

THE EASTERIEST EASTER WE HAVE EVER EASTERED

EASTER SUNDAY – APRIL 12, 2020

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Alleluia, Christ is risen! The Lord is risen, indeed! Alleluia!

This year, more than any other year, the word “risen” stands out for me,
because for something to rise, it first has to fall;

Actually going through death is the only way Jesus could have a risen life.

This year, more than any other year, though,
death has become much broader than the ending of an individual life.

As a priest, the reality of the ending of a person’s life is sacred.

Journeying with a person to their last breath,
weeping with a family after the mysterious stillness of death begins,
these are some of the most poignant times of ministry.

This year, death is bigger. Of 1.8 million infected by a brand-new virus, COVID-19,
over 10% have died, and that’s all since January 11 . . . just 93 days ago.

We all have stuff in our refrigerators that’s been there longer than that.

All the usual reasons people die are still around, of course: heart disease,
car accidents, overdoses, gun violence.

but we’ve kind of gotten used to those. They are part of our human landscape.

This new cause of death is like a scene from *Independence Day* or *Star Wars* –
an enormous alien spacecraft so huge
it covers the entire sky and blocks the sun.

The deaths this virus caused weren’t only those of people,
it has ended normalcy.

Our very reality has shifted in 3 months,
and it isn’t done shifting yet.

For us in the US, the loss of normalcy began
just about the same time Lent did,
in late February-early March.

when the impact of the pandemic began steamrolling through our lives and calendars.

The Rev. Jay Sidebotham, an Episcopal priest whose blog I read,
wrote in the Monday of Holy Week that a friend had commented about 2020,

*This is the lentiest Lent I've ever lented.*¹

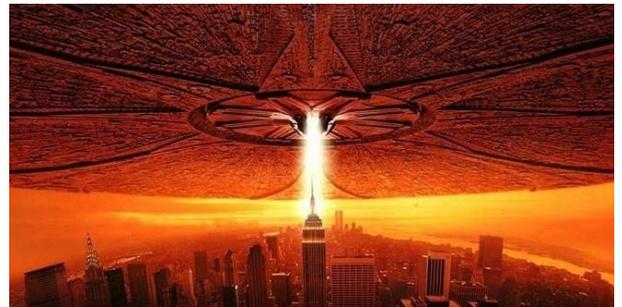
That resonates with me, especially this Holy Week.

All the plans I had honed over 20 years of ministry were swept away in a moment.

Rituals and events that focused on an ancient story
of God’s grace in times of oppression, plague and the death of the innocent,
stories from thousands of years ago that in many ways seemed pretty remote,
had to be interpreted for a day where suddenly pestilence once again stalks and upends lives,
economies, schools, families, and a whole lot of our assumptions.

The question this Sunday, this Feast of the Resurrection,
this celebration of the foundation of our Christian faith,
is whether we can truly embrace what we ask God to do in our Collect today:

Increase in our minds and hearts the risen life we share with Christ.



¹ Jay Sidebotham, *Monday Matters: A Very Different Holy Week*.
<https://renewalworks.org/2020/04/monday-matters-april-6-2020/>

If we can really have our minds and hearts set on God granting us what we pray for, this could be the easteriest Easter we have ever eastered.

The risen life of Christ is the eternal life of God, the Eternal One.

Jeremiah proclaimed to people suffering through the devastating chaos of war – the sword is real, but it cannot cut them off from God.

The Lord, said Jeremiah, says *I have loved you with a love that lasts forever.*

And so with unfailing love, I have drawn you to myself. Again, I will build you up, and . . . you will play your tambourines and dance with joy.

That's the risen life, the live of the Eternal One, and what Easter is about.

For us to have the easteriest Easter we have ever eastered

in the midst of the chaos of disease and economic collapse,

we need to grasp that the love of God is meant for all of humanity, and do what God does:

build people up – all people, everywhere – until everyone knows joy.

In Colossians, we are told *You died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God.*

This is a reference to Paul's teaching on baptism where he says,

all who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death. . .

Therefore, we were buried together with him through baptism into his death,

so that just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father,

we too can walk in newness of life. [Romans 6:3-4]

To walk in "newness of life, we are to *Think about the things above and not things on earth.*

For us to have the easteriest Easter we have ever eastered,

we are to die to all of the ways of living our lives

that do not faithfully and intentionally mirror the life of Jesus.

We are to live such Jesus-shaped lives that when people see our Christ-light shine in our actions

that they give glory, not to us, but to our Father in heaven. [Matt. 5:16]

In the Gospel, two women go in sorrow to a tomb, still walking in the oldness of the old life, still assuming that, as had always been, death has had the final word.

They are confronted with an absolutely new reality:

the man crucified by the perennial human forces of hatred and injustice

has emerged through the other side of death to life beyond death.

The women encounter their Lord, now a risen Lord.

Being "risen" changes everything! death no longer has the last word in how to define life.

Their risen Lord sends them racing off to tell the news of how reality itself has changed:

The soldiers at the very same tomb see exactly the same scene,

and race off to tell the priests and elders the news of how reality itself has changed,

that death has lost its power.

The old forces of hatred and injustice won't accept this new reality.

They are addicted to their elite status and power to control others through the machinery of death.

Appealing to the old ways of greed, denial, and willful ignorance,

the authorities pay the soldiers to lie about what they saw.

Lies don't change facts, but they are excellent at fomenting the chaos

that permits the oppressive forces of selfish control thrive.

Back at the tomb, what did Jesus do with his new reality?

Take a page from the old human ways and wreak vengeance

on everyone who betrayed, denied, judged, tortured and killed him?

Or did he live into the ways of Eternal Life, the Eternal one, loving, forgiving, blessing, equipping

and sending humans to do as he had done, to faithfully and intentionally mirror his life,

and to proclaim the new reality?

For us to have the easteriest Easter we have ever eastered, do you think we need to be like the women, telling the truth about how everything has changed, like Jesus who forgave those who handed him over to die, or like the priests, elders and the soldiers, using lies and violence to shore up their own privilege?

Which has the last word for our lives: death, or the life of the Eternal One, the risen Lord?

Let's not be simplistic about this: we've seen a lot of death since January 11th, and the toll keeps climbing, until as of today it's over a hundred thousand human lives.

Each one of those lives precious to God: mothers, fathers, sisters, brothers, children, lovers, husbands and wives.

We have also seen the death of many assumptions about our normalcy, what we think we need, what we chose to want.

We have been exposed to the tremendous impact one life can have on many, many others – on people we don't know.

A single person can make a choice on something as simple as what to eat that changes everything for everybody everywhere forever.

And although this virus has been called the great leveler,

affecting people of every nation, race and religion,

we have also had our blinders ripped off: the poor, the homeless, and the vulnerable have been far more devastated by this disease

than those of us who have resources, homes, and health.

With so much death and chaos around us, it is so tempting to deny the need to change, to cling to the old reality, especially if that old reality has worked well for us.

Remember, though, that the resurrection of Jesus Christ, God the Son, proclaims the hard truth that actually going through death is the only way we can have a risen life.

For us today, it's not so much about our physical death as it is the need to die to the ways of earth and seek Eternal Life – the things above, doing God's will on earth as it is done in heaven.

For us to have the easteriest Easter we have ever eastered,

we need to faithfully and intentionally seek a newness of life, that God *increase in our minds and hearts the risen life we share with Christ.*

What does a risen life look like, for you? To frame this, I offer another blog post, first published on March 16th, not quite a month ago.

It's *IN THE TIME OF PANDEMIC* by Kitty O'Meara; it has been all over social media.

And the people stayed home.

And they read books, and listened, and rested, and exercised, and made art, and played games, and learned new ways of being, and were still.

And they listened more deeply.

Some meditated, some prayed, some danced. Some met their shadows.

And the people began to think differently.

And the people healed.

And, in the absence of people living in ignorant, dangerous, mindless, and heartless ways, the earth began to heal.

And when the danger passed, and the people joined together again, they grieved their losses, and made new choices,

and dreamed new images, and created new ways to live and heal the earth fully, as they had been healed.²

² Catherine M. O'Meara, *The Daily Round: In the Time of Pandemic*, <https://the-daily-round.com/2020/03/16/in-the-time-of-pandemic/>

There are many kinds of deaths, and every kind is very, very real,
 but there is no kind of death that is more powerful than the love of the Eternal One,
 the God who assures us in plagues, wars and chaos, ancient and modern,
 that *I have loved you with a love that lasts forever.*

God bless each us and every one of God's children this year, of all years,
 with the easteriest Easter we have ever eastered.

Alleluia! Christ is risen!

The Lord is risen, indeed! Alleluia!

COLLECT OF THE DAY:

God of mercy, we no longer look for Jesus among the dead, for he is alive and has become the Lord of life. Increase in our minds and hearts the risen life we share with Christ, and help us to grow as your people toward the fullness of eternal life with you, through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

JEREMIAH 31:1-6

At that time, declares the Lord, I will be the God of all the families of Israel, and they will be my people.

The Lord proclaims: The people who survived the sword found grace in the wilderness. As Israel searched for a place of rest, the Lord appeared to them from a distance: I have loved you with a love that lasts forever. And so with unfailing love, I have drawn you to myself.

Again, I will build you up, and you will be rebuilt, virgin Israel. Again, you will play your tambourines and dance with joy.

Again, you will plant vineyards on the hills of Samaria; farmers will plant and then enjoy the harvests.

The time will come when the watchmen shout from the highlands of Ephraim: "Get ready! We're going up to Zion to the Lord our God!"

PSALM 118:1-2, 14-24

Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good; his mercy endures for ever.

Let Israel now proclaim, "His mercy endures for ever."

The Lord is my strength and my song, and he has become my salvation.

There is a sound of exultation and victory in the tents of the righteous:

"The right hand of the Lord has triumphed! the right hand of the Lord is exalted!
 the right hand of the Lord has triumphed!"

I shall not die, but live, and declare the works of the Lord.

The Lord has punished me sorely, but he did not hand me over to death.

Open for me the gates of righteousness; I will enter them; I will offer thanks to the Lord.

"This is the gate of the Lord; he who is righteous may enter."

I will give thanks to you, for you answered me and have become my salvation.

The same stone which the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone.

This is the Lord's doing, and it is marvelous in our eyes.

On this day the Lord has acted; we will rejoice and be glad in it.

COLOSSIANS 3:1-4

Therefore, if you were raised with Christ, look for the things that are above where Christ is sitting at God's right side. Think about the things above and not things on earth. You died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ, who is your life, is revealed, then you also will be revealed with him in glory.

MATTHEW 28:1-15A

After the Sabbath, at dawn on the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary came to look at the tomb.

Look, there was a great earthquake, for an angel from the Lord came down from heaven. Coming to the stone, he rolled it away and sat on it. Now his face was like lightning and his clothes as white as snow. The guards were so terrified of him that they shook with fear and became like dead men. But the angel said to the women, "Don't be afraid. I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. He isn't here, because he's been raised from the dead, just as he said. Come, see the place where they laid him. Now hurry, go and tell his disciples, 'He's been raised from the dead. He's going on ahead of you to Galilee. You will see him there.' I've given the message to you."

With great fear and excitement, they hurried away from the tomb and ran to tell his disciples. But Jesus met them and greeted them. They came and grabbed his feet and worshipped him. Then Jesus said to them, "Don't be afraid. Go and tell my brothers that I am going into Galilee. They will see me there."

Now as the women were on their way, some of the guards came into the city and told the chief priests everything that had happened. They met with the elders and decided to give a large sum of money to the soldiers. They told them, "Say that Jesus' disciples came at night and stole his body while you were sleeping. And if the governor hears about this, we will take care of it with him so you will have nothing to worry about." So the soldiers took the money and did as they were told.

SERMON HYMN: *God of Tempest, God of Whirlwind*

BLESSING: The God who is creating a new heaven and a new earth, who walks where least expected, who disturbs the comfortable and comforts the distressed, and whom death could not control, now sends you out to announce with your lives that the Lord is risen indeed. Go, you are blessed in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.