

May 3, 2020

This Joyful Eastertide

When I was younger, I remember a time in church, and this was weeks after Easter Sunday, when the pastor would see us in Sunday school and yell out 'Happy Easter', joyously and exuberantly. Some of us, or maybe it was just me, sat there puzzled. Clearly, Easter had passed. The Easter Bunny had come and gone, and no more eggs were to be found. And as a congregation, in those few weeks after celebrating Jesus's victory over death, perhaps our hearts and minds had also moved on, as were already on to the next thing.

Our Easter Sunday was only three weeks ago. We enjoyed dressing up, in pajamas or our fine Easter clothes, and joining in virtually as a church family, our hearts warmed by the pictures of Easter's past. While we yearned to join together for the traditional Easter egg hunt on the church grounds, we enjoyed a new and creative virtual hunt, and in that way broke new ground. Together we faced the uncertainty of our times, turning on our electrical devices and tuning in to hear inspirational music from Sophia, Zoe and Jim and inspirational words from Jill, as yet we continued be challenged and threatened by the Covid19 Pandemic. But have we also already moved on from Easter?

This year, for some, the joy of Easter may have felt diminished. Families celebrated the holiday in smaller units separate from one another. Grandparents enjoyed their grandchildren from the other side of a computer screen, children searched for Easter eggs in their own homes, and congregations struggled to implement technology to replicate fellowship. I don't know about yours, but in our family this meant learning how to cast to our TV from our phones and then coercing toddlers to pay attention to the TV screen for any length of time. These certainly are challenging times even without toddlers.

Covid-19 has placed us, as a world community, in a state of unrest. How many times have we heard, or used the phrases, "Amid the uncertainty of Covid-19...?" or "We are living in unprecedented times...?" Confusion. Fear. Loneliness. Doubt. Mental Anguish. Disillusionment. Anxiety. These are rampant emotions in a world already hurting from issues of systemic

oppression, social inequality, and political unrest. There is no denying that the world looks very different than it did when we entered into the Lenten season not that long ago. Our collective way of life, comfortable by virtue of its familiarity, quickly became uncomfortably unfamiliar with no end in sight. Not to be trite, but perhaps we are living in an unprecedented time. Some of us are haunted by questions we have no answers for or any clear idea of how to go about finding those answers. This is a time where certain actions of our government make some in our community question the moral code being followed, if any, while others believe that the government is performing necessary tasks in order to protect our nation and praise its efforts in doing so. This is a time where some entertain the possibility of conspiracy and deviant motives, while others are brushing up on their reading of Revelations readings and preparing for the Zombie apocalypse. Unprecedented times, indeed.

Or are they?

Overwhelming joy is a major theme of Easter as it should be! However, when I think about the women who met the angel at the empty tomb, or those who later laid eyes on the Risen Christ, exuberant joy and awe are not the only emotions at play. For many that came after 50 days of rumination, of percolation, of marination, during this time known as Eastertide from the Resurrection to Pentecost. This was when the Christian religion began to take root and form communities that celebrated its doctrine. For us this morning, because Christianity has enjoyed this strong privilege of over a thousand of years of history, (a religion of the oppressed made popular by oppressors), Easter embodies a celebration of Joy and its profound significance to the faith.

I go so far as to suggest that this joyful Eastertide we are being given a rare gift - the opportunity to gain a deeper understanding of the origin of our Christian faith and the Gospel's message of divine joy.

Imagine you are a beloved follower and contemporary of Jesus. Here is a man you met a few years ago but have followed and trusted, devoting your life after witnessing his acts and hearing his teaching. This person, who has done great deeds, has been victim to a very dramatic and public

death. Jesus' crucifixion was meant to humiliate him and warn his followers about the consequences of resisting the Empire. For many, it worked.

Imagine knowing all that the disciples knew and experiencing first hand what they witnessed. Consider what it would really mean to walk in their footsteps. Would it be easy to believe that the risen Jesus walks among us? Would you recognize him without question? Might you not experience profound confusion and struggle to make sense of the whirlwind of events that transpired? Could the world you once knew ever look the same to you? Might you not experience a great deal of uncertainty? I may be trying too hard to hammer this parallel of then and now, but I'll keep going.

The ancient texts outline a new life lived by the community of Jesus. They show that Easter can be dangerous and demanding. Stephen, as the church's first martyr, is an embodiment of the risk of Easter faith. The reaction to Stephen's preaching of Easter is that he is stoned to death. His witness conflicted with the powers of "the old age" that wanted no new life to be announced or enacted in their world. When I look into this biblical narrative, I see a community affected by something far beyond their control or understanding. What were they meant to do moving forward? What were they to think? How were they to embrace the Joy of the Miracle when it stood in stark contrast to the spiritual uncertainty they were facing in their community?

Would you struggle with doubt? Doubting your perceptions? Doubting Jesus? God? Would it be easy for you to fully wrap your mind around and accept this miracle in the days following experiencing the traumatic death of your mentor? You watched your beloved Jesus die, and have heard rumors that the tomb was empty and that He has appeared to some in person. It is for this reason that the earliest church had to tell the story in so many variant ways, because none of the stories seemed fully adequate in telling the whole story. Certainly the story in John's gospel about the resurrected Jesus penetrating locked doors doesn't quite fit our theme of joy. It turns out that the risen Jesus, who twice said "peace" to his disciples in this morning's scripture lesson, eventually said "peace" even to Thomas, who is the voice of our own doubt.

Those dark, uncertain, and painful moments gave spiritual birth to transformational faith. A faith that holds our rawness, our ugliness, doubt and sorrow, and lifts it into the light. The apostles, disciples, and people who loved and followed Jesus were dealt a great disillusionment by the crucifixion. They were left to puzzle out the meaning of it all. Who was Jesus? A Rabbi? A prophet? God? What significance does this have on my life?

These are questions that we should ask ourselves. The walk with the risen Christ is an ongoing process of having our anxiety transformed in faith, and our despair transformed in hope. It is an ongoing journey of wellness and mental health. While our anxious, despairing world is inevitably self-destructive, the church lives in faith and daring hope that issues forth this Eastertide, an emancipated life in this world. Easter is like that: It initiates upheaval in every "best practice" approach. It exposes our world as stubborn, obstinate, and unresponsive just as this pandemic has done.

There are multiple poems and laments circling around social media about finding gratitude in the inconveniences and difficulties associated with our current situation. In many places, nature is flourishing, families are bonding, and food is being cooked at home again. I am going to suggest finding gratitude for the struggle, but not for the reasons you might think. I am suggesting finding gratitude for the unique opportunity to see the formation of our faith from a relatively shared position of uncertainty and fear with those of our early disciples. But also to find symbols of hope, like the bluebirds flying over the cliffs of Dover, giving hope to the British that war would soon end and peace would rule – And as Michael so beautifully sang, “Tomorrow, Just you wait and see, there’ll be love and laughter, And peace ever after.” A lyric from a famous Easter Carol where I based the title of this sermon says - This joyful Eastertide, away with sin and sorrow! Death’s flood has lost its chill since Jesus crossed the river. Moreover, the Apostle Peter writes, "be eager to do what is good" (1 Peter 3:13), "keep your conscience clear" (verse 16), practice "good conduct in Christ" (verse 16), go about "doing good" (verse 17), and maintain "a good conscience" (verse 21). The sum of this mandate is that the Easter has liberated God's people from fear and uncertainty (verse 14) for loving in risky, daring, and transformative ways. As a church, we have risked and dared to love in transformative ways. We have showed up in zoom calls, we have made masks for each other, we have performed unknown acts of kindness and generosity. May these actions and

many more lead us from the empty tomb out into the new world, from uncertainty to walk anew with the risen Christ. To set a precedent of divine joy that is lived through our faith.

One thing I love about this faith community in particular is our desire to know God, to know self, to seek truth and to build community. As Christ has risen, so will we rise. We will emerge on the other side, nearer to our God, led by faith and full of exuberant Joy in Jesus's endless love. Amen.

Benediction:

In closing, I share this poem –

Death will be all right for us when it comes.

But dying is another matter — so slow, so painful, so humiliating.

Death will be a quick turn, the winking of an eye

but dying turns and twists and waits and teases.

We have not died, but we know about dying:

We watch the inching pain of cancer,

the oozing ache of alienation,

the tears of stored-up hurt.

We can smell the dying of bombs and shells

of direct hit and collateral damage

of napalm spread thin and even of cities turned craters

of Agent Orange that waits years to show, and lives turned to empty stare.

We watch close or distant; we brace and stiffen and grow cynical or uncaring.

And death wins—

we, robbed of vitality, brought low by failed hope, lost innocence, emptied childhood,

and stillness.

We keep going, but barely; we gather at the grave, watching the sting and
the victory of dread.

But you stir late Saturday; we gather early Sunday with balm and embalming,
close to the body.

waiting for the smell but not;
dreading the withered site . . . but not;
cringing before love lost . . . but not here.

Not here . . . but risen, gone, awakened, alive!

The new creation stirs beyond the weeping women;

O death . . . no sting!

O grave . . . no victory!

O silence . . . new song!

O dread . . . new dance!

O tribulation . . . now overcome!

O Friday God—Easter the failed city,

Sunday the killing fields.

And we, we shall dance and sing,

thank and praise,

into the night that holds no more darkness.

Amen.

(Prayers for a Privileged People by Walter Brueggemann)

