



Sermon for Easter Sunday, April 9, 2023

St. Luke's Episcopal Church, Coeur d'Alene

The Rev. Dr. David Gortner

[Acts 10:34-43](#)

[Psalm 118:1-2, 14-24](#)

[Colossians 3:1-4](#)

[Luke 24:1-12](#)

Alleluia! Christ is risen!

The Lord is risen indeed! Alleluia!

Good morning, everyone. Welcome to St. Luke's Episcopal Church on this Easter Day, this Day of Resurrection. Welcome to Resurrection Life. Welcome to Love – the Love that welcomes each and every one of you.

Oh risen Jesus, give us all eyes to see, hearts open to yearn, receive, and embrace you, souls ready and waiting for this new life.

Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth,
for you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. (Colossians 3:2-3)

Dear people, today is the culmination of a journey that we in this congregation, and people all around the world, have taken through this year. It is a journey we take together every year. We walk through the awaiting for God's coming, through the birth of Jesus, through his life and all the ways he touched people and cared for them, through his betrayal and suffering and death, to the grave – and now, to this day.

You may be joining us for this day. But please know, there is so much more to all of this than a day that we hail as a great day of celebration, of God's. Behind all of this joy is the path of Jesus Christ that was and has been and always will be God's way of self-giving, self-emptying love.

God our Creator has made all things new in Christ Jesus. A new creation has begun when Jesus arose in new life from death.

God the Lover of all creation and all humankind has come among us, lived among us, becoming one with us in Jesus.

Through Jesus, God has opened the gate of heaven, has launched a new creation, has poured love out for the whole world.

But the path of God's loving, victorious birth of a new creation has been through the sorrows and sadnesses, the twisted ways, of this life as we humans have made it.

In the midst of all that is happening in the world around us, the wars and threats of wars and civil wars, the increasing natural disasters, the rising costs of living in every area of life, the violence that has become a nearly weekly expectation with shootings in our schools and churches and malls and shops and streets, there is one quiet recent news story that has continued to hang with me in the background. I think it's important. It is the decline in life expectancy in this country. After so many decades of life expectancy extending, the average lifespan in America is going down. There have been lots of reasons cited for this

decline – including all the things I just listed. There has been increase in death among middle-aged men, especially those alone or in families where there are fewer resources and fewer choices, where life has felt like a trap. But, the highest increase in early death is now among children in teens – from shootings, and from suicides.

And, I started thinking again about the many earlier studies of recent decades that have shown that participating in religious faith communities and being an active part of a tradition of faith seems to be associated with healthier and longer life. And then, in contrast to this, I think about the many years documenting decline overall in religious affiliation and participation in America. And, I look at the increase in violence and the breakdown of civil discourse and the rise in animosity between people of different political parties.

And, I cannot help but think that there is an important link between them.

People are losing touch with their connections to a deeper story, a deeper call of God, a truer way to live. And we are adrift, being tossed by the currents of everything coming at us.

I pray that we can once again be drawn together – to hear, to try to follow this message that brings us together under something far bigger than anything else we know – where there is room and a place for all. I hope that each one, even those of us joining the story today, that each of us can glimpse – can allow ourselves to glimpse – the wonder of the possibility of resurrection. The wonder of the possibility that God gives New Life.

Because, friends, we need that glimpse of hope, that bit of trust, that little step of believing, that possibility of New Life to embrace. We need it to counteract the slow, then sudden, slipping of us all into fear, grief, horror, uncertainty, anger, and confusion that has begun to grip us all.

As John 3:17 says, “For God sent his Son into the world not to condemn the world, but so that the whole world through him might be saved.” Many of us know John 3:16, and we see it referenced on posters and fliers and chests at football and baseball games. But John 3:16 is not complete without John 3:17 – God in Christ came into the world so that the whole world might be saved. Everyone. Every person. This is God’s deep desire. Because this is God’s deep, deep love for all of us – each one of us, across all times and places, all kins and races, all cultures and languages.

Peter, one of Jesus’ disciples, got a real lesson in this truth. Early in the life of the Church, the first followers of the risen Jesus were Jewish – like Jesus. And it wasn’t yet clear to them that Jesus’ message and gift of salvation was for everyone, everywhere. But God gave Peter a disturbing dream that shook up his sensibilities about “things as they should be,” and then told him to go with some visitors to a Roman military commander. Now, remember, it was Roman soldiers at Pilate’s command that crucified Jesus. So, Peter was likely more than a bit skeptical about this trip into the house of someone he might consider the enemy. But when he arrived, Peter found Cornelius and others who gathered together regularly in prayer to God and helped people in need, waiting to hear something from God. When Peter saw and heard of their faith, then the light dawned on Peter – Peter had a conversion of his own in this moment! – and that is when Peter said, “I truly understand now that God shows no partiality.”

No partiality! God’s love is for Everyone – period – full stop! Love from the God who died, who moved forward into that maelstrom of human cruelty, abuse, betrayal, abandonment, torture, and killing. We who are followers of Jesus face the reality of Jesus’ death, Jesus’ being killed. But we can only face such horror as we embrace the joy and wonder of resurrection. Each week in our church, as we gather in prayers before

holy communion, we proclaim together – and say it with me! – “Christ has died. Christ IS risen. Christ will come again.” “We remember his death. We proclaim his resurrection. We await his coming in glory.” So, it is not just Love from the God who died. It is Love from the God who rose again, who raised Love again from death, who as Love itself arose unable to be taken down by cruelty and death, who has opened the gates of this New Creation.

We so very much need this message of resurrection. We need the hope and promise and proclamation of New Life, the New Creation that has begun with Jesus Christ. We need the risen Jesus. We need the unexpected site of a tomb empty where we expected to find a body and expected to carry out the care of the dead and then just carry on.

I need Easter Day. I need to revisit this day, again and again. That’s why, week after week in this faith community, and in faith communities around the world, [we gather together around scripture and around the Lord’s table, hearing and proclaiming the core of the](#) story that guides and holds and ignites our lives together. We remember Christ’s death. We proclaim Christ’s resurrection. We await Christ’s coming in glory. We look squarely at the reality of death, the reality of human cruelty and injustice, the reality of human confusion, fear, anger, and mistrust, and the costs they bring of betrayal, denial, abandonment, and abuse. We name sin and death. We remember that Jesus died – and this remembering means that we do not allow it to hold power over us. Because we also remember and boldly proclaim that Christ is risen. Christ is risen! Life, new life, is the new gift that is for the world. The gate of heaven is open wide, a new heaven and new earth has begun.

This new truth is dawning on the followers of Jesus on that first Easter morning. It is a truth that takes time to sink in. Because, as human beings, we don’t do rapid and complete automatic change very easily. Our conversion takes time, as God works with each of us and all of us. And God is incredibly – incredibly – patient. Over these next 50 days of Easter, when we cry out, “Alleluia, Christ is risen! The Lord is risen indeed, Alleluia!” we follow the first followers of Jesus as they awaken to the New Life and New Creation that has begun with the living Christ, the risen Lord of Life.

And these first followers of Jesus don’t immediately rise in joy and faith. They follow a very natural path into hope, then trust, then believing, and then finally embracing that Jesus Christ has risen from the dead.

And their first confrontation with the TRUTH of the resurrection was their visits to the tomb. The tomb, where they were first confronted by the emptiness, the absolute silence of a place that was supposed to be occupied by the remains, the memories, of what was lost.

What draws them to the tomb was first love, then hope.

Mary the mother of James, Joanna, and Mary Magdalene went with other women to the tomb to do what people have done for the dead for thousands of years. They went to cleanse and anoint Jesus’ body. They came to take care of the body of their loved one. They came as an act of loving care. And God’s messengers met them in their loving care with the life-changing message.

After they return and share their experience, even when other men scoffed and did not believe, Peter got up and ran to the tomb. He went to see for himself. He came as an act of hope – just a seed of hope that propels him to go and see even if he did not yet believe. He emerges from the tomb amazed and marveling – not yet believing or embracing, but stirred to amazement.

Each of the disciples had their own individual responses as they faced the mystery of Jesus’ quiet resurrection, as quiet and unassuming as Jesus’ birth.

What is your response? As you hear the stories shared and the words proclaimed, what is your response? Where are you in your own life, now – your own journey through the beauty and chaos and suffering and celebration and brokenness of human life? How does that shape your response to Jesus, to this resurrection?

Kierkegaard was right. It IS a leap of faith, across a threshold as wide as the ocean, as deep as the night before the dawn, as silent as a grave. Behind you is all that you knew, expected, believed to be true. Before you is an unbelievable TRUTH, open, silent, empty. Before you is a mystery you have stumbled upon. You don't yet know what it means, but you feel the potential it has to change everything. Everything! The threshold is here, now, and WHAT WILL YOU DO NEXT? In this moment of startled wonder, silent, where will your heart turn?

This is a moment for your imagination, that holy place of possibility within you. Now, now, at the threshold, let your minds and hearts open to the question that must have just begun to form in the minds and hearts of the women at the tomb -- "Is it possible? What if it were true? What does it mean for me, and for all of us?"

Dear Ones of God, today of all days, embrace it. Embrace this hope and possibility stirring, pulsing, moving all around you and within you. Let the fears, the sorrows, the habits of lowered expectations – let them all be taken up into this Light – let them be set aside like an old garment in the brightness of this declaration that awakens hope and makes the air hum this day! Jesus is risen – and Jesus is not far from you – really! Let us pray for eyes to see and ears to hear, when he appears to us, unrecognized, and calls us by name.

Because – the great power of God that has raised Jesus will raise us! New Life! New Life!! In the great, steady, unrelenting power of Love that bursts with light from the tomb, that reawakens life in what we thought was dead and lost, that calls us by name. And there is not any one of us – not any human, not any creature great or small – that has not been called by name. We can truly understand now, and begin to see for real in this Easter season and into Pentecost, that God shows no partiality or favoritism. EVERY ONE OF US IS BELOVED. Imagine – as dear to God as God's own Son from all eternity.

It is this uncontainable Love that burst forth from God in the first words that called the universe into being and named every creature into being. It is this uncontainable and unbeatable Love of God that, this day, births a new creation – the New Life in Jesus the One who died and lives again for all eternity, who opens this path before us. Jesus calls us, and says to each of us, "I am risen. I am Life. I am creating a new heaven and a new earth."

Come and follow the One who calls you by name. Come and follow the One for whom you yearn. Come and follow Love. And rise!