

April 12, 2020 Easter Sunday
Rev. Jen Nagel, University Lutheran Church of Hope, Minneapolis
New life, Raw and Real

Jeremiah 31:1-6, Acts 10:34-43
John 20:1-18

[Debie Thomas in Journey with Jesus blog posted on 4/5/20, titled Risen. Thomas' blog includes the Beuchner quote. Yvette Flunder in Where the Edge Gathers, page 67, chapter 6 titled Someone Has Stolen Jesus. Ideas from Emmy Kegler in the Washington Post video: https://www.washingtonpost.com/video/national/pastors-from-around-the-us-talk-about-how-to-celebrate-this-easter-and-renew-your-faith/2020/04/10/92320d70-c7be-439f-8b87-c15d6eb60028_video.html?fbclid=IwAR2Lkt1j1_LtvkbmyeicHLrIGgew01t_KFnjteBx73gnM_2sEKceVn6d-OM Melinda Pupillo in the Holden Village Voice, Winter 2019-2020, Pastor's Message titled Awakening the Imagination, page 36.]

Alleluia, Christ is Risen.... Christ is Risen, Indeed. Alleluia!

Easter blessings, Easter peace to you, dear ones, in the name of the Risen Christ. Amen.

Let's just say it.

I'd rather we were gathering to worship in the sanctuary at University Lutheran Church of Hope.

I'd rather be surprised by the bounty of the Easter flowers.

I'd rather be savoring Easter breakfast together, and bustling to the next service.

I'd rather be greeting folks and seeing Ruth XXXX's fabulous Easter hat in person!

I'd rather be singing the hymns with the energy of the brass and organ and choir.

I'd rather be preaching and witnessing your faces,

hearing someone dare call out Amen,

sensing the Holy Spirit stirring.

I'd rather notice the tears running down someone's checks,

and how desperately we all need to hear Jesus' promise, God's promise of new life...

...right now, right here, especially right now.

I'd rather all of that...and I know you would too.

And the science is real.

The grief and sorrow and fear are real.

For the love of one another, staying put, staying home, staying connected... is the best we can do.

So still we gather—virtually—but we gather.

to hear again the powerful story of how God creates life in our places of death,

how God will not let death have the final say,

how God mends us, forgives us, recreates and heals us,

making our dusty brokenness beautiful and vital.

That's what I tell you every Easter, isn't it? That God makes a way, that Love wins.

And God does. Love does.

But truth be told, this year I also share the struggle that Debie Thomas articulates, writing from California.

Maybe it's a struggle that lingers in you, too:

She says, "What does it mean . . . to celebrate resurrection when people near and far are dying by the thousands?"

"What good can it do to insist that the tomb is empty when body bags are in short supply, mortuaries are at capacity, and mourners can't gather to bury their dead?"

Friends, when we're honest, there is something raw about this Easter Gospel story.

It's there every year, just ask someone with fresh grief,
ask someone who's daily existence is in question.

Over time, though, the resurrection Gospel can be heard so often, the edges get worn and soft.

It takes on a life of its own, like the polished brass and the Easter flowers.

That first Easter, must have been messy, mucky, stressful, confusing, frightening, isolating, even chaotic.

John gives us but a glimpse:

The dim, early morning light, when, as Frederick Beuchner says,
"it's hard to be sure what you are seeing."

The graveclothes piled hither and yon.

The tears, oh the tears, the aching, yearning tears.

The running.

The peeking into the tomb, desperately curious and, at once, utterly terrified.

The tight braid of hope and uncertainty.

Today, as we witness the new life, the resurrection of Jesus,

hear not only the glossy festive sheen, but hear the raw, gut-wrenching realities.

Jesus is risen right here, in the confusion, in the stress.

That's the resurrection mystery we, like Mary Magdalene, are witnesses to.

Mary knows this pain.

Twice they ask her (both angels, and "the gardener" too): "Why are you weeping?"

But Mary lingers; she doesn't rush away, she can't.

She stands witness in the only space she can fathom Jesus should be.

She doesn't hide her tears, she gives grief its due.

Why are you weeping? That's a powerful question in these days.

Why are you weeping?

Are you weeping in fear of the uncertainty of this time? The precious fragility of life itself?

Are you weeping in grief for the loss of one you love, or one that someone loves?

Or the potential of loss? Or for the future our kids will inherit?

Are you weeping for the end of work or insurance, or identity or dreams or stability?

Are you weeping because things feel shaky, anxious?

Are you weeping because our routines are in upheaval and nothing feels quite "normal", maybe not even your faith?

Are you weeping out of loneliness? Or exhaustion? Or stress? Or hopelessness.

I don't blame Mary for lingering at the tomb, for weeping.

Where else would she go? Where else could she look?

And yet Yvette Flunder names an important question when she asks,

"Could it be that [Mary's] need to find Jesus where she left him hindered her from seeing where he was?"

Jesus is on the move.

Always has been.

Bishop Flunder goes on,

"Can our need to keep Jesus where we need him blind us to where Jesus is moving today?"

Jesus is out of the building.

We've certainly realized that these last weeks.

As much as our church building is a powerful tool for ministry, Jesus is on the move—

sheltering with us in our homes and apartments and care centers,

hunkering down with our neighbors who are homeless,

moving through the expert and frightened hands of medical personnel and responders.

Jesus is on the move.

Truth is, in weeks or months, we may dream of things going back to "normal".

The schools will reopen, eventually, they surly will,
but things shouldn't, can't, all just return to normal.

Holden Village Pastor Melinda Pupillo wrote, months before the pandemic:

"How do we wak up and rise into the new life that the Gospel calls us toward?

We have to decide what's dead."

In these weeks, privileges and inequalities have been exposed, the chasm is wide and growing.

Black and brown bodies, low wage workers, woman are being disproportionately harmed.

We have to decide what is dead: Our system needs repair, decades of injustice are square before us.

With new life, with resurrection, comes new realities.

We could cling to the way it's been, that's a natural reaction.

Or we can go forward into the new life where Jesus already is.

This winter we've gotten to know our neighbors at Portland House.

Portland House isxs a Lutheran Social Service program a block and a half from church, on 11th.

At Portland House, 25 men are part of this prison early release program.

That means they are still serving sentences, but they live the final months of their sentence at Portland House.

They hold jobs and work on family reunification.

They practice budgeting or strengthen mental health or education skills.

They secure stable housing.

They are surrounded in this early release time by a "circle of support," community members who serve as mentors and navigators.

This program has been around for years but what a gift to finally connect.

Maybe you've noticed Portland House groups on the church calendar for they are around church weekly using space as others in the neighborhood do, too.

At Portland House, these beloved ones are learning that our bad choices don't need to define us forever.

New life is possible.

What a witness, for all of us: we don't need to be defined by past choices.

Many of you are learning to sew masks these days—a project not without its own agony, I'm told!

Thank you for your witness on our behalf!

So far 80 some masks have been given to programs and care centers around the Twin Cities.

16 of them have gone to Portland House.

In a thank you email this week, their director wrote, “The fact that someone thought enough about them to sew them a mask really meant a lot.”

People of God, Jesus is out of the building, on the move, in the hum of sewing machine needles, and in the hallways and bedrooms and community space of Portland House.

Jesus is on the move, not so much in our polished new life or even the expected places, but in the raw, honesty, in the tender moments, in the complexity of family, in the uncertainty of the future... Jesus is there, with us, with all the pain of this world.

These two questions are with me these days:

- **Where are you sensing resurrection new life in yourself or in our world?**
- **Where are you needing resurrection new life?**

As we move into our next hymn, let's look at the photographs some of you submitted this week under the banner new life.

We are witnesses, dear ones, not witnesses to fancy Easter platitudes, but witnesses to raw, honest, sometimes even desperate new life.

New life in the nooks and crannies.

New life deep in the doubts and the worries.

New life in creation,

but also new life in the beloved few with whom we spend our days.

Here's the thing...we can take more pictures of new life.

I expect to see some selfies in this mix,

for you are not only witnesses to new life,

but you, by God's grace and Jesus' love, are made new again, daily.

We'll leave our media email address open for a while and next Sunday let's see what else we've collected.

Let's witness what God is doing in and through and around us.

May God give you a keen eye for resurrection new life,

and in these raw and challenging days, may Jesus' find you, and take you where you need go.

Thanks be to God. Amen.