

Sermon – Easter Day

John 20: 1-18

Alleluia! The Lord is risen!

The Lord is risen indeed, and how we need to recall this amazing act of love from our creator at this time of crisis in our world. We are living with a pandemic of a silent and unseen virus that has encircled the globe and does not seem to discriminate in who it infects. Although as with all aspects of life the poor are the most impacted just by the very nature of their vulnerable existence. People throughout the world, our country, and in this city today are full of fear and anxiety. We are living into something that most of us has not experienced before.

NY Times columnist David Brooks wrote and very interesting article entitled “The Pandemic of Fear and Agony,” about the state of people’s anxiety from across the country. It was published in last Friday’s Times. He had previously asked readers to email him stories of their experience with their mental health as they lived into the current mandated isolation. He had some 6,000 responses. In many of the responses people outlined their fears, their deteriorating mental health and the agony they felt from heightened anxiety related to the unseen threat.

College students wrote about their anguish at the evaporation of their futures in a few short weeks, along with anxiety about debt payments that they can’t afford without a job. Widows and widowers spoke of their pain of missing their partners and the family and friends that often sustained them. One woman wrote of being terrified for herself and her family, indeed the whole world. She said she’s now afraid to do most things.

People who suffer from anxiety disorders wrote to tell of the fear of never knowing whether they had washed their hands enough to avoid the virus. Many people were either unable to do what they used to in a day or frantically cleaned their houses or did chores before sitting down and just weeping.

You might identify with any number of the readers’ stories. I feel like I’m living in some parallel universe that has entrapped me away from reality. The disruption to my own life cycle has been very disorientating to say the least, especially the absence of communal worship. With no end in sight to our forced isolation, we have to adjust in whatever way we can to this incredible climate of uncertainty. Uncertainty is not something we humans like very much.

This Easter Day is like no other that we have experienced. Normally we experience such joy and celebration as we gather together here in the sanctuary to marvel once again at the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ and the love God has for God’s people. But today we are a diaspora in every sense of the word. We are scattered from each other but with some hope in our hearts that we unite around the Easter story, through the technology we have.

The Good Friday passion narrative tells us that the pain of Jesus' arrest was too much for all but two of his disciples. Most fled and headed to their homes to shelter from the authorities. Fear filled their hearts and anxiety raised inside of them as Jesus was taken away, crucified, died and then was buried. They had lost their beloved teacher and didn't know what to do.

The day after the Passover was celebrated, Mary Magdalene went to the tomb in the pre-dawn hours and found the stone rolled away. She immediately went and told the disciples and Peter and John rushed to the garden and to the tomb. The body of Jesus was missing. But what had happened?

Inside the strips of linen cloth that had shrouded Jesus body had been removed and placed aside. It is hard not to think that Peter and John were perplexed as to what had happened to the body of their revered teacher. But they hadn't understood, and certainly didn't recall Jesus own words to them about rising from the dead after three days. The men returned to their homes but Mary Magdalene stayed behind.

What happened next was just incredible. Alone in the garden, or so she believes, Mary first encountered angels within the tomb and then encountered a man she believed to be the gardener. Then this stranger called her name, "Mary!" And instantly she recognized this man as her teacher, Jesus. She recognized him by voice but not by sight for his body had changed. Our bodies too, will be changed on the day of Jesus coming when we are resurrected to new life.

After Mary had told the disciples what she had seen, and what Jesus had told her to tell them, Jesus appeared to them that night in the locked room where they were sheltering together. How could this be? Physics as we know it would suggest that this was impossible. But the witness accounts we have verify it did happen. Maybe one day we will have the knowledge about how.

In the room that night, the risen Lord commissioned the disciples to go out into the world as he had done, to follow his example despite their fear of persecution, which was very real. He then breathed his Holy Spirit upon them and commissioned them and then gave them the power to forgive the sins of many. The Holy Spirit had been sealed within them as it is sealed in us at our baptisms.

All but Thomas witnessed this incredible encounter with the risen Jesus. When Thomas was told he very naturally doubted what the disciples had revealed to him. He naturally, like us in many respects, wanted proof, physical proof. The proof he demanded was to touch Jesus' wounds.

Thomas is often maligned for a lack of faith, for doubting the witness of his friends. But in all honesty we all doubt and as humans we seek proof in most things. In so much of life however, our understanding comes from the witness and testimony of others. It would be impossible for us to know everything about the world just so we could say that all has been proven to us beyond doubt.

Most of our lives is based on faith in the knowledge revealed by others, corroborated by still other people, to distill the truth. For example we can't see the coronavirus but know only too well that it exists and that it makes people very sick and kills many. We read the stories of those treating the sick and those that have survived, all of which have first-hand knowledge. And so we believe them. We believe their truth.

Truth is foundational to our understanding of the world and it is why truth is crucial to the stability of the world. Jesus came into the world to testify to the truth, but at his trial, Pilate rejected Jesus truth. Truth, as we know is the first casualty of an authoritarian regime.

So the doubt that Thomas expressed to his friends was really a reflection of a healthy, enquiring mind. We are told that sometime later Jesus appeared again to the disciples when Thomas was present. When Jesus invited him to touch his wounds, Thomas instantly believed and declared, "My Lord and my God!"

When we encounter Jesus Christ in our own lives, mainly through the work of the Holy Spirit within us, and the testimony of believers, we slowly come to understand the nature of God and the whole arc of God's salvation that has been playing out since the beginning of time. God has always wanted to redeem us from ourselves and our own selfish actions. Jesus lived to show us how this would be done.

Over time our faith matures as we live into it, appraising ourselves of knowledge through the reading of scripture, connecting in prayer with God and feeling the desire to help others as the Spirit of God grows in us. The Apostle Paul wrote to the Corinthian Church, reminding them that he was treating them as infants in Christ because there was still jealousy and quarreling within the community.

When we mature in faith we move on to "solid food" and a deeper life in the Spirit of God. In other words, we always have to grow into our faith as the Holy Spirit guides us and by growing in faith we lean in more and find strength and comfort in God.

This is the essential essence of Easter. God sent Jesus into the world to be a witness to God's love for all people and to show them the way back to full relations with God. When the state killed him, God raised Jesus from the dead, something no one had really witnessed before. It was a first. Even the disciples who had spent three years with Jesus failed to truly understand what he had told them multiple times before – that he had to die but on the third day he would rise to defeat death.

When they finally experienced Jesus as the risen Lord, their lives changed dramatically. No longer trapped by fear and sadness at Jesus death. They were now released from fear and isolation to go out into the world and to change it by their witness. The disciples of Jesus, including Paul, who had his own separate encounter with the risen Lord, and all those who have

followed since, have changed the world by their witness. And now we too can change the world for the better.

Hope for change grows out of a crisis. If this country, and many around the world, do not grow into more compassionate societies because of the current health crisis then the trauma and challenge of the time would have all been in vain. The suffering would have been in vain. The economic damage would have been in vain. So we are renewed in Jesus' call to follow him, to go out into the world, to be resurrected anew and to change the world.

Here at St Luke and St Matthew, we are responding to this call. We continue to reflect on the past witness of the church in this community and now the present challenges, especially learning from what we are experiencing now, both spiritually and practically. We will most importantly discern what the Holy Spirit is calling us to do in this neighborhood. How are we to impact peoples' lives for the good, to change peoples' lives through the love and mercy of Jesus Christ, and our witness to him.

We are energized by our passion for Jesus and by our example to the world. We don't go out with all the answers, with an arrogance that we know best, but with hearts of grace, love and mercy to listen to our communities needs and to serve as Christ served us. This is how we will change the world and tilt it ever so slightly further toward a just and compassionate place to live and raise a family.

This is resurrection in the 21st century. This is the essential Easter message.

My prayer for you all on this day of the Feast of the Resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ is that you use this time to reflect on your life, your life with family, with your friends, your life with Jesus Christ to discern what you see as being foundational to build upon and what you see as being waste to discard.

May you feel the presence of the Holy Spirit in your very being this Easter season and listen to the still, small voice of God calling you to rise and change the world, following in the footsteps of Jesus Christ, and his apostles and disciples.

May you all be blessed on this Easter Day and in the days ahead.

Amen