

## EASTER – APRIL 12, 2020

### MORNING PRAYER – LOIS HARDER

Living God, we thank you and praise you on this resurrection morning! Just as you appeared to your disciples those many years ago, in the midst of *our* fear and uncertainty, behind closed doors, you are present with us, offering us your peace. We are grateful. And this morning we are joyful as we cling to the promise that we also have new life with you and in you through Jesus. We are joyful in the knowledge that you humbled yourself to become a human being, so that you can fully understand what it is to be fearful, uncertain, sick and suffering. You understand, because you have experienced agony, grief and longing. And then... just as you promised, you brought resurrection, new life, hope and courage.

And so, God, with confidence and assurance, with grateful hearts, we offer you our prayers. We know, gracious God that even as we celebrate the joy of resurrection, there are many who are grieving. We pray for the thousands around the world grieving unexpected and premature deaths from the corona virus. In the midst of this pandemic, God, continue to be present with your Spirit of comfort, of love and of healing. We pray for those who are sick and struggling for their life, around the world and right here at home. Be with them. Bring your strength and healing. Be with the medical people who are caring for them. Continue to give extra measures of perseverance, commitment and courage to all who are caregiving in this time – in hospitals, clinics, nursing homes, homeless shelters, prisons, refugee camps and other settings. We pray for the residents of long-term care facilities as they struggle and grieve, feeling isolated and lonely. Come through those walls to be present with them; let them know your comfort and feel your resurrection hope. We pray also for Darlene Schmidt as she grieves the loss of her sister, far away, in CA. Be with Darlene and her family in this process.

O God, we continue to pray for students, teachers and all who continue to try to learn and teach in these new and strange ways. We give you thanks for our local teachers and students and their families. Continue to uphold and encourage them. Give them new and resurrected energy, ideas and creativity.

We acknowledge and give thanks, God, that there are some unexpected discoveries and surprises in this time of sheltering-in-place and maintaining physical distance. Many of us are finding time and space in our lives that did not seem to exist before. We are learning and re-learning to know friends and family members in ways we may not have done before as we spend hours together rather than just moments and as we create space for conversations and communication that may not have happened. We are watching the earth miraculously heal and revive as the air clears and some of the habitat is returned to the animals and creation. O God, let us see and hear and think and reason with resurrected senses and sensibilities. Give us newly energized imaginations that can dream and hope and move creation ever closer to you and your kingdom. As we pray together the prayer that Jesus taught us...

Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed by thy name.  
Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.  
Give us this day our daily bread,  
And forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us.  
Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.  
For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever, Amen.

## “PEACE BE WITH YOU” – JOHN 20:1-19 – CALEB YODER

The resurrection of Jesus is about the transformation of darkness into light and the transformation of death into life. To believe in Jesus is to believe that this story can also describe the pattern in our own lives. God is in the business of transforming our darkness into light. Both our banners and Laura’s children’s story remind us how caterpillars that “die” and go into a cocoon then emerge as butterflies – a beautiful and unexpected transformation.

This is a unique Easter with us meeting virtually as we face an unprecedented pandemic. It has upended our lives. Our country has half-way shut down to slow the spread of this terrible disease. We don’t know how long restrictions will need to last, and we worry about our health or the health of loved ones. At our house, mostly we are OK, and enjoying special moments with our boys. Other times we feel overwhelmed.

What good news can we possibly hold on to right now?

In the Gospel story, all of the disciples of Jesus were feeling completely defeated. Their beloved master and teacher was horribly executed. They could not fathom a redemptive end to the story.

Mary Magdalene, one of the faithful disciples, came to the tomb to honor Jesus’ body. She is shocked to find it opened and the body missing. Convinced that the body was stolen, she runs to tell Peter and the disciple that Jesus loved.

They all run to look, a rather undignified thing to do. The disciple Jesus loved gets there first but defers to Peter’s leadership, who goes in. All they see are the burial cloths rolled up. This is enough for the beloved disciple to have faith, but at this point it’s not clear what has happened.

Mary is still in grief – the kind of grief you would expect to be worsened if something tragic like losing the body happened. I have read how there are many unclaimed bodies of people that died of Covid, and in order to keep up with so many deaths, New York City is burying them at a rapid rate in the cemetery largely for homeless and indigent persons. What a nightmare it would be to not know how to track your loved one down!

Up to this point, Mary had only seen that the stone was rolled away. Now she actually stoops down to look in as the other two disciples did. But Mary is given spiritual sight that the other two didn’t have: she sees two angels – messengers of God – standing at the head and foot of the place where Jesus’ body had been.

They ask her, “why are you crying?” After sputtering her grief, Mary turns around and sees Jesus. He asks the same question: “why are you crying?” There is nothing wrong with grief. But the question invites Mary to consider a possibility she hadn’t thought of.

Oddly, Mary has the sight to see Jesus, but didn’t recognize him. Is this the graverobber? “Sir, if you’ve hauled him away, tell me where you put him!” It is when Jesus calls her by name that Mary finally recognizes him.

Even this encounter with the Risen Christ is not one she can stretch out forever – “Don’t hold on to me,” Jesus says. Mary has to “come back to ordinary life,” but now she has a message. The word angel also simply means “messenger.” Mary now “angels” the message to the male disciples that she has

seen the Lord. We can relate to Mary in many ways, especially at a time like now, where we are emotionally shaken. Our vision is clouded, until we hear Jesus call our name in some way or another.

The Easter account from John comes up in the lectionary every year. It really should end at verse 18. Verses 1-18 take place early Sunday morning. Once you reach verse 19, the narrator has jumped to evening. But I included verse 19, because of an important detail: the location of Jesus' disciples. By now, they all have to have heard Mary's message, but nevertheless they are behind closed doors and afraid. They have self-quarantined, although for completely different reasons than us.

Into that space that Risen Christ steps in and says "Peace be with you." It's a standard Semitic greeting, but Jesus really means it – *Peace is with you because I am with you*. This Easter might not feel like a real Easter, because we are all staying at home rather than gathering together. That doesn't invalidate our Easter. If Jesus stepped into his first disciples' room of fear, his spirit can and is stepping into ours. Let's be encouraged that we can have a completely valid celebration of Easter while staying at home. Moreover, let's be encouraged that this same Spirit of Jesus is standing with us in our time of being shaken.

The message of the Gospel is that God transforms our darkness into light – the same pattern of Jesus' death and resurrection repeats in our lives. I'm not in anyway detracting from the seriousness of the pandemic or the economic consequences. It's our responsibility to take it seriously in order to avoid infecting and endangering the lives of others. But we wouldn't be true to our faith if we didn't have eyes to see Christ standing with us in the midst of this mess.

Just as we have this compassionate picture of Jesus who calls a grieving Mary by name, God grieves with us. As surely as Christ didn't avoid the suffering of the cross, the Spirit of Christ knows our pain in this tragedy. God sheds tears with everyone impacted. *And* God is working to transform this tragedy.

This transformation happens in multiple ways. For one, the virus is making the inequities of our country and our world all-the-more visible. It isn't an accident that twice as many Latinos and African Americans are dying from Covid than whites. Four out of ten Americans live from paycheck-to-paycheck, and the poverty within our country and community is also about to become more evident. There is no transformation without bringing the shadows to light. As they come to light there is an opportunity to rectify them.

On the personal level, as our routines are so crazily interrupted, we are forced to evaluate what in our lives is truly the most important. How would you want to use your time if you knew this month or week were your last? We are forced to eliminate many of the distractions that consumed our time and energy. For some of us, not having those distractions may force us to attend to brokenness in our relationships. For example, we can't escape the house to avoid facing conflicts or hurts we may have with our families or housemates.

But most of all, while we face anxiety and even anticipatory grief in different ways, we have opportunities to transform that energy in light of our faith in the resurrection. I'll list some of these, but this might look differently for each of us.

We can strengthen family togetherness or be more intentional about phone calls with other important relationships – it's easier to do that when everyone is at home! We can spend time in God's beautiful

creation, such as gardening or exercise. For some, service will be a way to transform anxious energy: making cloth masks to donate or running errands if you are young for those who really should avoid leaving home.

Not least is the opportunity to pray, meditate on scripture, or other spiritual practices, especially if this situation is giving you more personal time. In fact, it would be a blessing if any of you would try journaling about what this unusual time is teaching you, and if you'd be willing to share that with others in our church.

Each of us can think about our own particular set of opportunities, but more important is knowing who we are. We are loved and chosen by a God who lived, died, and rose again among us in Jesus. We have to believe that.

Over the next weeks we will look at multiple stories of encounters with the resurrected Jesus. My hope is that we can spot signs of the Risen Christ who is with us. Christ not only transforms all darkness into light, but invites us to be take part in transforming this ugly pandemic into an opportunity for beauty and love to flower.

Happy Easter!