

Transfiguration
Dallas, Texas

Acts 10: 34-43

Psalm 118:1-2, 14-24

Colossians 3:1-4

Matthew 28:1-10

Okay, everyone, whoever took on a global pandemic as their Lenten discipline, you can stop now. The Easter bunny came out and didn't see his shadow, so Lent is over. The rest of us are ready to move on, now. Pretty please.

If only it worked that way.

Easter is here, and it's supposed to be happy. It's supposed to have flowers and a brass quartet and little girls in new dresses and little boys in suits. We should release butterflies on the lawn amidst the largest crowds of the whole year, and everyone should go home to big meals with their families, smiling and happy.

Well, Easter is different this year.

There aren't any little girls in dresses or little boys in hats. We had to cancel the butterflies and the brass. And the crowds, those huge congregations that fill this and every other church around the world today... you're all at home.

Yes, Easter is different this year. It's supposed to be happy, and happiness is harder to find these days.

But maybe, just maybe, this year we can begin to understand that Easter isn't about any of those things. We've celebrated the story so long that we've turned it into a bit of a carnival, you know, to keep it exciting and interesting and heighten the happiness. But no one was happy that first Easter morning. Comb the stories of the resurrection and you will not find the word happy. The women aren't happy when they arrive at the tomb, and they're not happy when they leave the tomb, either; even after they've met the angel who tells them the news that Jesus is not there, it's not happiness they're feeling. Matthew, Mark, and Luke all tell us that what they felt was a mixture of fear, amazement...and great joy.

If we come to Easter wanting happiness, it's in short supply, especially this year. Happiness is a fleeting emotion. Something dependent upon our circumstances. Something pandemics can take away. But if we come to Easter ready for something more, something bigger and deeper, we can begin to feel what the women felt – that same mixture of fear, amazement, and great joy.

Because what we need right now is not a pretty day filled with fleeting moments of happiness. What we need right now is to remember that the one we call Lord, the one we've been invited to make the center of our lives, whose way is truth and

love, walked out of the tomb that we put him in. There is nothing, absolutely nothing, that can hold Jesus back or keep him down. Jesus isn't afraid of pandemics. He isn't afraid of plunging stock portfolios or depressed economies. He isn't afraid of the powers and principalities. There will always be life on the other side of death. He made sure of that himself.

But he didn't do it for himself. It was always about us. When he stretched wide his arms on hard wood of the cross, it was to gather the whole world into his saving embrace. When he cried out in pain as he took his last breath, it was the weight of all the sin and suffering of the world resting on his soul. And when he died, he died to blaze a path for all of us to follow, so we can find our way to the eternal place he prepared for us.

Which means that the worst thing is never the last thing. Because he knows the way through the valley of the shadow of death. He knows the way through the darkest nights and the most fearsome circumstances. He even knows the way out of the grave. Which is why, even at the grave, we can make our song, Alleluia, Alleluia, Alleluia.

Friends, the world is in the middle of a slow-motion Good Friday. Whether from the virus or the side effects of our efforts to slow its spread, countless millions of people are suffering in every corner of the earth. Not only is sickness spreading, but also poverty and loneliness and despair. And the worst thing is that it seems like the end of the ordeal just gets further and further away.

But remember what we believe. The worst thing is not the last thing, and the time will surely come when this day *will end*. Night will pass, and a new day will dawn, and the world will wake up ready to know the power of resurrection. Because we know that God brings the joy of Easter after the pain of Good Friday. We know that life exists on the other side of the grave. And we know that resurrection is not just something that happened to Jesus of Nazareth, it's what God is going to do to this whole wide, weak, and weary world.

But we need to be ready, because resurrected life always looks different. That's what the gospels show us. No one ever quite seemed to recognize Jesus after he was raised. Mary Magdalene thought he was the gardener. The disciples on the road to Emmaus spent a day with him without knowing who it was. Because resurrected life looks different. Which means, we need to be ready to look different on the other side of this global Good Friday. And maybe that's a good thing. A world that can flip into desperation so quickly is not an Easter world. A world in which billions of people are one paycheck away from homelessness is not an Easter world. A world in which school closures mean millions of children go hungry is not an Easter world. A world in which leaders could think the economy is more

important than human lives is not an Easter world. That world needs to stay in the tomb.

But God will be ready with the new and transformed life of resurrection. God always is. God will be ready to pull beauty and goodness from the ashes. And we, God's Easter people, need to be ready to proclaim that message to the world, to show them how it works, to walk with them along that new and different path. We will need to be ready, with fear and great joy, to leave the tomb and follow Jesus out into the waiting world.

Yes, Easter is different this year. But, I'm willing to trade pretty photo-ops for something more amazing. I'm willing to let go of the momentary happiness of Easter to experience the deeper joy of the resurrection. And I've even come to see the emptiness of this church not as something to grieve, but as a fitting symbol of what we believe. Because as much as we love flowers and butterflies and bunnies, the truth is that emptiness is the real symbol of Easter. The one who was supposed to be in the tomb was not. The one whom the powers put to death didn't stay dead. When the women went to say goodbye to their Lord one last time, the place where he was supposed to be was empty. But in that emptiness we see the power of God.

Yes, Easter is different this year. And we all grieve that we're not here together. But don't let sadness overwhelm the joy. Because this building may be empty, but Christ is very much alive and well.

He is not here, he is risen. Alleluia.