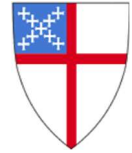




Sermon for the Great Vigil of Easter



The Rev. Dr. David Gortner

April 4, 2026

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Alleluia! Christ is risen!

The Lord is risen indeed. Alleluia!

All our praises be to you, our Creator, our Source. You are the self-giving God. Through you and from your very heart come all things. You bring all life, and new life.

All our deepest thanks and gratitude forever, our Redeemer, our Victor over all sin and death. You are our eternal Strength in and through our fragile nature. You are our Teacher and guide through all our fallibility. You are the Cleanser of all our faulty and sinful ways. You are our Healer who knows intimately our wounds we suffer and inflict.

All our joy and wonder be to you, our Life-giver, our very Breath, O Spirit of Life that flows and flies where you will. You move through our lives and all our history.

All Holy God, glory to you and Alleluia!

Tonight, we have crossed the gateway after our long journey of Lent.

All through this season that has now ended, we have heard how God in Christ Jesus continues to draw us into intimate relationship, to open doors, to bring new sight and new life. Through encounters with Jesus, we see clear truth about ourselves, the world, and God's unbounded love.

It's the encounters that matter. In our journeys with Jesus, we have seen that it is not the words of armchair philosophers that we find truth and love, but it is through direct contact and lived action that we find the heart of God and God's truth and love. Jesus is God's unbounded love on the move, in the flesh, in direct contact, conversation, and action with us. That is what we mean when we say Jesus is the Word made flesh – Jesus is God's nature and those two great commandments lived out in a body in the actions and encounters of every day. Late at night conversations with people like Nicodemus, who have risked the encounter with Jesus in their search for understanding. Conversations in the brightness of noonday with people like the Samaritan woman, who have been the subject of gossip and questionable reputation, who dare with Jesus to cross social boundaries that would divide them. Conversations with people on the side of the road and just outside the temple gate, like the man born blind who had live a hard life and had been blamed for his disabling condition, who ended up being the only one who really saw Jesus. Conversations in grief with people like sisters Martha and Mary, bringing Jesus to tears before he called Lazarus forth from the tomb and told people to unbind him and let him go. Conversations and encounters with his beloved followers as he gave himself to them in washing their feet and feeding them with himself in bread and wine made more. Direct and challenging encounters with stubborn religious leaders and detached political leaders wrapped up in and stuck in their own rigid ways of viewing the world. Matter-of-fact conversations with the one who betrayed him, the one who pledged ultimate allegiance to him but ended up denying any connection to him, the one who dealt him his death sentence. Jesus steps forward, constantly, offering truth and love at every turn, giving himself again and again and again.

And death is not the end of the story. Oh No! Death becomes the gateway, the birthplace of new life – a new creation – a story that begins anew and will go on and on and on. Life risen again!

How wonderful and holy this night. Just listen again to the actions we have heard that God has done for us and with us -- created, more wonderfully restored, saved, multiplied, delivered, renewed, reborn, raised up, made new, brought to perfection.

How wonderful the celebration of this night, when we cross the threshold into the inexplicable joy and surprise and delight of Easter, when we renew our baptismal vows and remember our entry into the death and resurrection of Christ Jesus through our baptism, when we crossed the threshold.

How awesome this night, when we affirm together that resurrection is possible, that life can be other than we have known, when disaster is turned on its head and made a triumph.

It is no easy thing to celebrate Christ's resurrection in a time of destructive wars – especially in a time when we in our own nation are implicated in such destruction and dealing of death. We plead in prayer for, and we dare to proclaim resurrection and new life for, the people of Iran, Gaza, Lebanon; of Ukraine; of Sudan; of all places where aggressor nations and militant groups have inflicted destruction and death. And we pray for the brilliant glory and light of Christ's arising from death to cast down the mighty from their thrones and bring them to deep repentance, and to lift up the lowly that have again and again been cast aside.

Our shout of "Alleluia! Christ is risen!" is a shout of victory, and a cry for that victory to take hold in all places. It is not our victory. It is the victory of the self-giving Christ over all our worst nature, over all we have inflicted on him and continue to inflict on him. Remember what Jesus has said, "What you do to the least of these, you do to me."

And so, our cry of "Christ is risen!" is a brazen declaration to ourselves and the world, and it comes with a prayer – "May it be so, even now." It joins with the cry coming through the ages as found in Psalm 68, and is sung loudly in churches around the world at this celebration of the resurrection:

"Let God arise, let His enemies be scattered;
let those who hate Him flee from His face.
As smoke vanishes, let them vanish;
and as wax melts from the presence of fire
let the demons perish before God and let the righteous be glad.
This is the day which the Lord has made.
Let us rejoice and be glad!"

We will say and sing this whole great Psalm at the end of the Easter Season. But for now, let our celebration of Christ's arising also be a prayer for all who suffer the ravages of any human cruelty, from any source and with any justification.

And then, O God, as we receive Christ, let us also become little beings of your risen Word made flesh, bearers of your presence through all our contact and conversation and action. Let us live the power of self-giving that rises new from any death. Let us live the power of unbounded love and honest truth that flows from the heart of God as creative force. Cry with me, for the sake of all who suffer, the boldest declaration of our faith—

Alleluia! Christ is risen! *The Lord is risen indeed! Alleluia!*

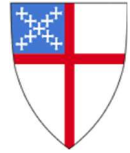
May it be so, even now. Let God arise. Come now, risen Lord Jesus.



Sermon Easter Sunday

The Rev. Dr. David Gortner

April 5, 2026



[Acts 10:34-43](#)

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

[Colossians 3:1-4](#)

[Matthew 28:1-10](#)

Alleluia! Christ is risen!

The Lord is risen indeed! Alleluia!

Dear people, today is “That Great Gettin’-up Day.” Today is the culmination of a journey that we in this congregation, with people all around the world, have taken through this year. It is a journey we take together every year as followers of Jesus. 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 great day of Jesus’ arising.

You may be joining us for this great day. 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 victory over death and all our sin we suffer and inflict. Behind all our joy this day 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 always been and will continue until the end of history through the sorrows and sadnesses, the twisted ways, of this life as we humans have made it.

All through the season of Lent that has now ended, we have heard how God in Christ Jesus continues to meet us in our human reality as fragile, fallible, faulty creatures, drawing us into intimate relationship, opening doors, bringing new sight and new life. Through encounters with Jesus, we see clear truth about ourselves, the world, and God’s unbounded love.

And death is not the end of the story. Oh No! Death becomes the gateway, the birthplace of new life – a new creation – a story that begins anew and will go on and on and on. Life risen again!

Friends, this is Easter. Today is when the story turns. Today begins our season of fifty days of Easter, celebrating in full force God’s resurrecting power of life and love.

Jesus Christ’s arising is the miracle beyond miracles. It is the ultimate intervention of God. It is the radical interruption of time’s relentless arrow – not a reversal of time, not a revisiting of what is past – no, resurrection is a new creation, a new life, a new path that awaits all of us. It is a journey uncharted, a way ahead beyond our imagining, very like all that we have known and yet so different. “I shall not die, but LIVE!” This is our song, this is our bold, ecstatic cry of eager certainty and joyfully defiant hope, joined together. Hope and bold declaration to the world. Christ is risen!

Be amazed. Be startled. Be perplexed. So begins the process of each one of us being remade. Just like it was for the first followers of Jesus almost two thousand years ago.

Easter is not just one day. It is a season – 50 great days of Easter, those days when Jesus appeared to his disciples and followers and friends. It is a season of 50 days for joy **to sink in**. And it is the rest of our lives and all eternity – it is the new reality into which God is nudging us and all creation.

Now, I need to say, Resurrection and New Life seems audacious, bizarre, ridiculous in the world as we know it. It flies in the face of so many realities we face. There are some times in our lives when things are so bleak that any new turn and restoration of fresh life seems impossible. There are times in history when all was dire and full of dread, when hope was lost. There have been periods of great plagues and famine and disaster, surrounding our ancestors with death. There have been so many times of great human cruelty, times of tyranny and war and invasion, times of enslavement and campaigns to obliterate people, times of constant oppression, times of deep mistrust, that have afflicted our ancestors and that our ancestors participated in making.

And through the ages, people have scoffed at this bizarre notion among those followers of Jesus that he is risen from death. Through the centuries, preachers have stepped forward to defend this audacious claim. In England in the years just after the ravages and horrors of World War II, a leading Methodist pastor, Leslie Weatherhead, urged people to reconsider their skeptical dismissals of Christ's resurrection. He asked pointed questions: "If Jews or Romans had removed the body, would they not have said so, provide it, and ended Christianity once for all? Did his own men remove it, keep the fact a secret for seven weeks, and then preach what they knew to be a lie, which anyone knowing what had been done with the body could have exposed? And did those eleven men proceed to give their lives for this lie?" (*The Resurrection and the Life*, 1948, p. 11).

It is no easy thing to celebrate Christ's resurrection in a time of destructive wars – especially in a time when we in our own nation are implicated in such destruction and dealing of death. We plead in prayer for, and we dare to proclaim resurrection and new life for, the people of Iran, Gaza, Lebanon; of Ukraine; of Sudan; of all places where aggressor nations and militant groups have inflicted destruction and death. And we pray for the brilliant glory and light of Christ's arising from death to cast down the mighty from their thrones and bring them to deep repentance, and to lift up the lowly that have again and again been cast aside.

Our shout of "Alleluia! Christ is risen!" is a shout of victory, and a cry for that victory to take hold in all places. It is not our victory. It is the self-giving Christ's victory over all our worst nature, over all we have inflicted on him and continue to inflict on him. Remember what Jesus has said, "What you do to the least of these, you do to me."

And so, our cry of "Christ is risen!" is a brazen declaration to ourselves and the world, and it comes with a prayer – "May it be so, even now."

And it is so, even now, and has been through the ages. In this time of great uncertainty in our own nation's future and what kind of nation we will be in the world and among ourselves, let me share this from my encounters last summer with the resurrected nation of Albania.

Last summer, my wife and I shared a sabbatical of ten weeks. During these weeks, we took an amazing journey through nations of the Mediterranean in southern Europe and northern Africa, diving deeply into the history and current life of Christian faith and learning from places where the great Abrahamic faiths of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam have coexisted peaceably and formed cooperative relationships. One of the great and

surprising gems in our journeys was Albania. Those of us who remember well the ages of the Cold War and the Iron Curtain, of Communist regimes that gripped nations and enacted purges on their own people, may remember Albania as one of the most extremely repressive and isolated Communist dictatorships in the world. Albania has a much longer, rich history, including traces of Christianity even in the first decades after Christ's resurrection. Through its history, it has been a region subject to the foreign powers of Rome, Constantinople, Venice, Sicily, Serbia, the Ottoman Empire, and then to Italy and other countries through parts of the early 20th century. There has been a strong push through the centuries for independence, including efforts to repulse Italian fascists and German Nazis. Albania was the only country where the Jewish population increased rather than decreased during World War II, as these feisty people made trouble for Nazis and held safe space for Jews. But then came the takeover by the Communist party and their leader, Enver Hoxha. He began purges. Then, he enacted purges of religion. All religion and speech about religious faith was banned, and all houses of worship were destroyed or turned into warehouses and bars. All forms of Christianity, Islam, and Judaism were annihilated by the State, and Albania was declared an atheist nation. Even cemeteries were destroyed, to obliterate sacred memory. The oppression endured for nearly 50 years, under this communist regime's cruel effort to obliterate all religion and all faith except in itself as the almighty state and its almighty dictator.

But when we got there, just this last summer, there were amazingly beautiful new churches and mosques, in cities and villages across the country. During the 1990s, the repressive regime toppled and was overthrown, and Albania slowly but steadily and peacefully emerged into a democratic nation. Religious freedom was quickly reinstated, and then began many long years of restoration and resurrection of the faith. Religious leaders who had gone into hiding 50 years earlier were now quite old and not able to lead with strength. But new life came forth – from other nations with leaders who came to help, and also from people who had held the faith privately and in secret with their children and grandchildren. And from the ashes and ruins, faith was restored, resurrected, reborn. The first gatherings for public worship were in the ruins of old churches and mosques. But thousands came out for these times of worship. Steadily, over the 25 years, hundreds of new houses of worship were built and hundreds more were restored, thousands of new leaders were trained and deployed across the country, and hundreds of new social care agencies, schools, universities, and hospitals were launched.

My wife and I had the opportunity to see many churches and mosques, and we were thrilled to join worshippers in the capital city of Tirana at the Orthodox Cathedral of the Resurrection of Christ – so powerfully named to always honor and celebrate Jesus' resurrection and also the resurrection of Christian faith in Albania. There, we met Sonila, an incredible woman leading women's ministry and co-leading interfaith collaboration in this small nation. Sonila lived her childhood under the years of the repressive autocratic state. Her grandfather was an Orthodox priest prior to the regime's absolute outlawing of all religion and faith. He was unable to practice his faith in any open way. But he found ways to share and pass on his faith in hidden ways – telling people bits of the teachings and healing ministries of Jesus without ever mentioning his name or any other names. He would say something like, "There was once this philosopher (or teacher) who told a story about a foreigner who helped someone really beat up and abandoned on the side of a road, when no one else was stopping to help – and this was to show what a real neighbor was like." Sonila grew up with her grandparents, and every night her grandfather would bless her with four kisses, starting on her forehead, then her chin, then each cheek – without saying so, making the sign of the cross on her. Years later, as the regime crumbled and educational and religious freedom were restored, Sonila learned what was behind what her grandfather said and did, and embraced Christian faith wholeheartedly as her true home. She now helps lead the Orthodox Church of Albania, as a layperson, in its time of arising to new life.

“What if the risen Christ is the clue for which all the world is groping?” Here I’m quoting pastor Weatherhead again, in one of his Easter sermons. *“What if the power of the risen Christ – far greater than atomic power both break down and to build up – is the only power that can save us?”* (pp. 14-15).

Our Easter shout of “Christ is risen” joins together with the cry resounding through the ages. We hear it clearly in the powerful voice of the Hebrew people in Psalm 68, a psalm that is sung loudly in churches around the world at this celebration of the resurrection:

“Let God arise, let His enemies be scattered;
let those who hate Him flee from His face.
As smoke vanishes, let them vanish;
and as wax melts from the presence of fire
let the demons perish before God and let the righteous be glad.”

The Psalm goes on from there, and Orthodox Christians repeat a resurrection chorus between sets of verses:

“Christ is risen from the dead, trampling down death by death,
and upon those in the tombs bestowing life!”

We will say and sing this whole great Psalm at the end of the Easter Season. But for now, let our celebration of Christ’s arising be a prayer for all who suffer the ravages of any human cruelty, from any source and with any justification.

Dear Ones of God, today of all days, embrace it. 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!