**Sermon preached by Dr. Gregory Knox Jones**  
**Sunday, April 1, 2018**

A colleague says that her friend Agnes, who was visibly pregnant, was at a market standing in the produce section trying to decide between apples and pears. While she was pondering which to buy, a woman spoke to her. She said, “Is this your first child?”

“No,” Agnes replied, “I have a little boy who is almost two.”

The woman stared at her for a moment, and then said – not with a smile, but a grave expression – “How can you dare to bring children into this cruel and terrible world?”

Agnes turned away, but the question lingered and stung.<sup>1</sup>

The stranger’s comment was rude and intrusive, but I suspect most of us understand the distress behind it. In a world where young men walk into schools and open fire with assault rifles, where opioid overdoses are skyrocketing, where terrorists kill complete strangers, where immigrants are made scapegoats, where sexual misconduct is excused, where those in power lie without shame, where partisan divides have grown nasty, where world leaders threaten to use nuclear weapons, there are more than enough reasons to fear we are living in dark times.

A faith leader asked an African American child who lives in Chicago’s South Side what he would like to be when he grows up. The child answered, “Alive.”<sup>2</sup>

Some of you may be starting to wonder if the preacher knows what day this is. Beautiful lilies adorn the chancel, the organ and timpani arouse our souls, the choir sings of rejoicing, the cross stands empty, and the trumpets and trombones herald victory. What gives with the pastor? Why the reminder of gloom?

First, Easter is not escapism. It is not a day for ignoring darkness and pretending that everything is innocent and lovely. It is not a day for imagining that any moment God is going to wave the divine arm and evil will be whisked off stage. Easter is not a flight into fantasy.

And, second, it helps to remember that the first Easter did not begin with singing and shouts of joy. It began in darkness with tears of grief and fear of the future.

Stepping inside of today's passage, the night is giving way to the dawn as we spot three silhouettes trudging toward the tomb. Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome have purchased spices to anoint the body of Jesus. They feel compelled to perform one last act of tenderness and they are desperate for one last chance to say good-bye. However, the thought that is setting off a tsunami of anxiety is: How are we ever going to live without him?

In the novel *Above the Waterfall*, the county sheriff is nearing retirement day. He hopes his last weeks on the job will be uncomplicated, but instead he finds himself dealing with an escalating conflict between the owner of a local fishing resort and a man suspected of poaching. In addition, the sheriff has become aware that out in the backwoods, crystal *methamphetamine* labs are as numerous as the moonshine stills of an earlier era. He has seen the ravaging effects of crystal meth...and is aware that the world is becoming darker and more dangerous. When he climbs into his squad car, he suddenly has a flashback to his childhood.

He remembers sleepwalking as a child and says, "There were times I'd make my way out of the house and end up in the yard... I'd open my eyes and there would be nothing but darkness, like the world had slipped its leash and run away, taking everything with it except me."

"(He started his car and) drove back toward town, all the while remembering what it had felt like when the world you knew had up and vanished, and you needed to find something to bring that world back, but you were not sure you could."<sup>3</sup>

Do you know that feeling of having the world you knew up and vanish? Have you had a calamity upend your life and you wish you could go back to the time before the disaster struck?

After a divorce, after the death of a loved one, after losing a job, it's natural to yearn for what has been lost. It is natural to resist the new reality and to fear what the future holds.

This is the story of the first Easter. The followers of Jesus were distraught after he was crucified and laid in a tomb. Early on Sunday morning, following a night when it was impossible to sleep, three women went to anoint his body. As they approach the burial vault, they wonder if they will even be able to get near his body. Who will roll away the massive stone from the entrance?

Yet when they reach the tomb, the stone has already been shoved aside. What thoughts must have run through their minds? Has the tomb been desecrated by vandals? Has the sly Roman guard set a trap for his followers?

The women garnered the courage to set foot inside the tomb and, when they did, they immediately realized the body of Jesus was nowhere in sight. A young man in a white robe said, "Do not be alarmed; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here." He gave instructions. "Go to the disciples and tell them that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him." Then we read that final, unsettling verse of Mark's gospel: "They went out and fled the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid."

Before anyone suggests we criticize the women for being cowards, remember that the male disciples were holed up in an undisclosed location with the door bolted because they were petrified to be seen in public.

The disciples were afraid because their world had crumbled and their future was thrown into disarray. The one who had been their North Star was struck down and the way forward was suddenly dotted with question marks.

Fear can annihilate hope. When we allow fear to dominate our thinking, we make reckless decisions. When we think that tomorrow cannot be better, cannot deliver anything new, it becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. We

become quick to recognize darkness and blind to new opportunities. Fear can launch a cycle that is difficult to break. Negative thoughts begin to pile up and we become skeptical of positive outcomes. With jaded vision, we imagine that anything positive must be temporary and will undoubtedly lead to something worse.

While the Gospel of Mark ends on this note of fear, we know that fear did not have the final word. Something jolted those first followers and transformed their fear into intrepid faith. The women and the disciples experienced the risen Christ. They caught a glimpse of glorious life after death and, it was so powerful, that these timid followers became courageous messengers.

Many are perplexed by the abrupt ending of Mark's gospel. However, he left his story hanging for a reason. He did not want us to read his gospel to the end, snap the book shut and say, "That was quite a story; and such an uplifting ending!"

Mark wants us to realize that the resurrection of Christ was not the conclusion of a first century cliffhanger. It was a declaration that resurrection is emblematic of God's activity in the world.

Each spring testifies to God's action in nature. After the dead of winter, the earth bursts forth with new life. God works in human lives in a similar way by bringing new life out of death – not only eternal life after our earthly journey ends, but new life again and again *before* death. Resurrection is always present beneath the surface beckoning us to a rich life despite the inevitable losses that are a part of human existence.

Resurrection generates hope because the way things are today are not how they will be forever. Hope is defiant. It refuses to allow present difficulties to dictate the future. Rabbi Abraham Heschel said, "Hope is not cheerfulness, a temperamental confidence that all will turn out for the best. It is not an inclination to be guided by illusions rather than by facts. Hope is a conviction, rooted in trust."<sup>4</sup>

Hope does not boast of knowing the future, but trusts God to present us with new, life-enriching possibilities. Hope must be built on trust because our eyes are not sharp enough to see a great distance down the road. We must trust that taking steps toward God can open new possibilities we cannot now envision.

The war in Syria has been destroying that country for seven years. More than 200,000 have died and millions have become refugees. You may remember Dr. Mary Mikhael, our mission co-worker in that part of the world, who spoke here last year. She encouraged us to continue to financially support the refugees – especially the children. I received an email from her a few days ago. She translated into English the greetings of Syrian refugee children who are now living in different cities in Lebanon and attending schools there.

Here is the message from the 110 children living in the city of Reyak: "To you our beloved helpers, greetings for Easter! We thank you for your support in the hard times of our lives. Without your help we would not be able to read and write."

Here is what the 96 children in Tripoli (Lebanon) say: "You helped us stand up in our trouble, you turned our hopelessness to hope and joy, you brought back to us the joy of childhood, thank you!"

Listen to the word from the 57 children in Minyara: "From our tent we send you greetings and love. We love you and thank you for taking care of us. You are great. Jesus rose from death and defeated evil, may he defeat the war so we can go back home."

And from the 107 children in Kib Elias: "God loves us and we love you. God has given us hope, you helped us know that. We thank God for your help, and for showing us your love and care. Now we can read, write, and learn how to become better children. Thank you and happy Easter to all of you. Jesus is Risen, yes he is Risen."

Fear narrows our perspective, hope broadens it. Fear limits what we believe is possible. Hope expands our possibilities. John O'Donohue writes: "If we move even the smallest step out of our limitation, life comes to embrace us and lead us out into the pastures of possibility."<sup>5</sup>

God's power of resurrection declares that the final word does not belong to death, not to darkness, not to fear, but to *life* and to *light* and to *hope*.

#### NOTES

1. Shannon J. Kershner, "Jesus Prays for Us," May 28, 2017.
2. Ibid.
3. Robert E. Dunham, "Unfinished," *Journal for Preaching*, Easter 2018, p.22.
4. Lee Staman, "A Mediation on Hope and Fear," *Politics and Religion*, (CAC Publishing, 2017), p.40.
5. John O'Donohue, *Eternal Echoes*, (New York: HarperCollins, 1999), p. 119.

### **Easter Prayer ~ Gregory Knox Jones**

Gracious and loving God, we are deeply grateful that we may experience lives of joy thanks to Christ's rising from the dead. In his victory over death, you revealed yourself as a God of transformation who is forever working to bring good out of evil, justice out of inequity, peace out of strife and hope out of despair. Through all the stunning peaks and lonely valleys of our lives, we pray that our faith in the resurrection may live within us as a mighty source of strength and guidance and confidence.

Living Lord, we pause to pray for those for whom the proclamation of victory over death sounds faint or unbelievable. We pray for those whose lives have been torn apart by violence, loss, prejudice, or poverty. We pray for the lost, the lonely, and those who struggle with illness of body, mind or spirit. May all who suffer and all who grieve find in you courage in the face of darkness; and may Christ's resurrection be a steadfast source of comfort that heightens their hope in your promise of new life.

Loving God, we pray for those within our church family who are ill, for those facing a severe test, and for those who will be celebrating this Easter without their loved one for the first time. We pray for your healing Spirit that all who are in need may find health, wholeness, and a firm resolve; and we pray that they will be touched by the Easter hope of new life.

Eternal God, when the constant drumbeat of injustice, greed, and death threaten to make us cynical or depressed, we pray that you will replenish our spirits with courage to resist evil and to trust in your resurrection power. We pray that you deepen our commitment to faithfully follow the example of Jesus so that your light and love may shine through us.

May we find joy in our time with family and friends; may we find delight in the laughter and energy of children, and may our spirits be lifted with the triumphant music declaring God's promise of eternal life. This and all things, we pray in the name of the Prince of Peace who taught us to pray saying, "Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory, forever. Amen.