Easter Day
April 12, 2020

This is not what I expected for Easter morning, to be worshiping at home and offering an Easter homily to you from our house. I expected to be at Trinity Cathedral, as usual for me on Easter Day, with a joyful Easter congregation, lifted by a glorious Resurrection liturgy and its beautiful floral and choral expressions of Easter joy. And yet, one of the essential truths about Jesus’s resurrection is that it was not what was expected. Resurrection experiences and the resurrected life are rarely, perhaps never, what we expect.

I am grateful to Dean Owens for celebrating the Eucharist in the Chapel of our beautiful Cathedral and receiving the sacrament on behalf of all of us. A cathedral church is a tangible expression of what it means to be a diocese, and whether we are present in person or not, it is an icon of our unity, of what it means to be the body of the risen Christ. As with every celebration of Holy Eucharist, the Cathedral this Easter, as BJ celebrates the holy mysteries, is filled on our behalf with “angels, archangels, and all the company of heaven.”

I struggled with whether to offer these words and the Easter blessing from that majestic space as well, but felt more connected to each of you, wherever you are, by being physically distanced and spiritually present in the very ways that you are. On the 5th Sunday in Lent, I was the celebrant for the live streamed service of Eucharist at the Cathedral, and the only person to receive the sacrament, as BJ will be this morning. While it filled a necessary role, it felt strangely isolated. With no one else receiving the sacred elements, I felt disconnected in breaking the fast alone, when, in fact, the act of receiving on behalf of others affirms our inviolable spiritual communion. Ironic, isn’t it, that the familiar vehicle of communion itself felt, in this extraordinary time, so very isolating.

Today, however, in solidarity with all who are fasting from public worship, I, too, am at home, sharing in our mutual, stay-at-home existence. I am grateful to all of the participants in this service who have provided their parts from homes all across the diocese. And I am holding in prayer those in roles critical to the common good, especially healthcare workers, food producers and providers, and untold others delivering “essential” services, who are taking front-line risks for the wellbeing of others. Staying at home, too, is an essential role in restraining and defeating the virus, and I encourage you to continuing doing everything that you can for your own safety and the safety of all.

We are fortunate, you and I, to have places where we can practice some physical separation in a time of unbridled contagion such as this. Countless are they around the world, in overcrowded and makeshift hospital wards, in refugee camps and other close confinement, who haven’t the simplest protection from one another. Our “making do” is comparatively generous. Like you, in these last four weeks my study has become my office, our bedroom has become Sue’s classroom for teaching her Cuyahoga Community College students, our younger two children’s rooms have become their college campuses, and this, today, is church. Yet, wherever we are, in the mystery of the Holy Spirit, the beloved of God are just as spiritually connected in this current separation as we have ever been.
In my prayers this week, I have been visited continually by the image of Mary Magdalene in today’s passage from the Gospel of John, specifically in her solitary visit to the tomb of Jesus. Her presence in my devotions has been a repeated reminder that, in John’s account, the first observance of the Resurrection of Jesus was not by a gathered crowd of like-minded believers on a sunny, spring morning, singing songs of joyful triumph and greeting one another in a reciprocated embrace of mutual acceptance. Rather, the empty burial site in Joseph of Arimathea’s garden was witnessed by one despondent, frightened, disciple whose world had fallen apart. As a follower of the scorned and executed rabbi from Bethlehem of Judea, this Mary was the picture of social distancing, making her way to his burial place under the cover of night, only to find an even more unsettling scene, that the stone had been rolled away and the tomb was vacant. In the dark of our coronavirus world, perhaps we can more readily appreciate her fear and connect with the alarming possibility that this confusing, unstable, and dreadful reality would be her new normal.

In her disorienting grief and isolation, Mary Magdalene ran to the few whom she could trust and shared her fear and incredulity. Two of them, Simon Peter and the disciple whom Jesus loved, went to the tomb themselves, in a desperate yearning for answers. Arriving separately, they took turns observing the artifacts of an event they could not understand, and then retreated to the uncertain security of the self-imposed and quarantine-like isolation they had established since their final meal with Jesus.

According to the Fourth Gospel, when they left, the Magdalene remained alone outside of the empty burial cave, emblematic as it was of her own emptiness. Her tears obscured a clear perception of the one who asked why she was weeping, the one whom she recognized only when he called her by name. “Mary!”

In the dark of our current, fear-filled world, the risen Jesus calls each of us by name, without exception. Wherever you are, physically, spiritually, and emotionally, he is calling you now, by the name you will recognize, assuring you of his very real presence and illuminating the way forward – out of despair into hope, out of the darkness of night into the light of a new day. As the Eucharistic Prayer puts it, “out of error into truth, out of sin into righteousness, out of death into life.”

Perhaps for us who are used to living in relative abundance and security, our present circumstances in this perilous and insecure time of the novel coronavirus offer us a deeper understanding of what Mary Magdalene and the other disciples experienced “early on the first day of the week.” Perhaps it is in dark moments like these that the Easter message most comes to life, when it offers us the greatest meaning. Perhaps it is in experiencing the emptiness of isolation, anxiety, and fear that we recognize with astonishment, as Mary Magdalene did, the presence of the risen Christ pointing to what lies ahead, to that new normal where he already awaits us and God is already at work.

Listen for your name. Right here, amidst the profoundly fearful uncertainty of this crisis, Jesus is calling you, calling you by your own name, so that you might recognize his unmistakable presence and move forward in hope. Like Mary Magdalene, we have seen the Lord. Christ is
risen; he is risen, indeed. And wherever we go from here, whatever befalls us and those we love, whatever challenges we and all God’s children will face, he is with us now, and always.

Amen.

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