



“Declaring Christ is Risen in a Covid-19 World”

Scripture – Matthew 28:1-10

Sermon preached by Gregory Knox Jones

Easter Sunday, April 12, 2020

The time in which we are living outdistances our vocabulary. We have never experienced anything like this pandemic and so our ability to describe it falls short. We reach for words – Surreal. Unsettling. Demoralizing. Eerie. Frightening. Each word applies, yet each word is insufficient to describe the full surface of our experience.

Most years we anticipate celebrating Easter with a feeling of jubilation. We look forward to hearing the swell of the organ, the rumbling of the timpani, and the triumphant blast of the trumpets stirring our souls as we stand together in a packed sanctuary belting out Easter hymns. We gather as a church family to hear the core message of the Christian faith: The tomb is empty! However, this year we mutter a somber testimony: “The sanctuary is empty.”

Most years, we celebrate Easter with an eye toward the good in the world, dodging the suffering that is also present. This year, that option has deserted us. In the midst of a global pandemic, in which more than 100,000 people have died, we celebrate Easter with Covid-19 hanging heavy over us.

Yet despite the fact that this Easter is so vastly different from years past, I wonder if it might actually better resemble the day the women discovered that the stone had been rolled away. Perhaps this year more than most, we can identify with the first Easter, which occurred while the crucifixion was casting a dark shadow.

Like the women who trudged to the tomb before dawn to anoint the lifeless body of their master, we find that life seems surreal. Suffering and death dominate our thinking. Like those women whose hearts were darkened and hopes were dashed, we grieve the numbers that keep piling up, the loss of our daily routine, and the disappearance of a predictable future. Like the followers of Jesus who were disoriented by his death, we fear what might come next.

Yes, this Easter, I believe we might better comprehend the first one when fear had driven the disciples of Jesus to shelter in place. They were haunted by the simple question: What now?

This is an onerous Easter. It is especially harsh for health care workers who are exposed to the Coronavirus while struggling to save lives, for those with the deadly disease who are gasping for breath, and for those who are barred from being present with their loved one who loses the battle and slips away alone.

What grieves your heart today? What fears dominate your thinking? Speak them out loud wherever you are.

The pain and fear are real, and death brags of its success, and yet, we dare not succumb to despair. Our faith reminds us that it was when fear and sadness dominated, that the women stumbled upon the empty tomb. It was

after dreams had been scourged and crushed that light burst forth. It was after hope had been crucified that people encountered the risen Christ.

All four gospels tell the story of that early Sunday morning when women who had been faithful to Jesus made their way to the cave where his body had been placed. The gospels of Mark and Luke provide the detail that the women were taking spices to anoint his body. I have to believe they also made that trek to the tomb before daylight because they missed Jesus terribly and that was the best place to grieve. That was the place they could let the tears flow, kick the stone covering the tomb, and let the curse words fly. It was the place where they could shake their fist at God and try to come to terms with what seemed surreal.

From the time Jesus died, on Friday afternoon, to early Sunday morning when the women reached the tomb, it was only 39 or 40 hours. The women's emotions were still raw.

All four gospels inform us that when the women reached the tomb, the stone covering the entrance had been rolled away. Matthew's Gospel says there was an angel who said to the women, "Do not be afraid; I know you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. He is not here; he has been raised." The women were invited to inspect the space where the body of Jesus had been placed. Then they were instructed to find the disciples and tell them that Jesus had been raised from the dead.

This is the astonishing claim upon which Christianity is founded. It is also what makes many 21st century people squirm.

Having been raised in an age of reason that scoffs at what cannot be verified by the five senses, many have lost their capacity for mystery and make no room for the remarkable. Even though many have been brought back to life after dying and report on another world, and many others have peered through to the other side days before dying, and still others have been visited by their recently departed loved ones, many simply refuse to believe what they have not personally experienced or what they cannot comprehend.

Of course skepticism is nothing new. The Gospel of Luke reports that when the women informed the disciples that Jesus had risen, the men rudely brushed them off. It was not until they experienced the risen Christ for themselves, that they realized the women had it exactly right. Of course they did.

It is too far-fetched for me to believe that the disciples could have initiated the movement that launched Christianity if they had not personally experienced the risen Christ. Remember that when Jesus was alive, the twelve often misunderstood him. When Jesus was arrested, Peter was so frightened for his life, that he denied even knowing him. Following the crucifixion all of the disciples hid behind locked doors, terrified that the authorities might grab them next. But then, something happened that triggered a radical transformation in them. These men who fled when Jesus was alive became courageous witnesses who refused to stop claiming that Jesus was the Son of God even as they were executed. People will not willingly die for a fairy tale. The resurrection of Jesus and his appearance to them must have been the life-changing event.

And for 20 centuries, Christians have declared that the resurrection of Christ is what makes us people of hope. We dare to allow the possibility that this life is not all there is.

As the death toll from the Coronavirus mounts, we can worry that we are mired in a Good Friday world where darkness rules and threatens to drag us under. However, we must remember that when the life drained from Jesus and he cried out "It is finished," it was not *finished*, finished! His physical existence in this world was at an end, but his spiritual essence, his core being was resurrected. And this is the hope by which we live. This life is prelude to something more.

So despite the mighty scourge that is sweeping the planet and racking up a terrible score, we must remember that it will not last forever. It is finite and will come to an end. Our hope is in the everlasting One who is a God of new beginnings.

Prayers of the People ~ Sudie Niesen Thompson

God of Life,

On that first Easter our Risen Lord appeared to Magdalene, who stood alone — weeping — beside a garden tomb; and to a pair of downcast disciples walking the Emmaus road; and to a band of fearful followers, huddled at home behind locked doors.

On that first Easter Christ came to those who loved him – not in some sacred shrine, filled with trumpet blasts and shouts of ‘Alleluia!’ – but in quiet, tucked-away places, where the faithful sought refuge from a death-dealing world.

Having cast aside his own grave clothes, Christ came to unburden his disciples: to wipe away their tears, to set their hearts ablaze, to offer the gift of peace.

And so you come to *us* this day, while the shroud of death hangs heavy, while your people scatter for safety’s sake. You come to us, meeting us in ordinary places — the backdrops of our ordinary lives — to whisper the most extraordinary news: Christ is risen!

You come to us, Living Lord, to wipe away *our* tears, to set *our* hearts ablaze, to offer *us* the gift of peace.

And so we lift joy-filled voices to proclaim again and for all time: He is risen, indeed! Even in this season of fear, when anxiety is a constant companion; even in this season of uncertainty, when chaos seems to reign; even in this season of grief, when the forces of death seem determined to triumph, we rejoice. *Especially now*, we rejoice. For you have shattered the power of the grave and opened the way to eternal life!

As you come among us this day, open our hearts to your presence among us and grant us faith to believe the good news. Faithful God, we lift before you all who feel trapped in a ‘Good Friday’ world, all who cannot glimpse the brightness of Easter morn. Bring comfort to those who feel death’s sharp sting, and hope to those entombed by despair. Breathe reassurance into the hearts of those who cannot yet imagine a day when mourning turns to dancing, and send whispers of resurrection through rooms where fear still holds sway. Wrap these sisters and brothers in the steadfastness of your love, and fill them with peace.

Resurrected One, we know that Easter is not the end of the story. Christ goes before us still, leading us into a world that is desperate for good news. Though today we cannot go to the ends of the earth, or even to the streets of our neighborhoods, you still commission us to bear witness to this good news of overwhelming joy. Breathe your Spirit upon us so that we might live as a resurrection people. As disciples of the crucified and risen Lord, give us compassion in the face of suffering, courage in the face of injustice, and hope in the face of despair. Empower us, we pray, so that we might live as those who have seen the Living Lord.

We lift this prayer in the name of Jesus Christ, our Risen Lord, who gave us words to pray:

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.