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## **Easter People in a Good Friday World**

*Homily by Lisa Wiens Heinsohn given for the people of St. John's Episcopal Church*

*April 12, 2020*

Alleluia! Christ is Risen!

The Lord is risen indeed, Alleluia!

Happy Easter! I have to say I've been getting pretty emotional preparing for Easter this year, preparing to share my heart with you and the Word of God with you. Like all of you I am watching almost in disbelief at what is happening in this world. My 12 year old daughter Carly and I were talking this week. We were talking about this coronavirus pandemic. I was telling her that there are very few people alive today who have been through a time like this. We have had various epidemics, but nothing that went truly global. We talked about not knowing the future, except we can be pretty sure things will be different, at least for a while. We or some of our loved ones could get sick. For sure our school and our work, and our beloved church community, are changed for the foreseeable future. Lots of people have no jobs. There are people in Queens and in many places who are eating only one meal per day. It's almost beyond all description.

This pandemic has taken the world to its knees, and it's got everyone scrambling to have hope and to find meaning. There are also some of the funniest memes on social media, also trying to make sense of this pandemic, because humans also respond to tragedy with humor. There are memes of dogs standing way on top of kitchen counters refusing to come down because their stir-crazy owners have already taken them on thirty walks today and no thank you, they do not want to go on another walk

today, leave me alone. Memes of people getting so bored with their treadmills that they create new workouts like lying behind a running treadmill trying to catch candy flying off the end of it with their mouths. Hundreds of jokes about toilet paper. Jokes about beleaguered parents and kids trying to do school and work together at home in their pajamas.

But even though it's quintessentially human to make jokes about grief and fear and loss, when you are in the middle of experiencing those things yourself, you feel you might never laugh again. Three days ago, when I was writing this homily, Johns Hopkins predicted that the U.S. death toll associated with this pandemic would ironically reach its peak today, Easter Sunday, but that we would run out of hospital resources yesterday, on Holy Saturday, the day Christians for all time remember what it is to experience despair and loss unmitigated by hope. So that moving into the day that is supposed to represent resurrection and life and joy for Christians, the nation in which we live would be experiencing the most death, and would have run out of resources to deal with it.

So what are we to do with this? We are Easter people living in a Good Friday world. We have been seeking hope and comfort in our religious traditions, but those religious traditions have been stretched beyond recognition. We don't get to meet at church. We don't get to hear the beautiful piano or pipe organ in person and sing our guts out which I love that St. John's does and feel what surely is the Holy Spirit moving through us as a community, palpably, when we receive bread and wine together. Preaching into an iPhone is way less fun.

I said this in my Rector's reflection for Thursday's e-newsletter, the email that goes out to St. John's folks each week, but I think it bears repeating. My friends. Beautiful, beloved community of St. John's. For the Church, this is business as usual. Despair is easy, but we are Easter people.

Easter is about going through Good Friday and knowing that it is not the end.

In the midst of this craziness, we have been offering Evening Prayer every weekday, and this past week we also offered noonday prayer, via Zoom. This small and beautiful collection of people have been gathering every day to pray, explore the scriptures, and share our own feelings and struggles and hopes with each other. We are doing this because we are the Church, and building or no building, we are called to pray together. We have also begun Care Circles, in which about 25 St. John's leaders are reaching out to about 15 people per leader every week, to just connect, ask how people are, ask if people need anything. We are doing this because we are the church.

On one such recent call, a leader called someone who is very new to St. John's, a young mother named Sarah Wagner, who gave me permission to share her story with you. Sarah told me that on March 30, her beloved father died, and she was not able to be with him under the circumstances of this pandemic. She was grieving and praying, wishing there was some way for her father to still help her and still connect with her. She said her father was an Episcopalian and really loved the church, so she had wanted to be able to go to church and just sit in the pews, but of course that isn't possible right now. A few days after her father's death, a Care Circle leader from St. John's called her to check on her. For Sarah, this felt like God Sarah told me that she immediately felt it was her father offering her a way to stay connected. We invited Sarah to be part of one of the daily prayer services via Zoom, and during those services she said that people who were complete strangers to her wholeheartedly embraced her, which was healing beyond measure. My friends, nothing can change that her father has died. But this love that we are sharing is Easter in a Good Friday world.

Easter is about the vast explosion of love, hope and joy that was released into the world when Mary Magdalene went to the tomb, looking for a dead

Jesus. She wanted to honor him the only way she knew how, but she did not find him. Easter is about the radical, life-changing hope that comes to the world when we go through Good Friday, through horrible losses that shake us to our core, and then discover that there is something beyond utter despair on the other side. Easter is about knowing that you and I can identify with Jesus—we can let our selfishness and hatred and belief that we are alone die with Jesus, so that the love and embrace and communion of God can be born in us. We can let hyper-individualism die, and living for the Beloved Community be born. When we were baptized, we were initiated into this eternal reality of dying and rising with Christ. And through it all, including through the worst of times, we can experience in a profound and intimate way that God is with us. This changes everything.

I know that many of you are struggling. I have spoken with many of you. I know that many of you are overflowing with love and a readiness to help the world around you. Never discount that God can use your small efforts to create Easter for someone. On our own steam we can't create life and resurrection. But we can meet each other in our need and vulnerability and offer simple companionship, compassion, respect and help. And when God's Spirit animates our effort and someone else's need, powerful things happen.

In our Thursday noonday prayer, the group expressed powerful hope and insight. One of them said we are in the middle of incredibly difficult times that no one currently alive has ever seen before. But our spiritual ancestors did experience times like this, and they found the presence of God and hope in the midst of their times. And our Psalms and scriptures and prayer book are like a message in a bottle from them, from those other times of great suffering. Despair is easy. But we are Easter people.

During this time when we can't celebrate the Eucharist and receive the bread and wine in person together, I encourage you to explore even more

deeply the other great sacrament, which is baptism. Baptism is about this move from Good Friday to Easter. It is about grounding ourselves in the hope that God's love is stronger than death, and living from that place.

What is your Good Friday? What is your place of greatest loss or fear or grief?

Where is God catching you up into God's embrace and love and life?

How is God inviting you to share that new life and love with others?

Despair is easy. But we are Easter people.

Alleluia! Christ is risen!

The Lord is risen indeed, Alleluia!