

## Easter Day A 2020 Sermon

In John's Gospel (ch. 30), the first Easter day begins with Mary Magdalene going to Jesus' tomb just before dawn. She sees the stone rolled away from the tomb, and she runs to tell Peter and John, who, in turn, run to the tomb and see that it is empty. Peter and John return home, but Mary stays, weeping. Suddenly, Jesus, risen from the dead, appears to her, but she does not recognize him, thinking him to be the gardener. Then, Jesus speaks her name, and her eyes are opened. She returns to tell the other disciples that she has seen the Lord. But that very evening finds the disciples huddled in a house behind locked doors, fearful of those who had handed Jesus over to be crucified. Perhaps they hadn't **really believed** Mary's report that she had seen Jesus, risen from the dead. In fact, that's what **Luke's** Gospel tells us: that the other disciples did not believe that Mary Magdalene and the other women who had gone to the tomb had seen the risen Jesus. (Luke 24:10-11)

Now, there seems to be at least a *surface* similarity between that **first** Easter Day and *this* Easter Day. Our church buildings are empty, like Jesus' tomb; we can't look for Jesus there. And *we* are huddled behind closed doors, fearful of a pandemic which has killed, at last count, over 100,000 people around this shared world of ours. If the grief and shock of having their beloved teacher put to a horrible death hung over Jesus' disciples as that first Easter Day was dawning, certainly grief and shock are hanging over those who are losing loved ones to the coronavirus **this** Easter Day – loved ones who are having to die alone, without family and friends present.

It is important, on this Easter Day, that we not *forget* the pain, grief, and death of Good Friday; *and* it is important that we not forget the pain, grief, and death which this pandemic has visited upon so many of our fellow human beings around the world.

But today is Easter, and just as that **first** Easter brought resurrected Life out of great suffering and death, so **this** Easter we see signs of resurrected Life coming out of the suffering and death of this pandemic.

A recent headline provided a powerful image of this, for me. It read: "People in India can see the Himalayas for the First Time in Decades." Residents of Jalandhar, India, 100 miles from the Himalayas, have been posting pictures online of views from their homes – views of the tallest mountain range in the world, which had nonetheless been unseen in Jalandhar for 30 years – until the coronavirus lockdown dramatically reduced air pollution.<sup>1</sup> Is there a possibility that out of this time of pandemic, we might envision a world where air pollution and other kinds of pollution are drastically reduced? That would, indeed, be an Easter event.

But it isn't *just* the clearing of the air that struck me about that news report. The image seemed to have a more far-reaching, *symbolic* meaning. Here was the tallest, most majestic mountain range on this fragile and beautiful earth; and yet, people who had been relatively close to it could not see it for the haze. Mary Magdalene was so close to the risen Lord that she could have reached out and touched him; yet her deep grief over the tomb being empty and the dead body of Jesus gone kept her from seeing the very-much-alive, risen Jesus right in front of her – *almost* kept her from experiencing Easter.

My friends, we've been hearing and reading about various Easter events happening over these past few weeks – there have been extraordinary sacrifices and kindnesses. And many who have been home-bound have come to see that the "haze" of frantic busy-ness had been keeping them from realizing that Jesus is not only to be found in church buildings on Sunday mornings, but also in the quiet and solitude of their daily lives in their own homes or backyards. People have had more time to pray, to reflect, to go inside themselves; and they are finding that God has always been there. They simply could not **see** God through the haze of all the outward-directed, frantic busy-ness of their lives. Going off by himself to pray in solitude was important to Jesus, as we see in the Gospels. Is it possible that this pandemic can reestablish that ancient balance between *corporate* worship with the gathered church community and *private* worship in our homes, and in our hearts? Can we establish new, *lasting* habits of daily, private prayer, and see God in many other places *outside* the church building? If this can happen in our lives, it will be an Easter event.

In the scientific world, it is common that different scientists working on the same problem don't speak with each other; they are each in a rush to get *their* paper published first, or get *their* discovery patented first. But I recently read an article that said that this fragmentation of scientific research has totally changed in our current situation. Scientists around the world are sharing ideas and discoveries with one another with no thought of self-gain or advantage; they are all working toward the common goal of a vaccine or a cure for this virus.<sup>2</sup> Could this pandemic reduce the competition, and increase the cooperation, among scientists in our world? If it could, it would be an Easter event.

The Rev. Jennifer Butler, founder and CEO of Faith in Public Life, recently wrote, "In a culture that is increasingly nationalistic and individualistic many of us see more clearly now that the world is one. Disease knows no boundaries. We are interconnected by our suffering... What happens to one person, one nation, impacts the other no matter **how** far away. We mourn together... We rejoice together. We succeed together, or we fail together."<sup>3</sup> If this pandemic can create a lasting unity and solidarity across the man-made boundaries of nation, religion, and ethnic group, it will indeed be an Easter event.

Today, in the midst of all the Good Friday sufferings and deaths of this pandemic, we see, hear, and read about **many** Easter events happening daily in the lives of individuals, families, and communities across this fragile and beautiful earth.

And yet, we sometimes hear people ask, “When can we return to normal?” My friends, the message of Easter is that there IS no return to “normal!” At the end of John’s Gospel (ch. 21), we read the story of Peter, James, John, and 4 other disciples of Jesus going fishing. It was, at least for Peter, James, and John (who were fishermen), a return to their old way of life – their old “normal” *before* Jesus called them away from their nets to fish for people. But their attempt to return to “normal” doesn’t work! All night long, they throw their net into the sea, but they catch nothing. Returning to their “old normal,” their life before Jesus called them to follow him, **isn’t** working. Then, just after daybreak, Jesus stands on the beach (though they don’t recognize him), and shouts to them to throw the net to the right side of the boat; and the net is so filled with fish that they can’t haul them all in. Such is the power of the Easter event.

Their lives after Easter could *never* return to “the old normal.”

In the passage from Matthew’s Gospel which Sally read earlier, what was Jesus’ message that he wanted Mary to give to the rest of the disciples? “He has been raised from the dead, and indeed he is going ahead of you to Galilee...”

He is going *ahead* of us. Not, “He will follow *our* plans.” Not, “He will return things to normal.” No. He is going *ahead* of us, and *we* are the ones who are to follow where **he** leads, follow his way of love and life – new life, resurrected life. He is going ahead of us, leading us into **new** experiences outside our “old normal;” different from our old ways of seeing and living in the world. Ever-new experiences of Easter.

Journalist Gretchen Crowe writes, “We are in the midst of a tremendous challenge. This coronavirus pandemic has demanded that we completely redefine what our everyday life looks like, and it is only natural to want things to... return to some semblance of normal. But we are being offered an opportunity to *examine* our normal. To turn it upside down, to look at it from all angles, and to ask ourselves: Is this how I want to live my life?”<sup>4</sup> Is this how God would have me live my life?

Old Testament professor and blogger Peter Enns asks, “What exactly are we so rushed to get back to? What were we doing that was really so deeply significant on the grand scale of things?...”

“I want to **not** want to just slip back into ‘normal,’ but *interrogate* my notions of what ‘normal’ is. Rather than give the old normal a free pass and simply yearn for it, I want to take this time to ponder new beginnings—even small ones.”<sup>5</sup>  
Easter events!

In his recent book, *Epidemics and Society*, Yale historian Frank Snowden “explores how infectious diseases across time have altered the outcomes of wars, inspired political reform, demolished revolutions, transformed entire societies’ relationships with God, and fundamentally changed the course of human history.”<sup>6</sup>

Interviewer Roge Karma says that “According to Snowden, we [now] face a ‘fork in the road’ as a species. We could either use coronavirus as a justification to retreat into xenophobia [fear of the stranger], ethnonationalism, and tribalism — as we’ve *already* seen in many places; **or** we could use it as an opportunity to build a better, more just world. Epidemic diseases throughout history have prompted *both* sets of responses... How **we** respond to coronavirus will be one of the most important choices of our lifetimes... Where will we go? Coronavirus is a great moral drama that’s taking place right before our eyes. And the script has not yet been written.”<sup>6</sup>

From a *Christian* perspective, that choice might be articulated like this: “Will we allow the life of the resurrected Christ to enter into our response to this pandemic, and *transform* us, both individually and as a global community, creating ever-better ‘normals’ as we grow deeper in the divine life of the risen Christ?

“Or, will we rush, as fast as we can, back to the comfortable ‘old normal?’”

This Easter Day, will we let Easter have its way with us?

Alleluia! Christ is Risen! The Lord is Risen Indeed! Alleluia!

1 Rob Pichete, “People in India can see the Himalayas for the First Time in Decades,” CNN, April 9, 2020, <https://www.cnn.com/travel/article/himalayas-visible-lockdown-india-scli-intl/index.html>

2 Matt Apuzzo and David D. Kirkpatrick, “Covid-19 Changed How the World Does Science, Together,” April 1, 2020 <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/01/world/europe/coronavirus-science-research-cooperation.html>

3 Rev. Jen Butler, “Revisiting the Cross During a Pandemic Holy Week,” APRIL 8, 2020 [https://www.patheos.com/blogs/faithinpubliclife/2020/04/revisiting-the-cross-during-a-pandemic-holy-week/?utm\\_source=Newsletter&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_campaign=Best+of+Patheos&utm\\_content=57](https://www.patheos.com/blogs/faithinpubliclife/2020/04/revisiting-the-cross-during-a-pandemic-holy-week/?utm_source=Newsletter&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=Best+of+Patheos&utm_content=57)

4 Gretchen R. Crowe, “Remember the graces when things go back to normal,” April 7, 2020 <https://www.osvnews.com/2020/04/07/remember-the-graces-when-things-go-back-to-normal/>

5 Pete Enns, “Getting Back to Normal After COVID-19. Maybe. Maybe Not.” [https://peteenns.com/getting-back-to-normal-after-covid-19-maybe-maybe-not/?utm\\_source=rss&utm\\_medium=rss&utm\\_campaign=getting-back-to-normal-after-covid-19-maybe-maybe-not](https://peteenns.com/getting-back-to-normal-after-covid-19-maybe-maybe-not/?utm_source=rss&utm_medium=rss&utm_campaign=getting-back-to-normal-after-covid-19-maybe-maybe-not)

6 Roge Karma, “Coronavirus is not just a tragedy. It’s an opportunity to build a better world,” April 10, 2020, <https://www.vox.com/2020/4/10/21213287/coronavirus-covid-19-pandemic-epidemic-society-historian-nationalism-globalization>