

April 12, 2020

Easter Day

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Sermon Preached via Facebook Live

St. Paul's Episcopal Church, Benicia

Jeremiah 31:1-6

Psalm 118:1-2, 14-24

Acts 10:34-43

John 20:1-18

A Hard and Easy Easter

Every once in a while, the Jewish holiday of Passover coincides with Easter. This is one of those years. During the Passover seder, families and friends gather and retell the story of Israel's deliverance from slavery. It's a celebration of freedom. There are ritual foods, special prayers, and lots of laughter. There are also 4 questions asked by the youngest child, and they each begin like this:

Mah nishtanah, ha-laylah ha-zeh, mi-kol ha-leylot

Why is this night different from all the other nights?

I have been asking myself a version of this question for weeks now: why is this Easter different from every other Easter? There's the obvious -- I'm here, you're there. Our Sanctuary looks bare and sparse. No egg hunt in the yard after church. No belting out HE IS RISEN, HE IS RISEN from the congregation. We miss all of these things. We mourn them. And we wonder what the Good News might be for us today. How might we rejoice? How can we sing the Lord's song in this strange land?

This Easter is different from every other Easter because it's not about personal salvation, but the salvation of humanity. Jesus Christ is no longer

your personal Lord and Savior. This Easter is different because you don't have to be a Christian to proclaim resurrection and the way of love unfolding all around you. I rejoice today because all of us are doing the hard work to flatten the curve while supporting our essential workers, chalking up sidewalks with messages of hope, sewing masks, shopping for our neighbors, putting teddy bears in our windows, the list goes on and on.

You also do not need to be Christian to see resurrection and the way of love unfolding in the Christian and Hebrew Scriptures. In this section from Jeremiah, part of the Hope Oracles, God reminds an exiled, defeated, and hopeless nation of Israel that they are loved. I wish God spoke with a southern accent because it would help us to hear that this blessing is communal: "I have loved ya'll with an everlasting love." Even though God speaks specifically to the nation of Israel here, we remember the promise God made to Abraham in the beginning -- "I will bless you, and you will be a blessing." A Christian interpretation of these texts would say that Abraham's blessing has landed on us, and we too may be counted among the "ya'll" that God loves. This is the genealogy -- the ancestry -- of the way of love that we walk today.

I noticed something new and, honestly, a little annoying about the way of love in the Gospel reading this year. Mary Magdalene is beside herself, openly grieving and telling anyone who will listen about her sorrow. The gardener calls her name, she realizes he is Jesus and her belief in the resurrection blooms. The impossible has happened, the only thing that can wipe away her grief as if it never existed and what does Jesus say? "Do not hold on to me." The NERVE! Can't Jesus spare a hug? An "I've missed you too?" Or "this must have been so hard for you?" I mean, this is pastoral care 101 here, Jesus!

But here, now, Jesus is more than Mary's personal pastor. He is the resurrected Christ. The savior of everyone in his time and place and ours too and all the generations in between. Mary must have wanted to linger. To stay and be close to him. But the way of love called her to go and tell the disciples. I imagine it was a hard decision. But also, an easy one.

Deciding to walk the way of love is hard and easy. And we are making those hard and easy decisions all the time during the pandemic. It is so hard to stay away from my mom right now, but it's easy because it's the action I can take to keep her alive. It's hard when I remember that we won't get to go to my sister's house after church today and watch our sugared-up children jump on the couch while blasting Baby Shark for the 100th time. But it's easy to do because I want to keep her family safe.

This Easter is different from every other Easter because we have had to love our neighbors more than ever before. We have had to put others before ourselves more than ever before. We've gone far beyond hanging a flag, tying a ribbon, or even building a monument in solidarity. To save our neighbors' lives, we are giving up vacations, family gatherings, and our social lives. We are standing in long, socially distanced lines outside stores only to find that the 1 or 2 things we need aren't in stock. Parents are staying home, drawing on unknown superpowers to handle full-time work and full-time childcare.

All of humanity is making huge sacrifices for the common good -- it's not just the Christians. It's not just the "really saintly" people. It's everyone. We are all making those hard and easy decisions. We are all walking the way of love together.

Why is this Easter different from any other Easter?

Because from now on, Christians can no longer claim sole proprietorship of hope and resurrection and walking in love. Jesus is no longer your personal Lord and Savior but the one who came to redeem "ya'll." Not just the Israelite "ya'll" or the Episcopalian "ya'll." But "all ya'll."

Christ *is* risen, the Lord is risen indeed! Alleluia, Alleluia!