

Hespeler, 12 April, 2020 © Scott McAndless – Easter

Jeremiah 31:1-6, Psalm 118:1-2, 14-24, Colossians 3:1-4, Matthew 28:1-10

It is Sunday, the 12th of April in the year 2020 and my ecclesiastical calendar states very clearly that this is Easter Sunday. And yet the question of the day seems to be, but is it really? The question people have been asking me for a few weeks now is, “Is Easter postponed? Or is it cancelled?”

I mean, I suppose it’s inevitable that people would ask that question this year because frankly we are not going to be able to celebrate Easter today in the way that the Christian church has come to celebrate that day. We are not going to gather in large numbers and greet each other with a warm handshake or familiar hug and the ancient words, “*He is risen. He is risen indeed*” We cannot gather together in one big room and lift our voices in one common song, “*Jesus Christ is risen today, Alleluia!*” We cannot even hold a big scavenger hunt and watch and laugh while the kids compete with each other to win a cache of chocolate.

And, maybe most disturbing of all, we will not be able to gather over this long weekend with friends or extended family and feast together on roast lamb or ham or whatever it is that you love to share with your family. And, honestly, what kind of Easter is that? Is that any way to celebrate the ultimate triumph of our Lord Jesus Christ over sin and death, his victory over the grave. Did Jesus rise from the dead so that we could have such a celebration?

And, instead of finding ourselves celebrating Easter like we would love to do, where are we today? We find ourselves indoors and the doors of the houses where we are are locked for fear of what lurks outside. We huddle together with those few with whom we feel safe. We are shut out from all news, good and bad, which means that anything that might come from outside is something to be feared and scorned. Now, is that any place to be on Easter?

Except, of course, wasn’t that exactly where the disciples of Jesus were on Easter morning? They were huddled together, their doors were locked in fear and while they were indeed shutting out things that were absolutely genuine threats to them and their lives, that did not stop God from acting, that did not stop God from doing something that changed everything, including life, death and the moral universe. Did those locked doors and fearful huddles mean that Easter was cancelled or postponed? No, it did not.



Ah, you might say, but you don't understand. We are dealing with more than just that. On this Easter we are dealing with situations in various parts of the world where the authorities are clamping down, where armed guards are being sent out to enforce quarantine orders and to make certain that certain people who are deemed to be a threat to society do not so much as set one foot out of the place where they have been confined upon pain of... of what exactly? I'm not quite sure if the authorities have got that all figured out, but whatever it is, it is serious. We are living in times when the power of the state seems to be without limit and, while it is being exercised for the good of all right now, it does make you wonder what might be next. These are, at least, somewhat disturbing thoughts. Is this any place to be on Easter Sunday?

Except, well, wasn't that exactly where Jesus was on Easter morning? Once he had been sealed within his tomb, we are told, **“Pilate said to them, ‘You have a guard of soldiers; go, make it as secure as you can.’ So they went with the guard and made the tomb secure by sealing the stone.”** And those guards stood all around the tomb, assigned one somewhat ridiculous duty all things considered, to keep a dead man confined within his tomb at all costs. But however ridiculous the assignment, they were top-notch soldiers and could be expected to do their duty with brutality and excellence. But did that armed guard enforcing that quarantine mean that Easter was cancelled or postponed? No, it did not.

But no, you don't understand we are dealing with even more than this. We are dealing with grief and with loss. For this dreadful pandemic has definitely brought the specter of death in its wake. At this point in time, on a global level, some 100,000 people have died. Hundreds have died in Canada, a bit less than half of them in Ontario. And when you are dealing with unexpected death on that scale you can expect that it is going to affect just about everyone in some way. They will know someone who lost someone or maybe almost lost them. They will be touched in some way by so much collateral damage. There is a huge weight of grief lying upon us as a nation and perhaps awaiting us.

But then there's this other reality that is part of this whole thing, the fact that we cannot deal with grief and loss in the ways that our people have always done so. We cannot gather to mourn and grieve in community. We cannot shake the hands and hug the bodies of our loved ones to comfort each other and, in many cases, we cannot even be with those who are sick and dying to comfort them and ourselves in those final moments. So we don't even have the proper tools to deal with this loss. Is that any place to be on Easter Sunday?

Except, wasn't that exactly where those women were on Easter Sunday. They had suffered a grievous loss of a man who had meant the world to them and yet they had been denied their grief. In that culture, women had a

very particular way of expressing their grief. They would lovingly wash the body of the beloved and then anointed it with oil and spices and ointments. It may seem an odd custom to us, of course, but to them it was a very helpful way of dealing with grief. But they had been denied this when it came to Jesus. He had died in such a way and at such a moment that made the customary observances by women impossible. They had been denied. Such horrible grief and yet no proper way to express it. That's where they were on Easter Sunday morning. But did their grief and the denial of their mourning practices mean that Easter was cancelled or postponed? No, it did not.

Easter doesn't depend on how we feel or where we are or what has been denied us. Easter especially doesn't stay away because we are afraid. Did you notice that in our Gospel reading this morning? There is so much fear. There is fear even in the face of something joyful and wonderful. First of all there are the guards. They are big strong and well-armed men. They have fought in wars and seen things so terrible that they would make your blood run cold and yet they have never flinched. And yet we are told that when an angel appears "**his appearance... like lightning, and his clothing white as snow,**" the courage of these big tough guards completely fails them. "**For fear of him the guards shook and became like dead men.**"

So they are frightened and the women are certainly frightened. The first thing the angel says to them is, "**Do not be afraid.**" These instructions, however, they completely disobey and they leave the tomb "**with fear and great joy.**" So great is their fear that the first thing the risen Jesus says to them is a repeat of the words of the angel, "**Do not be afraid.**" Everyone was afraid. Everyone was terrified. So don't tell me that it can't be Easter because we are afraid.

No, all of this is quite clear. Easter is not dependant on the circumstances, on our fears or on our limitations. That is because Easter is not and has never been up to us. When Jesus was quarantined in that stone-cold tomb, there was no human power on the face of the earth that could have busted him out. Nor is there any sense in which Jesus busted himself out. It was entirely up to God. And that is exactly what God did. He is risen, he is risen indeed.

The reality of the world had changed, but did the disciples know that as they huddled in their locked upper room? No. Did the soldiers dispatched to stand guard outside of the tomb have any sense whatsoever of the magnitude of what had just happened inside the tomb? No. Did the women, still weeping in their grief and frustrated by their inability to demonstrate it as they wished, did they realize that the reason for their grief had just been eradicated? No. But that didn't mean that it hadn't happened.

The women, perhaps because they were closest and most in tune with their own grief, were the first to realize that something really had changed.

Their fear and terror still stalked them, but they were the first to find the joy that was in what had happened. The guards also found out pretty quick, but didn't quite experience it as good news. Quite the contrary!

The disciples, huddled and locked in their room, took the longest. In fact, the Gospel of Matthew kind of suggests that most of them didn't quite accept the reality of what had happened until they met with him in Galilee which must have been weeks or maybe even months later. Even then, Matthew says, some still doubted. But that delay and that doubt did not change the reality of what had happened.

We are perhaps most like the disciples today. We come together virtually and not physically, but we do it because we want to proclaim the truth of the resurrection. We proclaim it despite our fears and despite our doubts. And those fears and doubts may stay with us for a while, I cannot do much about that. But that does not change the reality of what God has done for us in the resurrection of Jesus. I know that it might take us weeks or months to fully experience it, but it will come. It will come, for some, and indeed for all of us at some point, on the other side of physical death and that is a hope that we can cling to in even the darkest moments.

But the promise of resurrection will also come to us in this life, for Jesus is raised for us in this world. This present trouble will pass. We can count on that. And despite whatever vale of tears we might pass through – a vale of tears that Jesus himself understands only too well for he passed through his own – there will be something good that comes out of this for this world because we have a God who specializes in exactly such miracles. This is the good news and it is for all of us today.

To close, therefore, I am not going to use my own words, but instead the words of hope and promise spoken by the prophet Jeremiah to a heartbroken people a long time ago. They seem to be the kinds of words we need to hear today and they are all the more valuable because they are true: **“I have loved you with an everlasting love; therefore I have continued my faithfulness to you. Again I will build you, and you shall be built, O virgin Israel! Again you shall take your tambourines, and go forth in the dance of the merrymakers. Again you shall plant vineyards on the mountains of Samaria; the planters shall plant, and shall enjoy the fruit. For there shall be a day when sentinels will call in the hill country of Ephraim: ‘Come, let us go up to Zion, to the LORD our God.’”**