

- Acts 10:34-43
- *or* Jeremiah 31:1-6
- Colossians 3:1-4
- *or* Acts 10:34-43
- John 20:1-18
- *or* Matthew 28:1-10
- Psalm 118:1-2, 14-24

I speak to you today as a sinner to sinners; as the beloved of God to God's beloved; as one called to bear witness to those called to bear witness. Amen.

A couple of weeks ago, I said something to the congregation in which I said, this is not the Lent that we would have chosen for ourselves, this was rather a Lent that was imposed upon us. Typically, Lent is a time of preparation and lots of working together and lots of physical activity in the church. But instead, we had a kind of different Lent in which we were called to move ourselves inwards so that we could somehow be elevated spiritually and to become a church not only in real time, but also digital.

In the same way I say to you today that this is not the Easter we would have chosen for ourselves. If it was our choice, this Easter would be a time of incredible celebration. There would be incredible activity in this church. People would have gotten up at the crack of dawn to do some last minute preparations to the flowers. I would have come in and done a service at 7:00 a.m. in Resurrection Chapel that would be attended to the point of bursting. And then we would move and we would have an incredible service at 9:00 a.m. and 11:00 a.m. in which our choir would sing. The children would be decorating a cross with flowers as they came in. And there would be brass and timpani and there would be celebration and everybody would be lifting up their voices and singing, "Jesus Christ is Risen Today" in this church.

And then some of us would have an Easter egg hunt afterwards and there would be this incredible moment of pandemonium and joy and all the children would be running hither and yon, and then we would somehow gather together and go home and have feasts. And during this time there would be the kind of practice which has been going on since at least the Middle Ages where people would wear new clothes on Easter. And the purpose of that tradition was to symbolize in real form the new life we have in Christ.

And over the course of that day, those new dresses and those new pants and those new shirts, well, they would probably get stained a little bit with grass from the Easter egg hunt and they would probably get stained with some food from a meal. And there'd be this whole moment of deep satisfaction.

But that is not the Easter that God is giving us today. The Easter that we have to celebrate today is one in which we are being pushed back to our deepest resources. That we are

facing a time in which there is incredible fear in which we are all touched by death, in which we are all wondering where God is sometimes when we are facing some of the suffering that we are surrounded by, the deprivation to others. This is not the Easter that we would have chosen for ourselves.

But I want to suggest to you that this Easter has come to remind us that the proclamation of a risen lord is larger than any one tradition. It's larger than the services we do. It's greater than the practices we do by putting on new clothes. It's bigger than our feast. It's bigger than our families. It's bigger than our traditions. The resurrection of Christ is a reality that unfolds and explodes and changes everything, which is why in our gospel from Matthew today, it begins with an earthquake, with a seismic activity, the Greek word *seismos*, because the resurrection is meant to change everything.

And today we have nothing but the claim that good news, that in the face of death, in the face of fear, in the face of things that are making us afraid and making us worried for this world around us. In the face of economic insecurity, in the face of deprivation, for the least among us, we have been called to say, "Alleluia, Christ is risen. The Lord is risen indeed." Because the good news of Christianity is that we worship not a God who has succumbed to death, not a God that succumbed to fear, not a God who succumbed to the suffering that He experienced, but rather that all things were transformed by Him, through Him, and for us and for our salvation.

So you and I have been called to bear witness to resurrection, even in a time in which we feel the causes and all the effects of fear around us, even in times in which we have deep uncertainty, even in times in which we can't even practice the traditions we know best. You and I have been called to bear witness to the resurrection because the resurrection is real, because the love of Christ is real, because as sure as I'm standing before you today with my feet planted on this ground, Christ is risen and the Lord has come to set us free.

Christ has broken the power of sin to bind us and make us trapped in straightjackets of shame. Christ has come to break the power of death and all that deals death in our world. Christ has come to liberate us from the graves that we find ourselves in, whether actual or metaphorical. Christ has come to bring us joy and peace and Christ has come to inspire us to be His hands in the world around us, His feet in the world around us, His heart in the world around us, and to see in each other's eyes His face.

So, no, this is not the Easter we would have chosen for ourselves, but this is the Easter where we have nothing but the good news of Jesus Christ to preach to you today. And I believe with every fiber in my being that that message is true. And that it is a privilege for me to be able to say to you, Christ is risen. Because I will hold on to that resurrection and that resurrection will be my peace. That resurrection will return to me the birthright to joy that I had traded away when I became enslaved to sin, when I became subject to death, when I became in my own way entombed.

But Christ has come to set me free. Christ has come to forgive my sins. Christ has come to heal me from the power of death. And Christ has come to you to do the same. Christ has come to us all to do the same so that we can say that the power of death and the power of sin and the power of the grave, these things have been fundamentally broken. Even if they

still have a time in which they are present in our lives because just like the Devil, these powers rage because they know their time is short.

And so you and I have a Christ who has come and broken the power of these things so that you and I can live as if death were not. You and I can forgive in ways that we never thought we could ever forgive before. You and I can love people we never thought we could love before. You and I can walk where Jesus walks in places that we never thought we could go because the resurrection of Christ is real. When He died on the Cross, Jesus said, "It is finished," but the resurrection is a beginning that has no ending. The resurrection starts something that's going to keep on going. And as much as we love our traditions, and as much as we observe them and feel the loss of not having them before us today, that resurrection is a promise that we will continue to proclaim Easter as Christians have since the beginning.

As I was reflecting on our gospel today from Matthew, I was struck by a fold in the story that I had rushed past. For many years, I have moved to the empty tomb and explored the incredible revelation of a God who has burst the confines of death and the grave and now is everywhere raised so that we see Christ not only in physical form, not only in flesh and blood, not only through His appearances, but we can see Christ, even in His absences, or at least His apparent absences.

And for years, I've looked at the appearances of Jesus and found incredible joy, incredible solace, incredible healing, incredible inspiration from the fact that our risen Christ comes to us still bearing the wounds of His crucifixion. And this is a promise that whatever has happened to us, whatever wound we have experienced, whatever pain we've borne, whatever suffering we've had to endure, that these things will be transformed. And while there may be a time in which we forget what happened to us, the horrible things that have happened to us, God counts the tears and forgets nothing. And when we will be raised, our whole selves will be transformed, our whole time will be transformed.

And I have also finally looked at the points in our gospel for today in which there is a call and mission. In which Jesus, the angel says to the woman, come and see where He is laid and then go and tell His disciples. And that is a reminder to us of what it means to know ourselves as resurrected people on the move. But there's one thing I missed in today's gospel, one thing that I haven't completely seen before and when I was reflecting upon this passage, it stood out and took center stage in my attention and prayer. And this is that in all of our gospels, there is a message given to humans like you and me through the words of an angel.

The angel is the first witness to the resurrection. While Mary and Mary Magdalene come to the tomb in today's gospel, they discover an angel and the angel says to them, you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth. He is not here, He has been raised. And this message of resurrection is such that it becomes larger than the mouth that speaks it, because there's a sense in which Mary Magdalene and Mary become angels too, because the root of the word angel in Greek, *angelos*, means messenger.

So the angel is not simply a heavenly being that stands somehow between heaven and earth, that stands before the throne of God and lives, but also is able to deliver a message to human beings like you and me. Angels are fundamentally deliverers of a message. Angels are messengers. And there is a sense in which you and I, when we deliver a word, we become messengers, too. When you and I speak a word of resurrection to somebody, you and I become angels, too. We take part in an angelic ministry.

And over the past few weeks, we have contended with this incredible pandemic, with the heartbreak that is involved as we have lost members of this congregation and our friends have lost members and friends and coworkers. As people who are working in the hospital wards, as doctors and nurses have themselves become infected, as we have been contending with economic insecurity and many people who relied upon our generosity now have nowhere to go and to look for their food and sustenance. While we are surrounded by all of these things, we have somehow continued to be angels of resurrection. We have been forced to our deepest resources. And today we celebrate the fact that when we go back to that deepest resource in our faith, we find the power not only to survive this pandemic, not only to find a strategy for survival, but we have come to find in us a moment of revival. Not just survival, revival. We have found our faith multiplied and we've become a church that gathers people in, digitally and has somehow created incredible communities of prayer, and prayer is more than simply begging God for mercy and asking Him for favor. Prayer creates a community of longing and a community of grace.

And in fact, prayer is actually a work of social justice, because when we pray, we begin to imagine what it would be like for the kingdom of God to come fully into being. And so prayer is kingdom work, and we have learned to pray as if we have never prayed before, we have been transformed these many weeks by prayer as we have gathered people in, to our church.

And we have become a church that embraces. We have been reaching out to other people and over the past few weeks we have had dedicated volunteers and staff members reach out and contact by phone and conduct personal interviews to ask where people are and to pray for them. Over 75 percent of our database of people who follow us, more than our parishioners, just anybody who had some kind of connection to Christ Church Cranbrook. Seventy-five percent of them have been reached by phone. And we're going to continue until everybody knows that they are beloved and that we are with them and that we are here to serve them.

And finally, we've also become a church that serves. Even though we cannot leave our homes, over the past week, we prepared 100 snack packs for the nurses who are at Henry Ford Hospital. Over the past three days, we have had a special collection in which we have raised thousands of dollars, enough to feed 3,000 nurses and doctors in 30 hospitals in southeast Michigan so that they would know that they are beloved as they themselves carry on a kind of angelic ministry by caring for those who need their care desperately in this time of pandemic.

So we have become over the past three weeks a church that still gathers, a church that still embraces, a church that somehow still serves. And that's why I believe that God is calling us on this Easter to not just seek survival as a church, but to seek revival, because God is already doing resurrection work between each of us, between you and me. And the resurrection of Christ is real. And with that power of the resurrection, you and I will be able to continue to be God's hands and feet and heart in this world around us. You and I will be angels and messengers of peace and joy and hope. You and I will continue to build the kingdom. We will discover new traditions. We will enlarge ourselves. We will return next year, as it were, but we will be changed and our church will be changed because when God begins something in us, we are all changed and our work is always enlarged and we are always transformed.

The piece of art that I have before you, it's in your bulletin cover, but it's also right here to your left, my right. It's a still from a video installation by an incredible artist named Bill Viola. This is from a series of installations that he did that he would hold together. And it was called "Five Angels for the New Millennium".

He did it in 2001 because when there was that shift into this new century, when we suddenly discovered that this new century was going to be even more challenging than perhaps the 20th century was, Bill Viola decided to try to come up with some artwork that could touch the spiritual realities that are always around us and yet hidden from sight. And so he takes this incredible film of a person plunging into water and coming back up and breaking the surface. And he bathes it in different lights and there is a kind of angelic quality to it because, of course, angels come and deliver a message and then travel back to where they are.

But of course, angels are also in some ways a kind of figurement of Christ himself, and you can see this angel has at the nadir of the plunge his arms stretched out like a cross. And this is a reminder to us that Christ Himself has come not as an angel, but as a human being, to fully take our form and to transform all the suffering and all the evil and all the sin of this world through His resurrection. And so I see in this not only an image of an angel descending and ascending, but I also see an image of resurrection.

And finally, even though we're not able to baptize anyone with water today, the fact that there is water in this picture, too, seems to speak to us, an Easter promise. Because as Paul writes in the Book of Romans, we have been baptized into Christ's death so that we might be raised into His resurrection. And you and I, when we are baptized and remember our baptism and complete our vows to God, you and I go through that powerful movement again of death and resurrection.

My brothers and sisters, now that our backs are against the wall, now that we are surrounded by suffering, let us not be weighed down. Let us be brave. Let us give thanks to a God who has come into our midst and transformed all the things that fill us with dread into a power to live. May God give us the grace to be witnesses to His resurrection. May we be able to say to one another, "Alleluia, Christ is risen! The Lord is risen indeed". May we continue to be a transformed church, gathering, embracing and serving. And may you know the power of the resurrection in your life, no matter what you're facing. May that

resurrected Christ be your North Star when you feel lost. May that resurrected Christ be the power to pick your head up high when you feel burdened by this world. And may the resurrected Christ be the love that spurs you on knowing that God has made it so. Nothing separates us from the love of His Son, Jesus.

Amen.

[End of Recording]