

Jeremiah 31:1-6
Colossians 3:1-4
John 20:1-8
Psalm 118:1-2, 14-24

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The Body of Christ for the World

Alleluia! Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! These are the heartfelt exclamations we shout every Easter Sunday. Worshipers dressed in their Sunday best flow through the red doors greeted with the fresh scent of white lilies that grace our altar while brass trumpets and our choir triumphantly declare Christ's victory over death.¹ Little ones wiggle and squirm as their tiny hands clutch their pastel-colored Easter baskets anxiously awaiting for the Easter egg hunt to begin.

But, not this year. This year is unlike any Easter we have known. The pews are empty. There are no Easter lilies, no choir and no brass trumpets. And, there is no bread to eat and no wine to drink. This Easter we find ourselves embroiled in a global health crisis. Instead of being in church we are sheltering in place, watching Easter services online in our homes. Even though we are physically separated from our family and friends, we feel an unusual but comforting connection, a kinship with the rest of the world, knowing we are all in this together. We are one. And, isn't that what Easter is really about?

We are discovering that we are all pretty adaptive and resilient even though we may find ourselves grieving what we have lost on so many different levels. Most of us have lost our sense of a normal routine; going to the office, to school, getting together for a birthday; or, simply greeting a friend with a handshake or a hug. Some of us have lost our moorings, feeling adrift and unsettled, anxious and unsure of what is next. More and more people are losing their jobs in unprecedented numbers while many worry about losing their homes. Of course, the most tragic loss of all is the loss of human life.

Each day the networks report ever rising death toll that is both incomprehensible and mind numbing. To handle the increasing overflow of COVID 19 patients field hospitals are constructed in a matter of days in parking lots. Mortuaries and morgues are running out of room to store bodies while the critically ill are having to die alone, separated from their loved ones who are left to grieve without saying their final goodbyes.

So how do we sing our *alleluias* in the midst of all this pain, grief and death? How can we celebrate the joy of Easter in such a chaotic time like this? Where do we find hope when life seems so grim? I believe that it is times like these, when the world seems to be spinning out of

¹ Debie Thomas, <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/essays/2595-risen>, last accessed on April 11, 2020.

control that Easter holds the most meaning. As the world shelters in place, we need to hear the Easter story now more than ever.

Mary Magdalene knows better than most what it means to live in a chaotic time, when the world seems upside down and nothing makes any sense. She was with Mary, Jesus' mother, and the other handful of women who stood at the foot of the cross and watched Jesus, her trusted confidant, her rabbi and her soul mate, die an agonizingly slow death. She watched the soldiers take Jesus' body down from the cross. Mary stood nearby, frozen with fear and disbelief, as they laid his body in the tomb and sealed the entrance with a large round stone. Now it was finished. Over. Done. Jesus is dead. And, I imagine she felt something within her had died too.

Two days later it is early in the morning and still dark as Mary makes her way to the tomb. She is carrying precious oils and spices to prepare Jesus' body for burial because it is the custom. Overwhelmed with grief she has no idea what else to do other than what is customary. Then, Mary suddenly stops. Even though it is hard to see in the pre-dawn light she senses something is terribly wrong. As she takes a few steps she sees the stone that had sealed the tomb has been rolled away, revealing a gapping black void. With her heart pounding she stoops down to look inside and sees that the tomb is empty. Frightened and confused Mary runs and tells the two disciples closest to Jesus, Peter and the Beloved Disciple, "Jesus' body is gone!" Mary, unable to comprehend any other explanation for the empty tomb, assumes someone has been stolen Jesus' body.

Coming into this empty sanctuary when it is cold and dark it feels much like an empty tomb. As my voice echoes and bounces off these stone walls I recall all the joyful services we have celebrated in this sacred place. These memories of baptisms, confirmations, weddings, and funerals, the milestones of our shared Christian lives, makes it seem all the more empty on this Easter morning. Not in a sad way, but in a comforting and reassuring way. Walking through this empty sanctuary there is no doubt that this is a holy place. Several generations have filled the air with their prayers within these walls, staking their hope and their lives on the very thing that Mary is about to discover when she returns to the empty tomb.

Shocked by Mary's news the disciples run to the tomb to find only Jesus' discarded burial wrappings on the stone slab where his body once was. Frightened and confused they return home. However, Mary remains behind, distraught with grief. Mysterious angels speak to her from the darkened recesses of the tomb. Then a stranger approaches her. "Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?" (v.13). Of course, Mary has no idea that Jesus, the Risen Christ, is the one speaking to her. It is not until he calls her by name, that Mary suddenly recognizes her dear friend and teacher. She is ecstatic with joy. But curiously, it seems almost cruelly, Jesus tells her not to touch him, not to hold on to him. Instead, he tells her to go and share the news with his disciples that he is ascending to his Father. And, Mary, in her new role as the apostle to the apostles, is the one that gives the very first Easter sermon with these five words, "I have seen the Lord!" (v.18).

How ironic that the empty tomb, Jesus' burial chamber, becomes the first sign that points to the promise of new life. It reveals the unfathomable depth of God's abundant love as the light of the

Risen Christ chases away the dark shadows of death, decay and sin once and for all. This is resurrection.

Easter is about our willingness to let go and die to our false self, the parts of our lives that make us fearful; that are joyless and not life-giving. We experience a rebirth and discover the miracle of a new, authentic life emerging within us. This new life is the Risen Christ dwelling within us, inviting us to trust deeply in God. When we do we find that we can bear all things in this life, both the beauty and the tragedy.² As one wise theologian states, “If you believe in the Resurrection, then you must trust death.”³ This is what sets us free to flourish in this new life God has given us a “sacred trust.”⁴ Jesus did not let Mary hold on to him because he was cruel. He sent her to share the news of his resurrected life with his community of disciples so they could experience what it is to be the Living Body of Christ, where we are one with each other and one with the one, true living God.

This Easter, if you don’t feel like shouting our *alleluias*, that’s ok. Maybe this Easter we quietly whisper our *alleluias* softly and reverently, more like a prayer of the heart. In this way we are cherishing this most holy time while also honoring those who have died as we hold on to our belief that nothing, nothing can defeat the love of the Risen Christ, not a darkened tomb or even death itself.

Alleluia, Christ is risen. He is risen, indeed.

² Richard Rohr, *Meditation: Lesson Three: Your Life Is Hidden with Christ*, from the Center for Action and Contemplation, 4/8/2020, www.cac.org, last accessed on April 11, 2020.

³ Rohr, 4/8/2020.

⁴ Rohr, 4/8/2020.

