

“A Different Kind of Easter”

“Do not be afraid; I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. He is not here, for he has been raised, just as he said.”

As we were returning from one of our walks around the neighbourhood (the only form of recreation that's currently available to us) Susan and I noticed a car that pulled up outside of the home of one of our neighbours. These visitors seemed to have been expected, since the people in the home came out onto their porch as soon as the car pulled up. The two occupants of the car stood at the end of the driveway holding a sign that wished them “Happy Easter.” After a few minutes of socially distant conversation, the visitors got into their car and left, while our neighbours returned to their house. It was yet another reminder that this is a different kind of Easter that we are celebrating this year.

Easter is one of the most festive days of the year and one that is filled with wonderful memories. As children, it is a time when we race downstairs to see what the Easter Bunny has left us or search the yard for Easter eggs that the Bunny has hidden. It's a time when the wonderful sights and smells of spring surround us, and Easter flowers grace our dinner tables and the altars in our churches. It is the day when Christians fill their pews in sanctuaries decorated with festive colors, with voices united in celebrating the good news that *“Jesus Christ is risen today; Alleluia!”* Easter is the most important day of the Christian year, the day in which we rejoice in the good news that is at the center of our faith: *“Christ the Lord is risen! He is risen indeed! Alleluia!”*

According to the calendar, this is Easter Sunday; but this Easter doesn't feel like any other Easters we have ever experienced. Instead of being filled with people joining their voices together in singing the joyous message of Christ's resurrection, our churches sit silent and empty. Instead of hearing the Easter proclamation in our worship assembly, we are forced to use the internet to communicate this Gospel message. Instead of gathering with our families for Easter dinner, we are forced to dine apart, connecting only by Zoom or Facetime. In the words of a hymn composed by Carolyn Winfrey Gillette, *“this Easter celebration is not like ones we've known. We pray in isolation; we sing the hymns alone. We're distant from our neighbors – from worship leaders, too. No flowers grace the chancel to set the festive mood.”*

Or as John Lennon once wrote, *“nobody told me there'd be days like these. Strange days, indeed!”*

This “different kind of Easter” that we are experiencing is actually reminiscent of the first Easter, which was very different from what Mary Magdalene and “the other Mary” expected when they *“went to see the tomb”* (Matthew 28:1). These two women have been identified in Matthew as witnesses to both the crucifixion and the burial of Jesus:

- “Many women were also there, looking on from a distance; they had followed Jesus from Galilee and had provided for him. Among them were Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of James and Joseph, and the mother of the sons of Zebedee.” – 27:55-56.
- “So Joseph took the body and wrapped it in a clean linen cloth and laid it in his own new tomb, which he had hewn in the rock. He then rolled a great stone to the door of the tomb and went away. Mary Magdalene and the other Mary were there, sitting opposite the tomb.” – 27:59-61.

Now, without accounting for their activity on the Sabbath (Luke reports that “*on the sabbath they rested according to the commandment.*” – Luke 23:56), Matthew reports that they return to the tomb to serve as the necessary two witnesses to Jesus’ death in accordance with the Torah (Deuteronomy 19:15). The women come only to see the tomb rather than to anoint the body of Jesus, since the guard that has been posted there makes anointing impossible, and because Jesus’ body had already been anointed for burial in 26:12 (“*By pouring this ointment on my body she has prepared me for burial.*”). The expectation of these two women was merely to see the body of Jesus in its place of burial and then leave, mourning the death of the Teacher as well as the message that had brought them such hope.

But this first Easter soon becomes very different for them when “*there was a great earthquake; for an angel of the Lord, descending from heaven, came and rolled back the stone and sat on it.*” (Matthew 28:2). In contrast to the soldiers at the crucifixion who had physically and verbally abused Jesus (“*They spat on him, and took the reed and struck him on the head. After mocking him, they stripped him of the robe and put his own clothes on him. Then they led him away to crucify him.*” – 27:30-31), the soldiers at the tomb are filled with fear and “*shook and became like dead men.*” (28:4). There is not report on how the women responded to the earthquake and the angel whose “*appearance was like lightning, and his clothing white as snow*” (28:3), but the angel senses that they are also filled with fear; so his first words to them are “*do not be afraid*,” a phrase that is typically uttered when people come into the presence of heavenly beings (“*But the angel said to them, ‘Do not be afraid; for see – I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is the Messiah, the Lord.*” – Luke 2:10-11). The angel then proclaims the message that will make Easter a different kind of day for these women and for all people: “*I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. He is not here, for he has been raised, just as he said.*” (28:5-6). The women are called to remember Jesus’ words that “*he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised.*” (16:21). For the Roman guards, the empty tomb is bad news, because they have failed in their assigned task and are afraid of the heavy price that they will pay; but for the women, the empty tomb is good news, the fulfillment of Jesus’ promise and a message that is to be shared with others:

- “The angel’s first words, expressed with a present imperative in Greek, strongly contrast the guards with the women: “*Don’t you be afraid,’ or ‘As for you, stop being afraid.’*” The angel is commanding them to reject their current state of fear, for his news brings great joy: ‘*I know that you are looking for Jesus the crucified one. He is not here, for he was raised just as he said.*’ The resurrection has already happened. The stone has been rolled away not to let Jesus out, but to let the witnesses in.” – Judith Jones.”

The women are called to be witnesses to the empty tomb and to be the first bearers of the glad news that Jesus Christ has been raised from the dead. The angel invites them to “*come, see the place where he lay,*” the place where they had witnessed his body being placed on Good Friday; and then to “*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.*” (28:6-7). Instead of being witnesses to Jesus’ burial, the women are now different kinds of witnesses as this has become a different kind of Easter; they are to be bearers of the good news that Jesus has been raised from the dead.

In Matthew, the women are not only the first witnesses of the empty tomb, but they receive the first appearance of the risen Jesus when “*suddenly Jesus met them and said, ‘Greetings!’*” (28:8). As they “*took hold of his feet and worshipped him*” (28:9), Jesus repeats the angels command to stop being afraid, and

them commands them to ‘*go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me.*’ (28:10). Jesus refers to his disciples as “brothers,” even though they have betrayed, denied, and abandoned him.

- “The alienation has now been healed from the divine side; the disciples now know that they again/still belong to the family of believers. The women become not only missionaries of the resurrection message, but also agents of reconciliation.” – M. Eugene Boring.

The different kind of Easter that these first witnesses of the Resurrection experienced are a reminder to us on this most different kind of Easter that while many things have changed in our lives, the one thing that isn’t different is the Gospel message that Christ the Lord is risen, and in him is our sure and certain hope that nothing can separate us from the love of God that is ours in our Crucified and Risen Lord. In his Easter letter to the pastors and deacons of the Eastern Synod, Bishop Michael Pryse reminds us that even though this is an Easter unlike any other, the hope that is ours in the Gospel of Christ’s Resurrection remains our constant source of confidence and strength:

- “Nothing feels the same. Everything seems different. The world really has changed, in ways we are only beginning to know and understand. But some things haven’t changed. And the truth of some things have, indeed, become clearer and more focused. The love of family. The need for community. The faithfulness of a loving God. Our dependence on these things has become crystal clear, as indeed they always have for those within the human family, both past and present, who have found themselves living, like us, in uncertain and fearful times.”

At a time that is defined by what we cannot do – including gathering for worship on Easter Sunday – we are reminded of new opportunities for things we can do on this most different kind of Easter. We can phone a family member or friend so that they hear a loving voice reassuring them in the midst of their isolation. We can learn how to text or video chat with family members, even having Easter dinner via Zoom. One of our neighbours will be delivering Easter dinner to the porch of another person in our development who lives alone and will be sharing the feast via speaker phone. Children will find that maybe the Easter Bunny – who has officially been declared and “essential worker” in the province of Ontario – still finds a way to deliver brightly-colored eggs into their baskets. The way we observe Easter this year is different, but the glorious message we share remains the same: **Christ the Lord is risen! He is risen indeed! Alleluia!**

Amen.