

## So This is Easter: John 20:1-18

Norwalk Christian Church, April 12, 2020, Livestream, Easter Year A

---

It felt right to speak to you today from this Sanctuary. Normally, we begin our Easter Sermons with the triumphant Easter declaration, “Christ is Risen,” and invite you, the congregation, to say, “Christ is risen, indeed!”

But this year, let’s begin by stating the obvious--Today, doesn’t really feel like Easter. The cold and chance of snow tonight in the forecast is enough to throw it all off. Add to that empty churches. Pandemic fears. Rising death tolls. Economic collapse. Easter’s when we all show up to church, get dressed up, gather with extended family--Easter is not when we stay at home in our PJs. It’s so good to be preaching in this space...and yet it’s sobering seeing the empty pews. We miss you.

This is not the way Easter is supposed to go.

The calendar says it’s Easter, but it almost feels insincere to declare Easter’s hope today. To speak of hope in the midst of fear? Resurrection in the midst of death? It doesn’t feel like Easter.

But can you imagine a better time than this for Easter’s hope?

---

Marti read for us again the Easter Story from the Gospel of John. It’s recorded in all four Gospels, but I like John’s account the best. It’s the most recent account, the one that was written the most distance from that first Easter. Life had gone on, the church had long started, and the Apostles were old--perhaps most of them dead--when the Gospel writer records an Easter account intended to speak to later generations, who only know of Easter through other’s testimony.

We started our service this morning with that triumphant Charles Wesley hymn, “Christ the Lord is Risen Today!” But John doesn’t start Easter that way.

“Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark...”, the Gospel begins. Not with joys and triumphs high. No boisterous Alleluias. But with early morning darkness.

As the song sings, Mary Magdalene comes to the Garden *alone*. *Before* the sun rises, *After* the stone has already been rolled away. *After* the grave clothes were removed. *Before* the two angels dressed in white appear. *Before* the resurrected Christ appears to her. It’s Easter, and Mary misses it all.

This is how Easter begins.

This Easter scene terrifies her, and she runs from there to tell the Disciples, declaring not the Good News, but her fear: “They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him.”

Peter and another unnamed Disciple rush to the tomb, the other running ahead. Still dark. Still empty. Stumbling, their eyes barely adjusting to the haze of the early morning. They find the grave clothes rolled up. And that’s it.

This is not the way Easter is supposed to go.

But this is Easter, nonetheless. Taking it all in, the Gospel tells us that other unnamed Disciple, who tradition believes is the young Gospel writer himself, “saw and believed; for as yet they did not understand...”

Seeing Easter, but not understanding Easter.

And then...well then, they go home. The first Easter, spent alone--at home--believing, yes, but definitely not understanding.

---

I’ve heard it said, more than once, and said it myself, that we have just experienced the most lentiest lent that’s ever been lented.

But maybe...maybe we are also experiencing one of the most Easter-y Easters that’s ever been Eastered.

Easter at home. Easter in the dark. Easter, in the midst of fear and the unknown. Easter, when you don’t yet know or understand, yet you still can’t help but believe.

This is Easter, too. It’s more than the fancy clothes and packed churches. It’s more than the organ swells and boisterous choirs. This, right now, standing in an empty church while you are all at home--sitting alone or with your family--this is Easter, too.

Because Easter isn’t about everything being right and normal. Easter isn’t about certainty and celebration. Easter is more than eggs and candy and choirs and dress clothes and even Alleluias.

Easter is more than understanding. Easter is hope.

---

Sometimes, hope is a blazing sun, that burns light upon everything.

**[pick up small candle]**

But sometimes, hope is but a small, flickering flame, putting out just enough light to shuffle and stumble in the dark.

This is Easter, too. Easter hope, giving just enough light to believe, while still stumbling in doubt.

Hope, that we will rise again, even though we still die. Hope, that we will be together again, even though we are a part. Hope, that all the sickness and suffering and fear and hardship can and will give way to life and healing and celebration and prosperity again.

**[put down candle]** But Easter Hope is never about returning to the way things were.

Later, after Mary returns to the Garden, she stumbles upon who she believes is the gardener, but it's all a literary setup. We know before she does--this is no gardener. This is the Risen Christ. He says her name, and the familiar sound opens her eyes, and she declares, "Rabboni - Teacher!"

And what is the Risen Christ's response? "Do not hold onto me." Now that's not very pastoral. I don't know about you, but when this is all over, and it's safe, you might have to tell me, "Don't hold onto me!"

Why does Jesus tell Mary, filled with Easter joy, to not hold onto him? He was dead and now he has risen, and Jesus says, "Don't hold onto me?!"

He has to ascend to his Father, Jesus says. So maybe he's telling her, "Let go, I have places to be." But this is Rabboni. Teacher. And in this moment, he's teaching her...us.

Do not hold onto me--don't hold onto the way I was, the way things were. Do not hold onto your expectations of who I should be. Do not hold onto this physical presence. Christ is risen, and Christ is with us, but it will never be the same. Christ is in here. Christ is within us all. Christ presence, in all our flesh!

Easter brings hope--but the hope isn't that everything will be the same again. It's hope for a new day. That the darkness will soon pass, and the light will shine again. And in that new day, a new world will be possible. Not simply the old world, starting up again. But a new world, where personal connection is valued once again. Where families have learned how to be family again. Where society's injustices and rifts are undeniably exposed, and justice can now roll down like a mighty river.

So this is Easter, and what will you do? It just might be the Easter-y Easter we've ever Eastered, because more than ever we can see Christ's Easter light shining through the darkness, showing us God's new World.

And when they finally let us out, let's run from our tombs, out into the world, not re-creating the world as it was, but creating the world as it should be, an Easter world filled with light, love, hope, and justice, where all God's people can shout anew, Alleluia, Christ is Risen! Christ is Risen, indeed! Amen and Amen!