

**Rev. Dr. David Holyan**  
**“He Is Risen”**  
**First Presbyterian Church of Kirkwood**  
**Sunday, April 12, 2020**

**Jeremiah 31:1-6**

*At that time, says the Lord, I will be the God of all the families of Israel, and they shall be my people.*

*Thus says the Lord:*

*The people who survived the sword*

*found grace in the wilderness;*

*when Israel sought for rest,*

*the Lord appeared to him from far away.*

*I have loved you with an everlasting love;*

*therefore I have continued my faithfulness to you.*

*Again I will build you, and you shall be built,*

*O virgin Israel!*

*Again you shall take your tambourines,*

*and go forth in the dance of the merry-makers.*

*Again you shall plant vineyards*

*on the mountains of Samaria;*

*the planters shall plant,*

*and shall enjoy the fruit.*

*For there shall be a day when sentinels will call*

*in the hill country of Ephraim:*

*‘Come, let us go up to Zion,*

*to the Lord our God.’*

**John 20:1-18**

*Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb. So she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, ‘They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him.’ Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went towards the tomb. The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in. Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there, and the cloth that had been on Jesus’ head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself. Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead. Then the disciples returned to their homes.*

*But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb; and she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet. They said to her, ‘Woman, why are you weeping?’ She said to them, ‘They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him.’ When she had said this, she turned round and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to her, ‘Woman, why are you weeping? For whom are you looking?’ Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, ‘Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away.’ Jesus said to her, ‘Mary!’ She turned and said to him in Hebrew, ‘Rabbouni!’ (which means Teacher). Jesus said to her, ‘Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, ‘I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.’’ Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, ‘I have seen the Lord’; and she told them that he had said these things to her.*

Let us pray. Gracious and loving God, we open our hearts, our minds, our imaginations and our faith to you and to the power of your Holy Spirit. I pray that you would take the words and prayers and songs that are in all of our hearts. The words from Scripture, the words that you've laid upon my heart this morning to share. And touch all of these words and by the power and mystery of your spirit, transform them into Christ's word, your word for each of us. And let your word have its way within us, among us and through us. Especially on this Easter Sunday. We ask this in the faithful name of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Last Sunday after worship on Palm Sunday, I called one of the elders to talk about some important business that the church was engaged in. And after we had talked about the business, this elder asked me, "Won't it be strange to preach on Easter?" And then I was asked, "what are you going to do?" What immediately came to me was seeing myself as Mike Wallace on 60 minutes, being given exclusive access to a story that was about to unfold. I saw myself as Mike Wallace sitting in a dark tomb waiting for the stone to be rolled away. And I imagined sitting there commentating on what was unfolding. We sit here in the dark tomb waiting. Rumor has it that he's supposed to be resurrected and coming out to see the world in a new way.

Yes, we see the stone moving, light is beginning to appear. And as I turn around and peer in the darkness, I see the reflection of that light in two eyes. Yes, I can make out a face. It seems that it might be him, I'm not sure and on and on the image went where I was commentating from inside the tomb watching Jesus walk out into the garden, and then engage with Mary and eventually others. This thought, or insider flash, lasted just an instant. But what it invited me to realize was a change in perspective that I had never imagined every other time I've ever preached about Easter. Always, I've sort of set myself up at the far edge of the garden in eyesight of the tomb and the stone being rolled away. And in the foreground, watching the disciples run in and leave and watching Mary stand there and weep and watching her eventually turn to the gardener and talk to him and realize that it's Jesus.

Never once did I imagine to look at the story from the perspective of the darkness, and watching the light appear around the edge of the stone, and then catching the glimpse of that reflection in the eyes of Christ. Never did I imagine what it must have been like for Jesus to be resurrected and to walk out from that darkness into the light. But this insight seems to have power and potential. To help us think about the promises of Easter as all of us are sequestered away in our homes, in a sense entombed in the darkness of not knowing, of wondering about what's going to come, of thinking about what it might mean for our elder parents, ourselves, our children or grandchildren. What will the world look like when we all emerge from this place that we've been in and continue to be in together?

As I was thinking about that, I read an article in the New York Times by Russ Douthat, an opinion writer. The article was entitled, "The Pandemic and the Will of God. The Purposes of Suffering may be Mysterious but the Search for Meaning is Obligatory." In the article, he talks about this time of pandemic being an invitation for us to think about what this means for us, our suffering, our being isolated, our worrying about loved ones, friends, ourselves, caregivers, the lack of toilet paper and ventilators and everything else that this situation is making us think about. He goes through and outlines his several points in the article, but concludes it in this way. He says that, "Because if there's any message that Christians can carry from Good Friday and Easter out into the world darkened by a plague, it is that meaningless suffering is the goal of the devil and bringing meaning out of suffering is the saving work of God." Bringing meaning out of suffering is the saving work of God. Moving from darkness into the light is that work. And in the body of his article, he cites the work of a Dominican theologian, Father Thomas Joseph White, who writes for a blog site called First Things. And his article is, "Epidemic Danger in Catholic Sacrament." As a Dominican, he's looking specifically at the role of the Catholic Church and the priests and the sacraments during this time. But what he does, again, when he concludes his article is he asks, "What is our current task?" And as Douthat says, "Our task is to find meaning in the midst of suffering." Father White says that our task is to answer the questions and think about hope, interiority, and Christian empathy. And I think this is an inviting framework for us to consider what is the meaning of this particular Easter in these unbelievable conditions in which we find ourselves? So in a sense I'm going to take that framework, that Trinitarian framework of hope, interiority, and Christian empathy, and explore it from the framework of a Presbyterian, thinking about what would it be like for us to look at these three things and to find the meaning of our suffering with regards to hope, interiority, and Christian empathy.

The first is hope. In the resurrection of Jesus Christ we have the foundational hope of the Christian faith that Jesus Christ as we often say in his life, death, and resurrection saved all people and us blessed with the spirit and imbued with faith are the first fruits of the hope of Christ and all that He means for the world. But as I was thinking about our oft used phrase "life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ," I began to think that it's time maybe that we tease that apart a little bit, that maybe our formulation about our hope is a little too simple. Because we talk about Jesus' life as if there's three pieces: life, death, resurrection. That's it.

Boom, done. And we miss the fact that in Jesus' life, especially towards the end, there is prayer, trust, doubt, betrayal, false accusations, surrender, humiliation, agony, and crucifixion.

All of these things are a part of the life of Christ. So when we think about Easter and we think about the promise offered to us and to all people in Christ, let us not just think about the life of Jesus and the death of Jesus. But let's make room in our lives for sitting with prayer and doubt and betrayal and false accusation and surrender and humiliation and crucifixion, the false accusations and surrender and humiliation of ourselves and that which we do to others, and realize that in the resurrection of Jesus Christ all of these things are redeemed. When you make false accusation or we betray a friend or we're humiliated by something stupid that we've done, these things are redeemed by Christ, and we are offered new life. In a sense, we are offered the opportunity to walk out of those tombs to gain new perspective, to be more compassionate. But we've got to go through the steps. When we're humiliated, we need to spend time in the tomb in darkness, in prayer, in wondering what's going on within us why did we do this. Especially in a world that too quickly wants to skip over pain and suffering and move to promise and hope and resurrection.

If the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus is our promise and if we are willing to look at the whole unfurling of Holy Week as being part of that dynamic, maybe the invitation for us in our lives is to slow down and to pay attention, pay attention to how God is at work within us and pay attention to the work that we need to do in the dark in order to step forth into the light, being new and resurrected and like Jesus, unrecognized.

The second thing that Father White talks about is interiority. And he's talking about this specifically in his context about the fact that the Catholics are not able to come together and share in the sacraments. Instead, priests are supposed to find a new way to be about their ministry, an interior way. And he encourages the lay people to do the same. In fact, here's what he writes, "Second, Christians ought to treat this pandemic as an opportunity to learn more about God. What does it mean that God is permitted or willed temporary conditions in which our elite lifestyles of international travel are grounded? Our consumption is cut to a minimum. Our days are occupied with basic responsibilities towards our families and immediate communities. Our resources and economic hopes are reduced or even threatened, and we are made more dependent upon one another. What does it mean that our nation state suddenly seem less potent, and our armies are infected by invisible contagion they cannot eradicate, and that the most technologically advanced countries face the humility of their limits? Our powerful economies are suddenly feeble, then our future, more uncertain. Priests and bishops are confronted with a new obligation to seek interiority over activism, as their sacramental ministry is rendered less potent, and lay people have to find God outside the sacraments, in their own interior lives, discovering new ways to be grateful for what they have rather than distasteful in the face of what they lack."

In a sense, he's saying that the pandemic offers us a way to learn to be more grateful for what we have rather than disdainful for what we don't have. Another way to say this is he's advocating for us to understand this time as going to school, religious school with a school of faith, where we learn that there's a difference in how the world sees if we resist the reality or if we accept it, if we react to it in fear and frustration or if we're willing to respond to what's going on. Do we say that it's not happening or it's not affecting us, or do we allow it to come in and be a part of who we are? In a sense, are we going to Martha this or are we going to Mary this? Are we going to use this as a time for contemplation, a time for learning, a time for seeing the hollowness of our busy lives, of our drive for success, of our accumulation of assets, of all the accolades that we seek? Are we going to realize that there's something more fundamental and more important in our lives?

My wife has continued her work as a parent educator, doing all of her visits now online. And a week ago, maybe more, she told me the story of talking to one mom whose little daughter said, "Mommy, I love the Coronavirus." And the mom chuckled in recounting the story and shared that she was rather perplexed by this comment from her daughter, and so she asked, "Honey, why do you love the coronavirus?" "I love the coronavirus because you and daddy get to be at home with me and my brother and the dog. We get to play games together, and we get to have dinner every night together, and when I go to bed now, instead of you tucking me in, both you and Daddy get to tuck me in."

In a sense, through the eyes of a child, we see what matters most in life, the connections and relationships that we have with one another. In a sense, this child offers that perspective from the darkness of the tomb, looking out at the world in a new way, that all those things that had meaning and seemed to hold value and were important before aren't so important after all. Or as one lawyer friend put it recently, "I'm realizing now that leaving work at 5 o'clock and being home for dinner is more important than the billable hours I can get by working until 9:00." This time of isolation allows us to learn these important lessons of seeking the interior goodness that resides within life, the things that really matter, not those facades that seem to have mattered before all of this started.

And finally, Father White talks about Christian empathy and what we can learn during this time of struggle and suffering as a people around the world, about Christian empathy, about living and putting flesh on the phrase from John 13, "By this, they will know that you are my disciples if you love one another." I've always heard that phrase as sort of meaning going to Africa and digging wells for indigenous people or teaching English in some orphan school somewhere around the world. I always thought that it was something big and huge that had to meet a certain level in order for it to be Christian charity or empathy. But, again, when you flip the perspective and look from the darkness through the light into the world, you can see that Christian empathy looks a little more homegrown. It looks like Tom Lowery and Anthony Heinemann and Leslie Mallory and Deborah Hillebrand coming here during our worship services and offering the gift of song. It looks like Bill and Travis taking time out of their week to post music pieces, sometimes with the section leaders, to Facebook, to offer hope and encouragement to all of us. It looks like Frank Darr sitting at the computer right now, running the camera for our video streaming service and all the other services that we've had during quarantine, or Rob Monroe, who sits in the balcony here to be of help or assistance to whatever anybody needs. Christian empathy, charity looks like a phone call from Paul Reiter asking how things are going with his friends in Kirkwood and phone calls from many of you. It looks like notecards of encouragement, letters that Karen and I and Bill and others have received saying how grateful you are for what we're doing and how important it is for each of you, your emails of love and support. In this time of suffering and uncertainty, Christian charity looks like Karen in her unflinching care for all in our congregation, but especially those who are ill in treatment, or in hospice care and the loved ones closest to them. Everyday I get an update, even this morning, about those in our congregation who are hurting or suffering or closest to death. That commitment is the kind of Christian charity that makes this world a better place. And it's not just her, it's thousands of people. It's the people sewing masks for their neighbors. I know because I'm one of those people who can't sew. It's members donating food and money to KirkCare or the Red Cross. Whatever you're doing, it is your Christian work that you're doing because of the expanded sense of what this Easter means. It looks like my wife coming up to me when I'm in a dark place, and just before she hugs me, she says, "How are you really doing?" And then, during that hug, she whispers in my ear, "I love you, Jo Jo." That, which I'm sorry to admit, too often seemed just like a comment out of her mouth, now offers the promise of new life. I think about the nurses at Mo Bap who got iPads for their patients so they can stay connected to their families and hear one of their loved ones say, "I love you." This Easter offers all of us a strange opportunity to understand suffering, resurrection, all of the life of Christ, humility, interiority, loving our neighbors, charity, all of it in a new way. And to me, it helps me hear differently and more profoundly one of the Easter promises that comes from the voice of God through the prophet Jeremiah. I have loved you with an everlasting love. Therefore I've continued to be faithful to you. Again, I will build you. You shall be built. Again, you shall take your tambourines and go forth in the dance of the merry-makers. Again. Amen.