

Easter Day 2020

Christ is Risen! He is Risen indeed! Alleluia!

And yet it doesn't seem that much like Easter. There is no band in balcony. I can't smell sausage and pancakes coming from the church kitchen. I can't look out in the pews and see the new Easter dresses. The sanctuary is unnaturally quiet for Easter.

There has been a lot of discussion in recent weeks among pastors and worship leaders: What are we going to do about Easter? Do we cancel it? Do we postpone it? One of my favorite Lutheran pastors, Pastor Greg Finke (I like him because he's a trouble maker in every good way that the church needs trouble makers) jumped into the discussion with "You can't postpone or cancel something that already happened."

Then he said this: **"We honor Jesus not by waiting to celebrate Easter till it's safe but learning to celebrate Easter every day when it's not."**

And he's right. Remember what Easter actually is.

Easter is not a great end to a great story worthy of an annual celebration.

Easter might seem like a great end to a great story because it is positioned toward the end of each of the four gospels. But Easter is not the end of the story. It is the end of the beginning of the story. It is a launch. It is a starter's gun. It is the grand physical evidence that sin and death have been definitively removed so that we are now completely free to get up off our pews (or this year, couches) and get on with the living and loving and redemption and restoration that the world so desperately needs.

Combine Good Friday, Easter and our baptism and we become the body of Christ... not metaphorically but materially. Jesus literally took our sin away from us on the cross and put His Spirit back into us through baptism. That means we are now literally the way through which the resurrected Jesus becomes real, physical, tangible and active to the people around us that need Him so badly.

So...

Easter is not about a party for us but a lifestyle for the good of others.

**We honor Jesus not by waiting to celebrate Easter till it's safe but learning to celebrate Easter every day when it's not.**

You see, there is a now and a not yet to Easter. How can that be? Already and not yet? We proclaim Christ crucified and risen. We proclaim the mystery of faith: Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ will come again.

This morning we proclaim the end of one story and the beginning of another, and the years roll on. How many Easters have you been here? Every year it is the same – the same joyous shout, "I have seen the Lord. Christ is risen!"

And yet, each year we know the story is not finished. Our alleluias get drowned out by other shouts, shouts of war or hate, of fear, of pain or confusion. People still lose their jobs. Relationships, be they between parents and children, or between spouses or

friends, relationships still founder and break. People still die. We still get anxious. We still worry. Our hearts still get sick, whether from physical ailments or from the burdens of the world. Dictators still rise and fall, and new ones rise up to take their place. Wars and violence still stalk us.

Yet every year by that ancient formula of the first Sunday after the first full moon after the equinox, Easter arrives, we come and we stand here, and we joyously proclaim:

Christ is risen!

*He is risen indeed. Alleluia!*

Every year we declare our intention to go on living despite the reality around us because of the greater reality of this day. We go on living and loving, learning and yearning, and Christ is right beside us because of this day.

And Christ will come again. It's that mysterious feeling of already and not yet. The poet Mary Oliver knows what this cycle is about. Here's a portion of her poem "In Blackwater Woods":

"Every year  
everything  
I have ever learned  
in my lifetime  
leads back to this: the fires  
and the black river of loss  
whose other side  
is salvation,  
whose meaning  
none of us will ever know.  
To live in this world  
you must be able  
to do three things:  
to love what is mortal;  
to hold it  
against your bones knowing  
your own life depends on it;  
and, when the time comes to let it go,  
to let it go."

Think of Mary Magdalene there in the garden. Three days ago her beloved friend and teacher was torn from her life by a violent mob. She stood on Calvary and watched her teacher die a hideous and shameful death. She had loved him in great measure because of the way he'd loved her. She had held tight to this seemingly mortal man and then she had to let him go.

Then there was the desolation of the time after they had rolled that stone in front of the entrance to the borrowed tomb. The finality of that thud was still echoing in her mind as she came to the garden that morning.

Even after she finds the tomb empty and even as she confesses her confusion to the angels, her grief blinds her. Even as Jesus appears, her grief blinds her, and she can't recognize him. It is only when Jesus calls her by name that she understands that he's done what he promised.

He had planted in her a once-fiery hope, the hope that she could change, the hope that here in this small community around her, she was not an outcast. When she went to the garden that morning, that fiery hope was a small dying ember, but at the sound of him saying her name, what had been smoldering burst back into flame.

What joy in that moment! How it banished forever the sound of that thudding stone!

Alleluia! Christ is risen.

*He is risen indeed. Alleluia!*

Life seemed to have suddenly returned to normal in that moment. But it had not, for the next thing Jesus says to her tells her everything had changed. "Do not hold on to me," he says. In effect: I cannot stay here with you, but I will still be with you.

If she'd looked more closely at him, she might have seen that he had changed. He bore the marks of his ordeal on his body. We know he showed Thomas the nail marks on his hands and feet. We know that Thomas could put his hand in the jagged wound in Christ's side.

Life is different now. Her teacher had come back, but he bears the physical memory of his treatment at the hands of his beloved creatures. He bears the memory of all that his creatures are capable of, and still he has returned and will soon promise to always be here, although his presence will not be the same flesh-and-blood presence as the sight of him that early morning in the garden.

Life is different now. The world seems to be destabilizing before our eyes. We wonder about the future.

Life is different now, but still we must love what is mortal. When we do that, we imitate God.

And we must be Easter people.

It's said all the time: "Every Sunday is Easter" (even in Lent). What if we meant that? What if we used every Sunday as an Easter launch to remind each other of what is already in play? That we are freed up from sin and death for a reason! That we get to be refilled, reminded, refreshed and restored so that we can be recommissioned and head out for another week of adventuring with the Living One for the good of others!

Postpone Easter? Are you kidding? Now is the time to kick it up a notch. Not by adding more brass to the Easter music, or by adding more dramatic effects to the PowerPoint. Instead we remind each other that Easter is already happening. It's not a

date on the calendar but a new reality unleashed. We remind each other that Jesus is already out of the tomb. That Jesus has already sounded the starter's gun. That Jesus is already on the loose in the community. And that He's still inviting us to join Him for the good of our neighbors.

My closing story came from the Miami Herald a couple of weeks ago. (Sunday, March 29, 2020—by Leonard Pitts).

"A few words on the quiet death of an Italian priest.

"His name was Father Giuseppe Berardelli, and he served in Casnigo, a small village not far from Milan. He was 72 and died in a hospital of the novel coronavirus.

"This was on March 15, though reports are just now filtering out. Again, it was a quiet death. As such, it was easily lost in the cacophony of our times.

"You see, Father Berardelli died after he gave away his respirator. He insisted it go instead to a younger patient who was struggling to breathe, a person the priest did not know.

"The biblical maxim leaps to mind: John 15:13, 'Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends.'"

Postpone Easter? Are you kidding me? You can't. It's already happening. And our neighbors need us to live it-- all the while proclaiming our Easter reality:

Christ is risen! *He is risen indeed. Alleluia!* Amen.