

Easter Sunday  
The Rev. Emily Richards  
April 12, 2020  
The year of the COVID-19 pandemic

*Easter in a Pandemic*

So, this isn't how it's supposed to be. I'm supposed to be here with all of you having returned from my pilgrimage to the Holy Land, replete with stories and experiences to share on this our most joyous occasion. Music from our choirs and instrumentalists that lift our hearts and take our breath away. Sights of children dressed in their Easter finest squirming in the pews and ducking from me when I zealously douse them with holy water. Olive in her bunny ears running to reunite with her friend Alayna; and Kieran desperately trying to get his hands into the baptismal font. An exchange of the Peace that even my most earnest attempts cannot quiet down. Glorious refrains of Alleluia that had been silent for forty days now ring out with unrestrained enthusiasm.

As grateful as I am for the gift of technology that allows us to be spiritually and socially connected, celebrating Easter in an empty sanctuary is not what I had could have ever imagined for this day. This is an Easter like no other. Drawn again into the story of Jesus' last days while living amid a global pandemic, I came to the awareness that maybe this Easter is more like that very first one. Helen Collins, a member of our parish posted this meme on Facebook, "Maybe for once we celebrate Easter differently. Maybe we celebrate the resurrection just as the disciples did: Alone, in the silence, hoping the faith outweighs the fear." \*

While it was still dark, when the world was quiet and still, Mary Magdalene arose alone and went to the tomb. Mary had gone there because she did not know what else to do or where to go. She couldn't stand another minute in that hiding place with Jesus' other fearful followers, pressed in on all sides by such profound loss. Like many who find themselves overwhelmed by grief, she put one foot in front of the other and just kept going. Mary felt compelled to be as close to her friend as she could, even if that meant sitting at his grave. In utter bewilderment Mary arrives to see that stone has been rolled away and the tomb empty. His words were gone, his life was gone and now even Jesus' body was gone. All she could do was stand there and weep. For her teacher. For herself; and for the dream a new world that had died with him. Into the darkness of her solitary grief, a voice calls out to her. "Mary."

In my own Easter proclamations, I find myself continually drawn to the words of other women. Women who like Mary are bold witnesses to the promise of the resurrection. An unabashed fan of Mary Magdalene, Nadia Bolz-Weber writes, "I started to wonder, 'Why was Mary chosen for this role?' I don't think it was because she had followed the instructions for how to make herself worthy to be a witness. And I don't think it was because she fit the high priest's description of an ideal preacher. But most importantly, I don't think it was despite who she was; I think it was BECAUSE of who she was. I think Mary was chosen, because she knew what it was like for God to move; not when the lilies are already out in church and the lights are on — but while it is still dark. Because unlike when the men looked in and saw only laundry, when Mary Magdalene looked in the tomb, SHE saw angels. Mary Magdalene saw angels, because she was not unfamiliar with the darkness. She had the kind of night vision that only comes from seeing what God does while it's still dark. I do not know why this is God's economy. But I do know that somehow in the darkness God does God's most wondrous work and we are closest to the resurrection." Amid her fearfulness, sadness and confusion, with her world spinning out of control Mary Magdalene, dared to show up at the tomb. And in that act, she was the first to come to know the power of God's redeeming love.

In my lifetime I have never experienced such a communal sense of darkness as I have with this global pandemic. I had hoped beyond hope that maybe we could be reunited on this day. And yet even while we must be separted a little a longer there are glimpses of the resurrection all around us. Doctors and nurses sit at the bedside of their Covid-19 patients while holding out their smartphones so that they can see and hear their loved ones. A husband stands outside the window of his wife's room and serenades her with *Amazing Grace*. A young girl arrives home after her final chemo treatment to her street lined with cars. People honking and cheering and waving signs to mark this momentous occasion. In parishes throughout our diocese children are sending cards and drawings to their neighbors confined in nursing homes so they feel a little less alone. Opportunities for prayer and worship are reaching those who would not dare enter our buildings on Sunday mornings.

The most surprising gift in this crisis is that we are showing the world what the Church is really about. In a culture that often considers us irrelevant our fresh expressions of prayer, connection and service are giving strength and comfort to people, embodying Christ's compassion in a time of great suffering. I long for the day when we can pray and laugh and sing and hold one another again. And until that time, may we have the courage as Mary Magdalene did, to show up even while it is still dark, bearing witness to the unbelievable good news that in Christ's resurrection hope is stronger than fear and love is stronger than death.

I end my Easter proclamation this morning with a poem that my sister priest the Reverend Laura Palmer sent to me yesterday. It is entitled "Lockdown" and written by Brother Richard, an Irish priest.

*Yes there is fear.*

*Yes there is isolation.*

*Yes there is panic buying.*

*Yes there is sickness.*

*Yes there is even death.*

*But,*

*They say that in Wuhan after so many years of noise*

*You can hear the birds again.*

*They say that after just a few weeks of quiet*

*The sky is no longer thick with fumes*

*But blue and grey and clear.*

*They say that in the streets of Assisi*

*People are singing to each other*

*across the empty squares,*

*keeping their windows open*

*so that those who are alone*

*may hear the sounds of family around them.*

*They say that a hotel in the West of Ireland*

*Is offering free meals and delivery to the housebound.*

*Today a young woman I know*

*is busy spreading fliers with her number*

*through the neighbourhood*

*So that the elders may have someone to call on.*

*Today Churches, Synagogues, Mosques and Temples*

*are preparing to welcome*

*and shelter the homeless, the sick, the weary*

*All over the world people are slowing down and reflecting*

*All over the world people are looking at their neighbours in a new way*

*All over the world people are waking up to a new reality*

*To how big we really are.*

*To how little control we really have.*

*To what really matters.*

*To Love.*

*So we pray and we remember that*

*Yes there is fear.*

*But there does not have to be hate.*

*Yes there is isolation.  
But there does not have to be loneliness.  
Yes there is panic buying.  
But there does not have to be meanness.  
Yes there is sickness.  
But there does not have to be disease of the soul  
Yes there is even death.  
But there can always be a rebirth of love.  
Wake to the choices you make as to how to live now.  
Today, breathe.  
Listen, behind the factory noises of your panic  
The birds are singing again  
The sky is clearing,  
Spring is coming,  
And we are always encompassed by Love.  
Open the windows of your soul  
And though you may not be able  
to touch across the empty square,  
Sing!  
Amen.*

*\*Meme posted on Episcopalians on Facebook page. Attributed to Casey Kerins.*