

Easter Sermon
John 20
April 12, 2020
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Let me tell you about the second-worst Easter I ever experienced. I was in college in southern Indiana and I was attending my home church, First Christian Church in Jeffersonville. Easter was always a big deal there, like it is at every church, so I was excited to sit with my family and hear the music and see the sanctuary all decked out in its Sunday best. So that morning I got up and got dressed and headed to church, planning to arrive early enough to get a seat.

When I got there, the parking lot was already packed. I thought, “This is going to be a great Easter service!” I walked in the front doors and could hear the choir rehearsing the “Hallelujah Chorus” in the sanctuary. I remember thinking, “They’re cutting their rehearsal kind of close, the service is starting in just a few minutes.” As I approached the sanctuary doors, I saw they were closed and there were no ushers handing out bulletins. And then a man who was coming out of the bathroom walked over to me, wagged his finger, and said, “Spring forward!” Turns out the “Hallelujah Chorus” I heard wasn’t rehearsal, but the end of the Easter service.

That’s the second-worst Easter I’ve ever had. This is the first, because we are not able to be together to celebrate the miracle that is the risen Christ. “He is risen!” echoes in this empty sanctuary without a response. There’s no choir, no fancy Easter outfits, and the flowers, while beautiful, look lonely. Can we still have Easter if we’re not together to celebrate it?

One of my favorite Easter cards of all time shows God shouting down from Heaven, “Jesus, get up!” and a voice from the tomb says, “Five more minutes, dad!” And God responds, “Jesus, you will resurrect this instant!” We need Jesus to resurrect again this instant, don’t we? We need a reminder that new life is still promised to us in the mist of our own fear, our own isolation. We are shut up in our own tombs, our mobility limited, our freedom revoked, no time table for the stone to be rolled away. We need resurrection this instant.

And yet, people keep getting sick. People are losing their jobs. People are being restricted from seeing loved ones in the hospital. People are dying alone. And there’s no end in sight. No promise of when life goes back to normal, if life goes back to normal. No idea when we’ll be able to go to a concert or a baseball game or church. Good Friday is only supposed to last for a day, and yet the fear and pain of that day has infected what is supposed to be the holiest and most joyous day of the year. Can we still have Easter when it feels like the stone is still there, blocking our way to the resurrection?

Of course we can, because we know that nothing can separate us from the love of God, not death nor life or angels nor rulers nor time changes nor global pandemics. We believe in a God who can walk on water and walk through walls and walk beside us and walk out of his own tomb. Jesus walks the walk of faith, reminding us that even when we are alone, we are not alone. Even in the midst of the most difficult, troubling circumstances, God is here with us.

But that doesn’t mean God can provide us easy answers. And that’s tough, because we want answers, don’t we? I love working crossword puzzles, specifically the New York Times crossword. Because of the complexity of my job, it’s nice to work on a problem that you know has an answer. If you know anything about the Times crosswords, you know they get progressively harder as the week goes on. Monday’s puzzle is a cinch, Tuesday takes a little bit

of noodling, and it goes like that until you get to Saturday, the hardest puzzle of the week. There are some Saturdays when I can only fill in a couple words.

We are living in a Saturday puzzle kind of world. There are no easy answers to what we're going through. And even though we know Jesus has been resurrected, even though we've celebrated it every year of our lives, it's completely understandable if, this year, we wonder whether or not it's true. Life can be so cruel and capricious and inexplicable that, to me, it makes sense to ask questions of God, who has promised us love and forgiveness and protection. Where is God now? Is Jesus still in the tomb? I heard one pastor say that preaching the resurrection this year is like standing in the rain and trying to convince you it's sunny out. There are no easy answers.

But there is one thing. It's tiny, maybe hardly noticeable. You might overlook it if your focus is on all the things that bring you fear and anxiety. It is sprouting like a green bud through a crack in the concrete, like a single ray of sunlight through a storm cloud. Paul puts it this way in Romans 5: "We boast in our sufferings, because suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope. And hope does not disappoint."

That little thing we have is hope. Hope is defined as "a feeling of expectation or desire for a certain thing to happen." We don't know it's going to happen. We don't have any proof it's going to happen. But we have faith it's going to happen. I have faith that Jesus walked out of that tomb 2000 years ago and that he is still walking with us today. Even in the midst of all the chaos and confusion and tumult, Jesus is calling to us, reminding us that he is with us, that there is still reason to have hope.

I've shared this story with you before, but I believe it is relevant now more than ever. I was in downtown Chicago once for an appointment with my MS doctor, and decided to walk back to Union Station to catch the train home. As I was walking down Adams Street, I was thinking about this disease that now possessed my body. I began to worry about the future, what this diagnosis would mean for my health, my family, my ministry. Life would never go back to normal. The future was a complete unknown, and I felt the fear welling up inside. So I prayed, not really knowing what to say. And then the strangest thing happened. Up ahead of me about 10 feet, floating above the sidewalk at about eye level, was a bubble. A perfectly round bubble. How would a bubble that looked like it belonged in the backyard of a three-year-old get to a busy street in downtown Chicago? I walked closer to it and reached out my hand, and the bubble floated right down into my palm – and popped. Out of nowhere, a bubble shows up, a glimpse of pure beauty along a busy downtown street, and then disappears just as it reaches my grasp. Now, you could very logically explain to me that my bubble came from a window washer's bucket up above, and that the bubble didn't change my diagnosis or my future. And you would be right. But God doesn't come to us in ways that offer us logical proof or evidence; only in ways that offer hope.

The longer this pandemic goes on, a lot of people are losing hope. At first, they were just hoping there would still be March Madness. Now, they are hoping not to lose their jobs, not to get sick, not to die alone. It's so easy to lose hope. But if the resurrection means anything to us at all, it means there is reason to have hope, even in the gravest of circumstances. If God can conquer death, then God can see us through whatever we are going through. That is our source of hope.

A lot of people are looking for answers, but there are none. A lot of people want to know a reason, but there is no reason. Maybe instead of asking the question "Why?" we can start asking the question "How?" God, how are you at work in this world today? God, how can I serve

you in this situation? God, how can I make a difference in the life of someone who's lost hope? At Crestwood, we are blessed with the resources to weather us through this storm, but that's not true for everyone. This world is going to look awfully different when we emerge from this crisis. There are going to be a lot of people who will be much worse off than us, people who have given up on God, people who have lost hope.

I want to encourage you today to look for signs of hope around you. How is God at work? I'm amazed at how this crisis has brought at the best of humanity through expressions of solidarity and connectedness. If I watch one more video of a teacher parade, my tear ducts may fall out from overuse. People making homemade masks for frontline workers. Kids talking virtually with nursing home residents. Random acts of kindness exploding like a hope bomb in our communities. There is so many reasons to believe that Jesus is indeed alive and at work in our world today, not only around us, but in us and through us.

So what do you choose today? Because it's your choice. You can choose to focus on all the reasons that exist to be fearful. You can choose to worry constantly about a future that is unpredictable. You can choose to participate in the divisive partisanship, to cast negativity in one direction or another, to point a finger so that we can have an enemy to blame. You can choose those things, because a lot of people are.

Or you can choose hope. You can choose to believe that even an insidious virus can't stop the spread of Easter. You can choose to believe that God is at work, eliciting from us the best we have to offer, inspiring us to speak words of joy and grace into the darkness. You can choose to see the resilient ways people are getting through this together, tangibly demonstrating God's love in this disconnected world.

So, what do you think? What's your choice? Is Jesus still shut up in the tomb? Did death actually win? Has God abandoned us? Is this still Good Friday? I look around my world and I see beauty and joy and the unquenchable spirit of God's people refusing to be defeated, refusing to stop believing in God's promises. And I, once again, choose hope. How about you?