

Sermon on Matthew 28:1-10
Easter Sunday, April 12, 2020
Lutheran Church of the Redeemer
By James Erlandson

Alleluia! Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! Alleluia!

Dear friends in Christ, grace and peace to you from God our Father, and our Lord Jesus Christ, Amen.

I thought I would begin this sermon in the most familiar way possible, with this joyful Easter greeting from my home to yours, because this Easter Sunday is the most unique celebration than any of us have had in our lifetimes! On a normal Easter we would have just finished our Easter breakfast downstairs. This would be the triumphant end to a Holy Week of worship, beginning on Palm Sunday and traveling through Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, and a vigil the night before, every one different, with glorious organ music and choirs, scripture readings, prayers offered, feet washed and processions with banners, crosses and incense. Perhaps you would be looking forward to spending Easter afternoon with your family, with a ham in the oven, or an Easter brunch at your favorite restaurant. Easter candy and egg hunts for kids, fancy dresses and big hats for women. How is it different? Share your thoughts on the chat bar conversation. Not only because we are worshiping from our homes, separated from each other – that can happen from time to time in our lives, if we are ill, or traveling, or when there might be a snowstorm – it can happen in Minnesota, you know! But this Easter Sunday worship services across the state and nation – and around the world – have been moved from inside church sanctuaries to our family homes for the first time since a world war or a Spanish flu pandemic in 1918 – that’s over one hundred years ago! So it is a once-in-a-hundred years phenomenon for us to be holding home worship on Easter, separated from each other to sing and pray alone or in our family groups, dressed casually, maybe even in your pajamas or comfortable sweats.

But, fortunately, we also have a uniquely different advantage on this Easter in 2020 from our ancestors in 1918. Today we have the technology to be connected by internet with each other across Minnesota – even across the world wide web if we wish, thanks to the miracle of Zoom! We can gather up to 100 at a time to see and hear each other on one computer screen, as long as we take a few precautions: such as mute our microphones when we are not the one assigned to speak, and when we sing – lest we turn our hymns of Easter joy into a cacophony of chaotic noise! Oh, and make sure your mike is muted when your dog decides to sing along to the hymn, or when that telephone rings to offer you the deal of a lifetime or to pay off your credit card debt in the latest scam! Technology is not always a gift!

One other thing that is different, however, is the ability through technology to interact with each other silently while we worship together – and be invited to do so! On the bottom of your screen there is an icon labeled “chat”. I invite you to interact with each other during the sermon by responding with your own thoughts and typing them on the chat bar. Please make them to “everyone” – though you can send a private chat message to another person in this Zoom call, please don’t make plans to go to brunch while the sermon and worship service are still on – restaurants are closed during the Stay at Home order anyway! But please share your thoughts that the Easter gospel may bring to you – which makes this an interactive sermon, thanks to Zoom!

Let’s try out that chat bar right now. As we know, the setting for that first Easter was the third day following the crucifixion of Jesus. The crowds praising Jesus on Palm Sunday’s procession had turned into a jeering mob on Good Friday. It had all gone so fast from that Passover meal the disciples had shared with Jesus, for literally overnight Jesus had been betrayed and arrested, tried before the high priest and Pontius Pilate, flogged, beaten and crucified by noon the next day. He was dead by 3:00 in the afternoon, and buried hastily in a tomb. The disciples were hiding out in fear, devastated, not knowing what lie in the future, and whether they would be arrested and killed, too. So they hid out in the upper room, or in their own homes, scattered around the city. On that first Easter morning, the disciples – the “church” was hiding out in fear and sadness. If Jesus had risen from the dead overnight they hadn’t heard or seen anything yet – no “breaking news” on CNN to let them know, no text message and no Twitter feed to give them a clue. Just darkness and isolation from others.

Maybe not so different from today. Many people today across the world are isolated in their homes, if not in fear – at least in confusion about why and how long we will Stay at Home under orders to keep physical distance from each other. 20,000 people in the United States and over 100,000 worldwide have died, with the United States death toll overtaking Italy as the highest. We watch the grim scene of a trench being dug in New York City’s public cemetery on Hart Island, for victims of the coronavirus whose bodies have not yet been claimed, because the city morgues are overwhelmed. While most cases and deaths have been on the East Coast, in New York and New Jersey with the highest population, the virus has spread across the nation to Minnesota and the Midwest. Perhaps the worst thing is that we really don’t know who “has it”, or has been exposed, until it is too late.

So **what fears are you experiencing**, and what are the fears you observe in others around you – or in our nation? Please share your fears in the chat bar – because when we name our fears, we can begin to address them. For some the greatest fear is the unknown, what to expect, and when this might be over. Are we

doing the right thing with physical distancing and shutting down so many institutions and businesses to keep people safe? Some disagree.

This crisis has even brought questions of faith into the public discussion! In a nation where “separation of church and state” has always been an expectation, never mind the misunderstanding of its original purpose, that “*Congress shall make no law respecting the establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof*”, churches, mosques and synagogues have had to decide whether or not to hold public worship services during the holiest times of the year. Most of us have agreed to abide by Stay at Home orders and closed our church buildings, as an act of faith and compassion for the sake of public health and safety of our people (and our neighbors). But for some this has been a controversial order, and a political issue of religious freedom, so some have decided to go on – foolishly, I might add! So most churches are closed for worship today on Easter, when many are packed with worshipers on the greatest festival of the year, which I contend is an act of faith, hope and love – showing good common sense and sound priorities. It could be a better witness to our faith NOT to worship in church today than to “defy the government” and good public health advise and open our doors. So our doors at Redeemer remain locked today, with just a sign saying “Easter Blessings – Pray at Home - Christ is Risen” outside on the lawn.

But staying at home to worship out of concern for each other’s safety is a powerful sign of Christian faith, hope and love on this Easter day. **So, what signs of hope do you see?** Please share them! I see how this past Holy Week on Zoom that our home worship has been just as meaningful as any other worship we do together in our beautiful church sanctuary! Not that I want this to go on forever! I miss singing in a choir and filling the church with joyful hymns to the sound of the organ. I miss being with you all – as I know you miss being with each other.

But stripped of our annual traditions and rituals, we find ourselves searching for meaning in all that is happening around us, by looking to scripture, in deeper prayer, and reaching out to each other to communicate. We are searching for faith, hope and love to overcome our fears – and isn’t that what Easter and being part of a community of faith is all about? God never promised that our worship services would always be grand or that our churches would be full, our economy always growing, that our health is guaranteed, or our lives and future will go as planned. Instead, the heart of the gospel is that God is with us, that God has sent Jesus to be God’s presence with us, whether in sorrow or joy, triumph or tragedy, gain or loss, peace or fear, scarcity or plenty. God our Creator is here, with us, to give us life.

I like what Baptist Pastor David Hulme wrote in Appalachia on April 9, how “*Closing our church doors isn’t a lack of faith, it’s an act of compassion.*” For even though in the conflicting messages given by government and public health leaders these days, when daily events change and common sense seems woefully

inadequate, scripture says “*Trust in the Lord with all your heart; do not lean on your own understanding.*” (Proverbs 3:5) So while the building is closed, the church is still open! [For] the church is a body of believers, not a building...If the only mission of the church is to meet together in a building, then we’ve missed the point of being the church...According to Jesus we are to “go and make disciples” not “stay and make church members.” “So COVID-19 has actually forced the church to move outside the comfort of its four walls and do what I was supposed to be doing all along....This Easter we are not worshipping in our church building...but this neither changes nor diminishes the fact that Jesus was crucified, died, and was buried, and then rose from the dead. If I can’t celebrate the triumph of life over death, absent a building and a new shirt, then something’s wrong.”

But there is hope to come. I close with this powerful poem written by Erika Takacs, rector of the Anglican Church of the Atonement in Edgewater, Chicago, and an organist. It’s called “*A Coming Alleluia*”.

*They say there will be no Easter this year.
No hats.
No hunts.
No hymning.
No lilies to fill a bright room with a fanfare of pollethn.
No garden, no angel, no victory.*

*They say that our journey
Born in sackcloth and ashes
Will lead us at last to nowhere.*

*And so we sit worried
That the tomb this year,
Will be found, for once, still full.*

*That Mary and the others
Will leave with their spices
And come back home with nothing.
That this year the women will finally end their work –
Anoint and then
Leave empty.*

*Ssh. Be still.
Do you not hear her?
Clucking close by like an old mother hen,*

*Brooding and sighing and
Stretching her wings?*

*Fear not, she says,
For I did it before –
In the silence
In the dark
In a closed and locked room
In a world that had known
Only death.*

*Did I not once prove
Once for all
That there is nothing you can do
No decision you can make
(for good or for ill)
That can stop
Me
Rising?*

So, in Matthew's gospel, on the first day of the week, Mary and the other Mary went to the tomb. There was a great earthquake disturbing the silence, and an angel of the Lord came to roll away the stone. The angel said to the women, *"Do not be afraid...Jesus is not here; for he has been raised....Go quickly and tell his disciples that he has been raised from the dead...So they left the tomb quickly with fear and great joy, and ran to tell the disciples...On the way Jesus met them and said "Greetings!" and they fell at his feet and worshiped him, Then Jesus said to them, "Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me."*

So sisters and brothers of Redeemer: do not be afraid, no matter what happens. Christ is risen! The tomb is empty. The church of faith in our hearts is full! God is with us and God is love. With faith and hope in God and love for one another, we have nothing to fear even in such a time as this. Thanks be to God. Amen.

"A Coming Alleluia" by Erika Takacs, Earth & Altar Magazine, April 2, 2020