

April 12, 2020  
Easter Sunday

Fifth Sunday of Remote Worship due to  
Coronavirus

Dr. Susan F. DeWyngaert

**Ephesians 3:16-19**  
**Matthew 28: 1-10**

**With Fear and Great Joy**

*So they left the tomb quickly with fear and great joy, and ran to tell his disciples. – Matthew 28:8*



Now hear the Easter story from the Gospel according to Matthew:

*After the Sabbath, as the first day of the week was dawning, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb. And suddenly there was a great earthquake, for an angel of the Lord, descending from heaven, came and rolled back the stone and sat on it. His appearance was like lightning, and his clothing white as snow. For fear of him the guards shook and became like dead men.*

*But the angel said to the women, “Do not be afraid; I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. He is not here; for he has been raised, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay. Then go quickly and tell his disciples, ‘He has been raised from the dead, and indeed he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him.’ This is my message for you.”*

*So they left the tomb quickly with fear and great joy, and ran to tell his disciples. Suddenly Jesus met them and said, “Greetings!” And they came to him, took hold of his feet, and worshiped him. Then Jesus said to them, “Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me.”*

The Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

Please join me in prayer:

Risen Lord, in these sacred moments, as we explore the joy and mystery of events of long ago, may the words of my mouth, and the meditations of all our hearts be authentic, acceptable and true. In the glorious light of this Easter, move among us, Living Lord, and surprise us again with the good news of your insuppressible love, in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

It was an Easter like no other.

That's what we're going to tell our children and grandchildren – the ones yet unborn, and the ones who are too little now to remember Easter 2020. We're going to tell them that we made videos of ourselves waving tree branches in our backyards, and for the first time ever we celebrated virtual Communion.

We sang and prayed and remembered Jesus' suffering. We grieved the ones we've lost. And we worshiped. We met Jesus in new ways and we worshiped him.

We worshiped the risen Christ that strange Easter of 2020 —not in the sanctuary the way we wanted. Instead we worshiped him in our family rooms and living rooms and kitchens. Some of us worshiped him in our best Easter clothes, and others came in pajamas, and it didn't matter – because Christ, the Lord is risen! He is risen indeed!

Today, on Resurrection Day, we declare that the One who died on Calvary is alive! He has broken death's terrible hold and shattered sin's power forever. That, we will tell them, gave us our reason to worship!

And while we couldn't be together in body on that strange Easter, we were one in spirit, bonded in the liberating truth – that Jesus Christ is risen today! And by his power we are set free -- free from fear, free from despair, free to live in love.

Today, the risen Christ is glorified! God has heard our prayers, and come to help us in Jesus. And we believe -- God will help us again, help us flatten the curve, help us heal our world together on this Easter like no other.

That's what we'll tell our grandchildren and great grandchildren when they ask what it was like to survive the COVID pandemic of 2020. And maybe we'll include the part about wearing masks and the run on toilet paper– and maybe not.

I'm certain we'll remember the heroes...those essential workers who risked their own lives every single day to keep ours safe. We will remember them and tell their story, the story of the Easter like no other.

You know, we are not the first Christians to celebrate Easter in a pandemic. Influenza shut down churches across America in 1918. In 1793 the African Methodist Episcopal Church -- AME was born from the compassion of African American Christians who served the sick in Philadelphia during the Yellow Fever epidemic.

There were others: the Black Death in the 1300's recurred in John Calvin's Geneva in 1542. The Grand Council of Geneva had to stop Calvin from visiting the homes of the sick.

The early Christians faced two devastating outbreaks of what was probably smallpox, one in 165 AD and another in 251 that killed as many as 5000 a day in Rome.

Sociologist Rodney Stark, in his book, *The Rise of Christianity*<sup>i</sup> explained how the church survived and even thrived during these critical times. There were three reasons the church grew, Stark said:

1. The Christians gave themselves away in service to others in extraordinary ways.
2. They comforted those who were dying.
3. They spread hope in a time of confusion and fear.

We have been here before. Churches that did this emerged stronger and purer for the ordeal.

We will rise!

Today, we know more about how viruses spread. And we have this technology that allows us to worship together – even while we are socially distanced.

I hope you will take advantage of the many opportunities the church offers: prayer and worship, Bible study, service opportunities, along with a healthy dose of family room yoga and chocolate are helping us choose hope over confusion, faith over frustration and fear.

But let's be honest-- our fear of what's next and our grief for all we have lost this spring... that's real. We need to acknowledge it-- and reach out to God.

Jesus did. He prayed, *My God, my God why have you forsaken me?*<sup>ii</sup>

It is not unfaithful to be afraid and admit that we are worried. There is so much unknown to us right now.

We are not alone in that fear and uncertainty. The first Easter was marinated in it...Easter began with an earthquake and an angel, bright as lightning. When the guards saw him they *shook and became like dead men*.

Someone said that those “soldiers had what must surely have been the unluckiest assignment in military history – making sure [the Son of God] stayed in the tomb!”<sup>iii</sup>

The women heard: *Do not be afraid*.

Angels always say that. It's kind of their signature line. But is it possible...for the disciples, or for us? Is it possible to simply pause our fears, to remind ourselves that “God's got this?”...and lay our anxiety aside? ...not likely.

It's better for us to admit our fear and our grief, that vague, or not so vague sense of dread and dis-ease. Let's admit we've got it -- and place it all in the hands of our Good Shepherd who knows our every need.

But listen: coronavirus is not the story. Resurrection is the story!

That angel followed *do not be afraid* with, *I know that you are looking for Jesus ...he's not here. He has been raised!*

Death could not hold him! He's alive, and loose in the world.  
*Go home, to Galilee, and he will meet you there.* That's what the angel said.

So the women ran; they *left the tomb ... with fear and great joy*; they ran as fast as they could until they ran smack into ... Jesus! Alive!

Guess what he said to them? *Do not be afraid.*

They fell down at his feet and worshiped him, which is the perfect thing to do at a time like this, or any time! Worship him! *With fear and great joy!* Fear and joy do not exclude one another. Maybe they sound like an odd combination. But think about it -- life's most important moments are exactly that – overflowing with fear and great joy:

bringing home a newborn,  
starting a new job,  
buying a house,  
entering into a new relationship,  
even death.

In my long years of ministry I have been privileged to be with many of the saints of God as they have passed from this life to life eternal. I can tell you that when death is near, fear and great joy are nearly always tangled up together.

That's another reason why the Easter story is so important now, as we face an unknown future.

Some of us, and many of our loved ones, have health conditions such as asthma or heart disease that make this virus particularly dangerous. We are afraid. And that's a good thing. Healthy fear will keep us at home where we need to be. This is how we love one another.

But COVID-19 is not the story. Resurrection is the story! Because the Lord is risen! He is risen indeed!

Because he lives we will live also! Death has lost its power! *So we do not lose heart.*

Paul writes:

*Even though our outer nature is wasting away,  
our inner nature is being renewed day by day.*

*For this slight, momentary affliction  
is preparing us for an eternal weight of glory.<sup>iv</sup>*

The 19<sup>th</sup> century Scottish novelist and travel writer, Robert Lewis Stevenson, was once on a small ship in a frantic storm. The passengers were terrified. One man finally went out on deck and watched the captain pace the bridge, calm and undisturbed. The man came back to the cabin where the passengers were huddled together, and said to them: “I have seen the captain’s face. We will be fine.”

Mary Magdalene and the other Mary could have said the same thing. “We have seen the Lord! We will be fine.”

As I close, I’d like to share a story I heard years ago. It’s about a health care worker, a doctor who went to serve a medical mission in a village near a river in a remote part of Brazil. A contagious disease was ravaging them. People were dying daily. It was too much for one doctor to handle. He had to get patients to the hospital, which was not far away, but there was no bridge across the river. To reach the hospital they would either have to swim or go by boat.

Only problem, the people believed that this particular river was full of evil spirits. They thought that to swim in that river or even to fall into it would mean certain death. The doctor explained that he had crossed the river unharmed. But they were not impressed.

Desperate to save his patients, he led them down to the riverbank and waded out into the muddy water up to his waist. He began to splash water on his head and face. It didn’t help. People watched him in horror, but they didn’t come near the water.

Finally, the doctor climbed up on a rock and dove headfirst into the water. He swam underneath the surface all the way to the other side. When he emerged dripping but very much alive, a cheer went up from the river bank!

Then one by one, the people followed him into the water, some strong enough to swim, some carrying their loved ones toward help and hope on the other side. <sup>v</sup> Fear and great joy –

As we experience this Easter season, a season like no other, you and I can rest safe in the knowledge that Jesus has gone ahead of us. For our sake and for our salvation He endured the worst death had to offer, and he emerged safe on the other side.

Heaven and Earth rejoiced with fear and great joy.

Easter joy will not remove our anxiety. Let’s be honest with each other about our fear. Our situation is precarious; we know that. But fear cannot dampen or destroy the joy that is ours in Christ Jesus.

The Lord is risen!  
He is risen indeed.  
He is not in the tomb!  
Jesus Christ is alive and loose in the world.

Now we know that death can never have the last word. Because he has gone before us now we...

*Have the power to comprehend, with all the saints,  
what is the breadth and length and height and depth,  
and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge,  
so that we may be filled with all the fullness of God.<sup>vi</sup>*

The Lord is Risen! He is risen indeed. Alleluia!

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<sup>i</sup> Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity*, HarperCollins, 1997, Ch. 4.

<sup>ii</sup> Matthew 27:46

<sup>iii</sup> Thomas G. Long, *Matthew*, 322

<sup>iv</sup> 2 Corinthians 4:16-17a

<sup>v</sup> Max Lucado, *Six Hours One Friday*, Thomas Nelson, 2019, 126-127 adapted

<sup>vi</sup> Ephesians 3:18