

## **EASTER SERMON 2020**

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### **GRIEF INTERRUPTED**

Mary Magdalene and a woman we know only as 'the other Mary' went to the tomb. It was dawn. It was the first day of the week.

In grief, human beings are as instinctive as animals. We go to the tomb to go to the tomb. There is no reason, except that we must. In grief without end, darkness on all sides, we go to lie down next to the rock of loss, cold and hard, so the wailing can at last shake through us, so that we can feel what we feel.

For The Other Mary, and Mary Magdalene, this grieving instinct was interrupted. There was thunder and the stone was rolled back. Where there should have been rock to wail against, there was another darkness, another unknowing. What is this? And there was someone like lightning on top of the rock telling them to go tell the others to go to Galilee. That's his message. Jesus isn't there. "That Jesus, you know, the one who was crucified: He is not here. He has been raised." The Gospel says, "So they left the tomb quickly with fear and great joy, and ran to tell his disciples."

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They left with great joy, yes, but also fear. Let's not forget the fear. They had no idea what their message meant, only that they were to bear it. That fear is awe. It is reverence, it something on the edge of ecstasy and surrender. This fear comes from the awareness that the holiness of God has swept in and acted decisively in history. It has broken the present open. It is making all things new. We don't know what this means, or what shape this new life will take. We have only these words "The Jesus whom you seek is not here; he has been raised." There will be time to grow in understanding. Tradition has Mary Magdalene becoming a hermit following Easter. In her cave, she would steep her small human joy in God's joy for the rest of life.

### **TOO SOON FOR RESURRECTION?**

For us, it may be too soon to speak of resurrection. 1.6 million have been diagnosed with the virus worldwide, 520,000 in our country. Dozens of parishioners at St. Matthews have a loved one at serious risk – nurses in ICU's, grandparents in retirement homes, truck drivers and grocery store stockers. Millions are unemployed. Tens of thousands of deaths are yet to come. And we have not been together for over a month in our churches. We are not lighting our church with candles as we process with great shouts: The Light of Christ! Thanks be to God! The Light of Christ! The Light of Christ?

But at some point, sisters and brothers, in our grief and numbness, as we look for a rock tomb to weep against, we are going to find the tomb door ajar. We are going to find an angel who says to us, "Jesus is not here. Jesus is not here in your grief. He is not in your darkness." It is true that Jesus was there. He did die with you. He suffered your rage with you. He walked right into the loneliness with every person who dies alone and he dies alone with them. That is what God does. God journey's in great compassion into every human sorrow to be there for us. Jesus' great joy is that he forged a connection with us in his life and death 2000 years ago, a connection without reservation or constraint – unconditional and eternal.

### **JESUS IS NOT HERE. HE GOES AHEAD OF US**

Our Gospel, however, is not only a Gospel of God alongside us in our suffering, a Gospel of compassion and ultimate connection. It is also the Gospel of Jesus, resurrected, going ahead of us into Galilee. God interrupts the Marys in their grief and gives them impossible news to tell their brothers. He commands them all to go Galilee, to come alongside him in the new life that he has. God is not only with us, but God goes ahead of us, and asks us now to come alongside Him, to go with Him. This is the start of a new life for everybody who says 'Yes.' This is the start of the deep transfusion of his blood, his life, pulsing into ours.

You might remember, from the Acts of the Apostles, that the first name that the world had for Christians, before we were called Christians, was *Followers of the New Way*. This New Way is Jesus' resurrected life, his blood transfused into us, his breath like nectar in our mouths and fresh in our lungs. God came alongside us so that we might now go out and find him, and come alongside him.

### **PRESENTIMENTS OF RESURRECTION**

My church family, my friends, I must on this Easter witness to you that, in spite of the rising deaths, and the rising fear, and the brutality around us, I see strong presentiments of this Resurrection, this New Way among us. Through of this pandemic, God is teaching us new things. God is teaching us, and we are learning from God, experientially.

- God is teaching us, first of all, that Church is not Sunday. And we are learning this! Church is not Sunday; Church is everyday. The pandemic has taken away from us church on Sunday, and so we are being forced to learn that our faith, our discipleship, is not wearing our Sunday best and making it to the church one day a week. Our life with God is realized in how we are in our relationships, our marriages, our homes, our vocations, our families and friends. It is there in our relationship with ourselves. The pandemic has stripped from us the bizarre idea that by showing up at a church building on Sunday we are going to live the other 6¾ days of the week as Christians. Because of the virus, we are being forced to learn that being Christian is something we have to grasp on our own, working out our salvation in fear and

trembling in our homes and ordinary lives. We come to Church on Sunday only to celebrate that. I call this new learning **"Church Reversed."** It is a flipped classroom for the soul.

- So we are learning about Church Reversed, finally, thanks be to God! But we are also learning something else. Through our video calls, God is teaching us about humility and frankness and connection, about being together with our hair uncombed, about being ragged together, in tears together, needy and scared together. I have never seen us be too deeply human together. We are also learning about how, if we had our way, we would drink coffee in church. We are learning how to be humble and human and frail together. We are learning how to be authentic. Thank God!
- Finally, if your home is anything like mine, a place where tempers have worn thin and anxiety has ratcheted high, we are also on a big journey into forgiveness. We are learning how to cut slack – extravagantly, for ourselves and others. We are learning to attend to what really matters because there isn't time for anything else. We are learning compassion here – not maudlin co-suffering, but attention to one another in our craziness, feeling the pain that is underneath our sometimes hurtful behavior, and loving each other there.

God is teaching us, and we are learning so much in his pandemic: Church Reversed, humility and authenticity, forgiveness and compassion: these are essential to Jesus' New Way, his vision of new community gathered around him. He has yearned to teach the church these things for millennia and we are learning them powerfully now. I could go on. There is so much more that we are learning, but I want to mention only one last thing. It's an essential if challenging lesson, and it's about sin. Stay with me.

- The pandemic has shown me the extent of sin, and how it leaves us especially vulnerable to anxiety and despair, to a vacuum of meaning. In the wealthiest country the world has seen it is understandable that we might live our lives a little out of touch with basic human reality – how we would live in bubbles of entertainment and distraction, how we would be lured, amid so much, always to be wanting more things, and better things, and more extreme experiences and holidays. It's understandable that we would live disconnected from how we actually are, and how we feel, entertained by so much, constantly dazzled by flashing screens. It's even understandable that we might ignore the ruination of the planet, the suffering of the poor at the very bottom of our copious supply chain. It's all understandable because we are really simple creatures. But living in this way, on the surface and disconnected, leave us spiritually weak and so easy prey to anxiety and despair and a loss of meaning once our plentiful lives are disrupted. One virus has brought our lives to a standstill and we can see perhaps, in the empty stillness of our streets, that our souls have not always been rich. Our treasure has not been in heaven.

I am learning this. I am learning to see my sin more clearly because of this pandemic. I see how I have been dependent on distraction and plenty, and not enough on God, how I have chosen disconnection because it has been easy.

### **SEARCH FOR THE LORD TOGETHER**

All this is true. There is however, nothing to fear in our Lord as he now walks among us. One thing we will discover about the Resurrected Lord – it's all through the Gospels – is that he does not blame us for sin. He accepts our repentance by inviting us into a new life with him. And that new life is all that we need. The resurrected Jesus, up into the mountains of Galilee – he alone can share with us a life, his life, a way of being, his Way, a truth, his Truth, that can't be undone by a virus. Authenticity, humility, serious individual faith lived in our relationships and in our homes, forgiveness, and a call to serve: this is our joy, our strength, and is untouched by this virus. It is the life of Jesus, now beyond all death and calling us to itself, calling us, because already in us.

Let us go out then, brothers and sisters, and search for our Lord together. Let us scour the hills of Galilee that is our everyday life. Let us look in the new landscape we will inhabit following this pandemic for the presence of the resurrected Lord. It's a mysterious thing that our first Easter Gospel does not present us with our Lord among us, but our Lord going our ahead of us. At least, that is what the women have said. Let us go and search for this one who is our joy, our song, our salvation. Alleluia!