

Easter People, Raise Your Voices
John 20:1-18
April 12, 2020

Loving God, we do give you thanks for opportunity of knowing that you walk with us in the midst of these days. You know our thoughts before we can think them. You know the emptiness of our heart, the struggle of our soul, you know of our uncertainty in the midst of these days.

Come Lord Jesus be our guest, speak to us where we need it most. Give us that peace that surpasses understanding, bless us with courage and strength for the journey that lies ahead. And grant to us, Oh God, continual revelations of the resurrected Jesus in our midst.

God in these moments, as I share this message, I will pray a personal prayer that either through me or in spite of me, you might speak to your church today. I pray this in the name of Christ. Amen.

The Easter Story that we love to tell each year is filled with drama: sadness and despair turned into awe and inspiration. It's a story of human aspirations and dreams being dashed one minute and revived the next. It's a story of doubt and skepticism being converted to renewed faith when Christ is witnessed in their midst.

It all happens when Christ is witnessed in their midst:

- The downtrodden disciples did not believe. But Mary knew because she witnessed Christ in her midst.
- Skeptics felt that the empty tomb only meant that Jesus' body had been stolen. But the disciples believed because he appeared to them in the Upper Room.
- Thomas doubted. But Jesus offered his hands and his side and Thomas believed.
- Later on, two followers of Jesus encounter him on the road to Emmaus and while they didn't know who he was, they recognized him when he broke the bread, and they believed.

What is interesting to me is that for centuries now we have maintained and passed on the Christian faith, but there are no current eyewitnesses. Instead, it's how we see the story playing out in our midst and how those stories make the resurrection real for us even now.

We cannot literally see the resurrected Christ, but in reality, today we do see Christ alive. We see Jesus through symbols, feelings, and people in our midst.

As long as I have been alive, I have these memories of Holy Week and going to church. On Maundy Thursday, I remember worshipping together, remembering the story of the Last Supper and the Disciples betrayal. For years, I participated as an actor in a "Living Last Supper," and at the end of the service, stripping the church and going from light to darkness.

I remember Good Friday services, nailing confessions on a cross, singing somber music, and calling people to journey deep within their souls and evoking a feeling of emptiness as they thought about how they themselves had betrayed Jesus.

I remember Sunrise Services, cold spring days waiting in song and liturgy for the sun to rise and the beginning of a full morning of praise and joy over the coming of Easter.

I remember in my first appointment, the Quille Crook family cooking breakfast for the entire church following the Sunrise Service. I remember the pastries, the pancakes, the taste of fresh sausage.

And then the Easter Service! What joy in putting on my white stole, processing with the choir, singing the great hymns of the church, seeing everyone all decked out in the new Sunday best, and the Lilies – oh, the sweet smell of those lilies!

This Lenten journey to Easter has, historically, been all about evoking the presence of Jesus through symbols, songs, fragrances and nature. Over the years, we've relied on those feelings and looked forward to those remembrances.

But this has been a strange Lenten Season. A most unusual Holy Week. A less than majestic Easter Sunday.

It is a season that has tested us. A time when we have had to remind ourselves, some days more than others, that God did not bring this pandemic on us, but God surely is with us as we journey through these uncertain days. When times are good, how easy it is to say, "God is with us." But when times get challenging, it is when we draw deep into the well of our faith to say then as well, "God IS surely with us!"

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It could be said that this has been a forty-day journey of Good Friday. There has been so much darkness, so much illness, so much death. We haven't needed a service to stimulate or remind us of the pain of death. Those reminders have been on our televisions no matter the time of day or night. Many people that we know and countless others that we will never know who have been and are facing such pain and agony.

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Oh, how I wish I could just smell the sweet aroma of a lily this year.

But wait a minute! Perhaps there IS a sweet aroma in our midst. Perhaps there IS a great symbol of resurrection all around us. Perhaps we ARE seeing Christ alive all around us!

As we have journeyed through these days, we ARE eyewitnesses of Christ alive in our midst. We are benefactors of daily stories of how the spirit is moving and breathing and working in our actions and the actions of others.

- I see Jesus today in the sacrificial service of medical personnel who are putting their lives on the line to save the life of another.
- I see Jesus alive today in an ER nurse who works tirelessly to make sure her patient has oxygen, a police officer & a fireman who respond to every call for help, and a grocery store clerk who shows up faithfully and stands in the midst of harm's way just so I can be fed.
- I see Jesus today as I talk to my neighbors distanced by our yards. Never before has "How are you?" and "I hope you are healthy" meant so much.
- I see Jesus in local church feeding stations, and homeless ministries, and live stream worship, and countless ways we are engaging in "high touch" ministries with no touch precautions.

Today, the darkness is turning to light, the nothingness has turned to lily white, the feelings of newness and beauty and love have turned our heads and touched our hearts, and the countless ways that Jesus, the way, the truth, and the life, the resurrected Lord of life has showed up to remind us that in the midst of the darkness there is light and hope and promise for a new day. It's all because the resurrected Jesus has worked through us.

Who needs the smell of a lily when the sweet smell of good people living out their faith in selfless acts of love all are around? Today, we ARE the Easter Connection; a connection of faith & hope that unites us together in fellowship and love even though we cannot be united in physical presence.

We serve a risen Savior, he's in the world today. I know that he is living, whatever folks may say. I see his hands of mercy, I feel his loving care. And just the time I need him, he's always there.

We are connected today to the empty tomb and the risen Christ. We are connected because love's sacrifice on our behalf didn't end when Jesus rose. Love's sacrifice on our behalf continues today. And there is nothing that can compare to the actual experience of Christ alive in our midst.

A few years ago, there was a couple who visited the majestic St. Paul's Cathedral in London, England. As a part of the tour, the guide showed them a picture of the bombing of London during World War II.

The guide told the couple of being a young man when the bombing took place. He told them about that particular night when it seemed all of London was in flames. His voice filled with emotion as he described how he and his family could only see flames and clouds of smoke. A tear welled up in his eyes as he told them of how they cried because they felt that their entire lives were being destroyed forever.

But then he told the couple about a breeze that started to blow and how the breeze settled in and miraculously began to clear the smoke. *“Then,”* the guide said, *“then we received our sign from God. As the smoke began to clear, I caught sight of the gold cross still standing on St. Paul’s cathedral. In that moment, I knew God was with us. In that moment, I knew there was a power greater than a swastika that would bring us through our dark days.”*

Oh, my friends and colleagues, today life is filled with gloom and terror, hardship and pain, suffering and death on a scale that many of us have not witnessed in our lifetimes. It is scary and dark and terrifying. But on this Easter Sunday, let me remind you – there is a breeze that’s blowing. Look up from your downtrodden and anxious spirits. There is a cross that is still standing! Catch a vision of what Christ did and what Christ is doing and what Christ will do for each of us. And know that there is a power greater than any earthly force that WILL bring us through!

There are no lilies this year and there are no grand processions. But there are eyewitness accounts of an empty tomb, a risen Christ, and plenty of hearts all around us filled with love of God and love of neighbor.

Earlier in the week I was on a phone conversation with Cardinal Timothy Dolan, the Roman Catholic archbishop of New York. In that conversation, Cardinal Dolan told a story that I have used myself in past sermons. Back in the 1950’s, there was a large gala in New York City. In attendance was the great actor, Richard Burton and the great preacher, Bishop Fulton Sheen. Near the end of the event, the hostess said, “Tonight we have in our midst two of the world’s greatest speakers.” She then proceeded to ask Burton and Sheen to both give a reading of the 23rd Psalm. The two great figures complied. Richard Burton recited the 23rd Psalm and with his great voice, he compelled the audience. Bishop Fulton Sheen followed and with his great oratory skills, held the audience spellbound.

When they both had finished, the hostess simply said, “Mr. Burton, it is clear from your reading that you know the Psalm. But Bishop Sheen, it is clear from your reading that you know the shepherd.”

Do you know the shepherd? If you do, you are the one who says, *“Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for thou art with me.”*

We know that he is with us. And we celebrate today not only a historical event of resurrection. Today we celebrate life and resurrection as it is being witnessed all around us.

One of the great rhythms of the Easter Season is found in the songs that we sing.

Don’t you just love to sing the Alleluias in “Christ the Lord is Risen Today,” or the great hymn, “Christ is Risen! Shout Hosanna! Celebrate this day of days” or the drama and buildup of “Up from the Grave He Arose?”

You just can’t replace those songs that recount the historical events of Jesus’ resurrection.

But a few years ago, in 1979, a man by the name of William M. James, a name that many of us know, wrote a hymn that appears in our Book of Hymns. Bill James was born in Mississippi, served United Methodist congregations in Harlem and the Bronx. He was a community developer and mentor to many clergy and laity in New York City. He was the face of Christ in the midst of poverty and racism.

He wrote a hymn entitled “Easter People Raise Your Voices.” It is a hymn that does not tell a historical story of resurrection but, instead, reminds us that Easter is always around us, always within us, no matter what we face.

Easter people, raise your voices, sounds of heaven in earth should ring. Christ has brought us heaven’s choices; heavenly music let it ring. Alleluia! Alleluia! Easter people, let us sing.

Fear of death can no more stop us from our pressing here below. For our Lord empowered us to triumph over every foe. Alleluia! Alleluia! On to victory now we go.

Every day to us is Easter, with its resurrection song. When in trouble, move the faster to our God who rights the wrong. Alleluia! Alleluia! See the power of heavenly throngs.

I don’t need a lily this season. The sweet smell of the risen Christ at work among us is the best smell I can imagine.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

Amen.