

**Easter 2019 - April 21, 2019**

**Acts 10:34-43; Ps. 118:1-2, 14-24; I Cor. 15:19-26; Luke 24:1-12**

**St. Peter's Episcopal Church**

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Before we rush to celebratory “Alleluias,” I want to ask us to stay within the context of this gospel reading for a few moments, to place ourselves in the sandals of those followers of Jesus on that first day of the week. Jesus had just been put to a grizzly death...by hanging...nailed to a cross. Once dead, Joseph of Arimathea, a follower of Jesus, was concerned that the body not remain hanging on the cross during the Sabbath. Receiving permission from Pilate, he placed the body of Jesus in a tomb. Women who had followed Jesus from Galilee watched from a distance, and when the great stone was rolled against the entrance of the tomb, they all left for the observance of Sabbath.

What a somber Sabbath that must have been. They had just witnessed the worst of humanity—three humans tortured to death before their eyes, and worst than that, one of them was Jesus, a man who dared to put people first, who cared for everyone regardless of class, gender, ethnicity, even religion, but who had come to be seen as a threat by those who guarded the boundaries of that religion. An innocent man who taught the way of humility and servanthood—dead. They must have been in stunned disbelief and grief. And worse, maybe they even wondered—where is God?

I think we've all had times like that. I suspect it's not possible to get through this human journey of life without hitting a “cross” at some point. That was on my mind yesterday. Yesterday, April 20th, was the 20th year after the school shootings at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado. I was a pastor there then. That day was one of stunned horror, but that night was worse. They do things differently now, but then the school was barricaded as a crime scene and because of concerns regarding explosives, the school was methodically checked—every inch—as the bodies of those who were murdered stayed right where they were. Parents, whose children hadn't reunited with them by that evening, huddled together through the night at a neighboring school hoping beyond hope that their daughter, their son was hiding—not realizing it was safe to come out—somewhere in that school—alive, not dead.

Then today, we woke up to learn that over 200 people were killed and over 400 injured in Sri Lankan violence when three hotels and three churches were targeted—the churches while people were gathered for Easter Sunday worship.

Holy Week began with the inferno images of the Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris—a fire that shocked the world—a symbol of Christian presence and message in the world and through history going up in flames at the beginning of the most Holy Week of the Christian religion. Before that, though, much less publicized, in late March/early April, three churches in Louisiana burned to the ground, all historic churches, places of Christian hope and strength for African American communities. But those churches were torched, not an accident but arson, stoked by the twisted hate of a young man barely old enough to vote.

Meanwhile, we've been hearing a steady stream of reports about politicians who care more about their own image, their own power, their own wealth than they do about the good of the countries and the people they are supposed to be serving. We have unprecedented numbers of refugees and immigrants fleeing conditions none of us would want to live under while others are

intentionally stoking fears of race, ethnicity, and “the other.” Increasingly, we are receiving alarming reports of climate change and implications around the world that are dire.

We might wonder. Is this day when we celebrate Easter just an attempt at a temporary respite, a collective, even conspiratorial longing to lift our spirits for a day, in an otherwise grim reality of pain, suffering, greed, and hatred? Does the message of Easter make a difference come Monday morning or Tuesday or Wednesday? Does the fanfare of today, the glorious music, the joyous shouts of Alleluia! have any lasting power, any lasting impact upon our lives?

The disciples, and those women who watched as Joseph of Arimathea placed Jesus’ dead body in that tomb, may have wondered that about the whole trajectory upon which they had placed their lives. They had believed in this Jesus. They had placed their hope and their futures in him. Now, not only was he gone, but brutally destroyed by those who turned on him, who rejected the message he was bringing into the world.

And yet, that next morning, as soon as dawn began to appear following the Sabbath, the women made their way back to the tomb, spices in hand because there hadn’t been time for the ritual anointing of Jesus’ body before the Sabbath. So, they went. Frankly, I don’t know what they were thinking. Had they forgotten about that great stone? How were they going to roll that away? And where were the men? They were hiding behind locked doors—afraid of what might happen to them now that Jesus was dead.

But the women went—and quite a few of them—Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and other women who weren’t named. No doubt, they, too, were fearful. Was it safe to be out? Who might be watching? In what condition would they find Jesus’ body? But their hearts must have been so heavy with grief and their longing so great to tend to Jesus’s body with the ritual anointing, that they didn’t care. They were going. Don’t tell a mother, a sister, a lover to stay away when a child, a brother, or a loved one needs them. They will be there, no matter the danger. And it appears that these women knew what women have always known, there is strength and solidarity in numbers. I am reminded of Leymah Gbowee who was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2011. When civil war, corruption, and abuse were rampant in her country of Liberia and the men too enamored with guns and power grabs to seek peace, she organized the women, Christian and Muslim together, to stage massive sit-ins for peace and even a sex strike because the quest for peace needed to involve all of them. Those women brought the men to the table and their nation to peace. Leymah knew that it is the women who lose their sons and husbands in conflict and who suffer the most, and she knew, that women working together, have the power to become an unstoppable force. The women in our gospel today were headed for that tomb—soldiers? a great stone in their way?—nothing was going to deter them.

But they weren’t prepared for what they encountered. The tomb was open. The stone rolled away. They dared to go in. Jesus’ body was gone. Had someone stolen Jesus? What was happening? Then, suddenly two men in dazzling clothes were standing beside them. They fell with faces to the ground, terrified. But the men said to them, **“Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen.”** They reminded the women what Jesus had said before his death—the exact sequence—that he would be handed over, crucified, and on the third day rise again. That had made no sense to them then. Could it be true? Could Jesus really, truly have defeated death? Could he be alive? **“Why do you look for the living among the dead?”** The women had come to the tomb to find death not life.

How often in *our* lives do we expect to find death?—after a relationship ends, after the loss of a job, after retirement, after a medical diagnosis, after a loved one dies. Can it be that there can be life again? What about the dead and injured in Sri Lanka? The Columbine survivors? The Notre Dame Cathedral? The church communities in Louisiana that have no church buildings in which to celebrate Easter this year? At the heart of this gospel story is a resounding NO to death and YES to life. “Yes” in ways that we don’t rationally understand, “Yes” in ways that will come unexpectedly and surprisingly, “Yes” in ways that we won’t understand at first but that will be made clear to us over time. The witness of the Bible is that this mystery we call faith, is not magic but a God committed to a deep and everlasting relationship with us, God’s created, a relationship that is marked by love, grace, and mercy that is beyond anything we are capable of or that we have experienced in this human life; a God who entered into human flesh and the experience of human pain and suffering even death and then defeated death; a God who breathes the Holy Spirit upon us.

That Holy Spirit propelled those women and disciples out from behind locked doors into new life, proclaiming the way of Jesus, the way of love and forgiveness, inclusion and acceptance, humility and servanthood. So powerful was the encounter of that first Easter that they preached and lived the way of Jesus despite persecution, prison, and martyrdom, and that has continued down through the centuries. The power of Easter continues. **Why do you look for the living among the dead?**

This week a group of Columbine survivors as well as family members of those who died gathered for conversation. Amidst deep and abiding loss, many peppered the conversation with the same word—hope. One student survivor whose sister died in the attack said, “If you ask me why” talking about the shooters and why Columbine happened, he said, “it was because they saw nothing but negative in this world and in themselves.” A father who lost his son and who speaks now to young people said, “What I’d like them to take away from Columbine is that there is hope. Over time, we have come a long way.”

Within hours of the Notre Dame Cathedral fire, money began pouring in to rebuild that iconic symbol of Christian faith, but in response, others highlighted a fund to rebuild the three African American churches in Louisiana burned to the ground by hate, that had, up until then, received only meager support. Over \$2 million poured in. “What the devil meant for bad,” said one of the pastors, “God’s going to turn it into something good.”

On the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, Michelangelo’s famous fresco painting shows the image of Adam with a limp hand reaching out to be touched by the energizing touch of God. It is Michelangelo’s rendering of the moment when God gave life to man. In Jesus, God touched our world, and in the Holy Spirit, God continues to touch us down through the generations. This is life-giving touch that propels us into life in the way of Jesus, a life greater than our own sorrows and shortcomings into a life of service with God’s Spirit in this world. And our world **needs** those of us who are dedicated to life in the way of Jesus Christ.

In the great drama of ongoing creation, if hatred and cruelty are to be overcome, it is our hands and hearts, energized by God, by which love will be made manifest in this world.

If our cities are to become places of vibrancy and community, then it is our hands, energized by God, which must form them.

If there is to be a cure for disease of our bodies, then it is our hands and minds, energized by God, which will be the instruments of that healing.

If justice is to be done in a manifestly unjust world, then it is our minds and hands and wills, energized by God, which must build the structures to bring justice.

If the eco-system of our world is to remain healthy and life-giving, then it is our minds and hands and wills, energized by God, which must be united in that effort.

This day and age cries out for us to take Easter seriously in our lives—the promise of new life and the hope which comes with this promise, even with the certainty of death. A portion of a Good Friday prayer in the Book of Common Prayer reads, *...let the whole world see and know that things which were cast down are being raised up, and things which had grown old are being made new.* That is the promise of Easter. So today we are asked to consider—What difference does Easter make in your life, in my life, and what impact does it have on the decisions you and I make and the way we live our lives Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday and beyond?

**Why are you looking for the living among the dead? He is risen.** He is risen indeed. Alleluia. Alleluia.