**Cultivating Hope**

**Jeremiah 31:1-12**

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Easter Sunday, April 12, 2020

It’s Easter morning and we expect to be gathered together in our sanctuary with all the sights and sounds of a Christian community celebrating the most important event in our faith story!  Organ and hand bells and brass. Easter bonnets and pastel bowties. The air filled with the scent of tulips and hyacinths, daffodils and Easter lilies. Bright children’s faces, glorious music, flowers filling the chancel, and a story that changed the course of human history. Without doubt, Easter morning is my favorite worship service of the year.

But that’s just not quite where we are this year, is it?  In putting together today’s service, we wanted to use enough footage from last year’s Easter worship to give you a sense of home, a taste of what we expect Easter to be like.  But, I also think it’s really important to acknowledge just how strange and different this Easter is.

Our whole global community is struggling this Easter as we live with the threat of Covid-19.  The numbers are staggering. More than a million and a half cases worldwide. Tens of thousands of lives lost.  And, unlike other recent disease outbreaks, we here in the US are not protected from it. Washtenaw County has had hundreds of cases.  Our small business owners are begging for help hoping to survive. People are out of work. The economy is tanking. Hospitals are reaching their maximum capacity.  And all of us are sheltering in place - we’re on lockdown, afraid to leave home for fear of catching or spreading the virus we know can kill.

So, it doesn’t feel much like Easter.  But, what if we were to reframe our expectations?  What if we were to consider that this Easter what we are experiencing is far more like the first Easter than any we’ve celebrated before?  That first Easter morning there were no bells or bonnets, no lavish displays of flowers and certainly no Easter bunny. Rather, Easter day started with the disciples huddled together in a locked room much like we are isolating ourselves in our homes.   And like us, they were afraid. Just two days before they had seen Jesus crucified. Their teacher, their friend, their healer, their hope convicted in a mock trial, whipped, humiliated, and hung on a cross to die. Their hearts were filled with grief and fear.  They had been Jesus’ closest friends, his allies and disciples, and they knew that the Jewish and Roman authorities might soon come for them, as well.

And so after the crucifixion, they locked themselves up in a room.  Sheltering in place together, waiting out the storm. They are in lockdown, fully aware of the dangers that lurk outside the door.

All of this in the context of a country struggling to survive. Governed by the heavy hand of the Roman Empire, the majority of Jewish people at the time lived in poverty.  Good work was hard to come by. Illness was commonplace. And there was little hope that things would get better. It’s a context that in some ways sounds eerily familiar.

But then, the miracle happens.  Then Mary slips out under the cover of darkness to go and prepare Jesus’ body for burial.  She enters the tomb and finds he isn’t there. She runs to tell Peter and John, and they, too, discover an empty tomb.  Anxious to go back to where the other disciples are hiding, they leave Mary alone and crying. As she sits outside the tomb, Mary encounters a man she thinks is the gardener.  But when he speaks her name, she recognizes this is Jesus. Stunned, she returns to the disciples to say, “I have seen the Lord.”

Now, maybe you will say that this is where my comparison between that first Easter and this Easter breaks down.  Yet, I don’t think so. The stories of our faith tell us that God is always at work to restore, renew, rebuild, rebirth God’s people.  We see it in the promise God made to Noah - a promise to never destroy the world again. We hear it in the words from Jeremiah 31 in which God tells the survivors of Israel’s exile in Babylon.  “I have loved you with a love that lasts forever. And so with unfailing love, I have drawn you to myself. Again, I will build you up, and you will be rebuilt, virgin Israel. Again, you will play your tambourines and dance with joy.”

And we see its ultimate expression in the resurrection of Christ.  Our God is a God of life and abundance, of new beginnings and new birth.

We may feel today like the disciples hiding in a locked room, but the promise of Easter is that there is always hope.  God is always at work in the goodness that moves within and between us even in the darkest of times. God is at work as strangers smile and greet each other from six feet away.  God is at work in the insistence of daffodils to stand tall and blossom even in the snow and wind and hail. God is at work in the home recordings of singers and musicians and late night hosts who use their gifts to reach out when we’re all in isolation.  God is at work in the parade of emergency vehicles through Ann Arbor in support of health care workers. God is at work in the sidewalk chalk greetings we see as we walk through our neighborhoods. And in kids writing paper and pen letters to people in nursing homes.  And people donating money, food, and medical supplies while others sew homemade masks.

In Hebrew, the same word can be translated as “hope” or “wait”.  Easter is about waiting in hope. Trusting that resurrection will come in ways we can’t even imagine yet.  That God is about the work of resurrection even now and that we are called to be God’s Easter people.

The last words that Jesus says when he appears to the disciples in the room where they have been hiding are these, “Peace be with you.  As the Father sent me, I am sending you.” Jesus has work for the disciples to do. He is sending them out to build the church, the community of people who will be his hands and feet in the world.

I know that many of us are grieving this Easter because our sanctuary stands empty, the church doors locked.  But, the church has never been the building. As one of my favorite Christian bloggers, John Pavlovitz said recently, “**The Church has never had anything to do with geography. It was never a building, never a fixed, physical location you visited for an hour on Sunday. That’s far too small a space to fit the vast and sprawling life it produces.**

**The Church has always been the people who gather together to do the work of compassion and mercy and love and justice, regardless of where and when they gather. They are living, breathing, animated sanctuaries who house divinity.”**

Church happens when God sends us to be God’s love in the world.  Hope and love can’t be quarantined. They can’t be locked in, locked out, or locked down.  And that is what Easter is really about. God was at work in a little room outside of Jerusalem 2000 years ago.  God is at work today - in our homes and our hospitals and our research centers and our hearts.

The promise of Easter, like the promise God makes in Jeremiah, is that ultimately death and destruction will not win.  Ultimately, God’s love for humanity is stronger than Covid-19, stronger than our own self-destructive habits, stronger than the anger we hold against our neighbor, stronger than the selfishness, greed, and dishonesty we experience around us.  God’s love defeats evil and we, as God’s people and God’s church, are called to share that love out in the world.

Six weeks ago, at the beginning of Lent, we started a sermon series called “Cultivating and Letting Go”.  Over the six weeks, we’ve talked about letting go of different attitudes and ideas that can come between us and God.  We talked of letting go of expectations, judgments, and fears. But, we also talked about what we might cultivate within ourselves to strengthen our relationships with God.  Cultivating faith, peace, or gratitude.

Since then, so much has changed.  This Easter is indeed unlike any other.  Yet, the message of Easter has never changed.  From the moment Mary stepped into the empty tomb until today, the message of Easter, the call of the resurrection remains to let go of despair and cultivate hope.  Hope for a whole and healthy world. Hope for abundance and joy. Hope for justice and peace. Hope for resurrection!

May it be so.  Amen.