

April 12, 2020 – Easter Sunday – Online/Remote Worship Service
Sermon – Here is Love

Easter Sunday has always been a day of celebration;
 a day of triumphant and exuberant praise,
 proclaiming the resurrection of Jesus
 and the new life he makes possible for us all.
 Rafter-rattling hymns and anthems,
 masses of flowers, shouts of Christ is risen,
 churches packed with family, friends and visitors...
 ...most of us have memories of Easter past that make us smile,
 that make us anticipate this Sunday
 as the victorious counterpoint to Christmas.

This year...

...it's different.

Our Easter celebrations are marked today more
 by what is not here, by what's missing,
 rather than what is present.

Our church is empty.

No hymns are being sung by a congregation over a hundred-strong;
 no Easter lilies; no anthems;
 no joyous hugs and handclasps as we greet one another;
 no big extended family dinners,
 no community Easter egg hunts...
 ...I'll stop there.

But this is not the first Easter Sunday marked
 – not by what is present –
 but rather by what is missing.

For almost two thousand years,
 Christians have formally celebrated
 the resurrection of Jesus from the dead together.
 The earliest written evidence is from about 100 years
 after Jesus' resurrection,
 but we probably started commemorating it
 – this pivotal event of our Christian faith –
 even earlier than that.
 But even further back in time than that,
 there was one Easter Sunday
 that was not unlike our quiet Easter Sunday today.

After Good Friday,
 after that final blow-up between Jesus and the authorities
 that led to his death,

his disciples and friends were in a kind of self-isolation.
They were hiding from those same authorities,
afraid to go out because they might be recognised
and arrested or killed.
And they were grieving and confused as well;
Jesus, their teacher and their friend,
this man who called himself the Son of God
and could do such extraordinary things,
who made them hope
for impossible things...
...was dead.
They had lost so much.
So they were hunkered down, isolated, afraid.

Only two women,
perhaps trusting to their gender to make them unworthy of notice,
slipped out and went to the tomb,
so they could properly care for Jesus' body.
Things start to get interesting.
All at the same time, the very ground shakes
and an angel appears
and the stone blocking off the tomb is rolled back.
The soldiers left stationed at the tomb to guard it
fall down, unconscious.
The angel says, as angels so often do:
don't be afraid.

And now we find another space,
unexpectedly empty on Easter morning.
You seek Jesus who was crucified,
but he is not here for he is risen, just as he said.
And the angel invites the two women
to examine the empty tomb.
The angel gives them a message,
and they take off to find the others,
crashing into Jesus himself on the way,
these first preachers proclaiming the empty tomb,
the good news of Christ resurrected and alive.
We'll let those two courageous, joyous women go on their way.
We know where they're going
and we'll pick up the story
of how that good news crashed into
and revived the faith and hope of Christ's followers.
Right now, though;

come back with me to the empty tomb.

The women have run off;
the angel is gone;
but we have two unconscious soldiers to deal with.

We can imagine that they awoke,
saw the chaos of the stone rolled back,
saw the empty tomb.
They go to the Jewish religious authorities
and this second pair of preachers
proclaim the empty tomb, too
– but it's very bad news
as far as they're concerned.
Dereliction of duty, falling asleep on the job...
...they'd be executed themselves, most likely.
If they got caught.
So the religious authorities do a deal with them:
we won't rat on you,
if you tell everyone that Jesus' followers
came at night and stole the body.

We 21st century people think of ourselves as
pretty sophisticated, rational, logical people,
that there's been kind of a trajectory of advancement in thinking
that naturally makes us a bit more worldly
than past generations.
So we sometimes forget that the idea of someone
coming back to life after they die,
of God raising someone from the dead,
was just as difficult for ancient people to believe as it is for us.
They weren't stupid;
life was short and hard back then,
and they'd seen many people die.
Jesus' miracles aside,
no one had come back to life.

Faced with the incomprehensible,
something that is impossible,
friends and enemies of Jesus alike
tried to come up with an explanation.

Someone must have taken the body away or hidden it;
the body was never really in that tomb in the first place;

he was never really dead, only unconscious or pretending.
 Anything but the truth.
 Oh, the tomb was definitely empty;
 everyone agreed about that,
 whether it was good news or bad;
 Jesus was not there.
 That's as close to a fact as we can get.
 The tomb is really empty;
 he is not there.

So...where is he?
 The angel and all Christ's followers
 -even the skeptical ones –
 say that he is risen and alive.

The very unbelievability of that story kind of makes it believable;
 surely if you were trying to start a new religious movement,
 it'd be easier to sell people on the idea of a martyr
 or a vanished, taken up into heaven body,
 rather than a resurrected and alive one.

Most of what Jesus taught about his resurrection during his life
 was open to interpretation.
 And surely you'd pick legally-acceptable witnesses
 – women, after all, were not allowed back then
 to testify in court.
 If you're trying to create an easy to accept
 appealing new religion...
 ...this resurrected, bodily alive
 walking-talking-eating Jesus
 is a terrible origin story.
 No one sensible would make this story up;
 so we're left with trusting the angel,
 trusting the women and the other followers of Jesus,
 trusting the witness of Christians from that moment to this:
 the tomb is empty because Christ is risen.
 For two thousand years,
 Christians have been celebrating and proclaiming that truth,
 not just on Easter, not just in church;
 every Sunday, every day;
 in homes, in hospitals, in books and greeting cards,
 over the phone, in person, online,
 every place that we are,
 every place where

hope and healing and love
are needed.
Jesus is alive, and that tomb,
once a symbol of defeat,
of the end of hope,
has been transformed into a message of life.

Jesus is risen, just as he said.
And that puts everything else Jesus said in a new light;
all his teachings and miracles and insights...
...it all means more and makes more sense.

It's like...if you've ever read a book or watched a TV series,
and you get almost to the very end,
and then there's this totally unexpected twist in the story.
You're shocked, surprised.
You flip back through the book or re-watch old episodes,
and sure enough, signs that major plot twist
was coming were there all along.
It's kind of like that:
Jesus is alive, and maybe,
just maybe,
every other impossible-sounding thing
he ever said or taught
has been made possible now, too.

That new way of living – that kingdom-life –
that Jesus taught and demonstrated,
a life grounded in justice, generosity,
humility and love;
a life of being a good neighbour to all,
of being transformed,
healed and made whole and set free...
...the empty tomb,
Christ risen and alive,
means all that
is possible for us
right now.

From being the teacher to becoming the truth of the teaching,
the resurrection of Jesus,
the good news of the empty tomb,
is that we can experience and even participate
in that new, resurrection life now.

The empty tomb changes how we live now,
and it also gives us hope for a future
where that kingdom-life
of abundance and love
is the whole world's
"new normal,"
for eternity.
So, let's celebrate what's missing today;
let's celebrate the empty tomb,
and even our empty church.
Both are signs of life;
our empty churches and that empty tomb
stand witness to love;
their silence proclaims *that* love
and hope for the future,
and that lives are being saved,
right now.
That tomb,
on that first fearful, cautious Easter Sunday,
really was empty.
Jesus really was raised from the dead.
He really is still alive, and he really is still right here
– and right where you all are –
in our every act of love, of kindness,
generosity, justice, compassion and hope.
Jesus lives, and so do we.
Thanks be to God.
Amen.