

**A Sermon from the Episcopal Parish of
St. John the Evangelist in Hingham, Massachusetts**
Preached by the Rev. Timothy E. Schenck on April 4, 2021 (Easter Day)

Well, I'm not exactly sure how I'm supposed to preach after *that*. What a beautiful and compelling re-telling of the Easter story by our Sunday School children. They have just preached the gospel in word and action in a much more powerful and eloquent way than I ever could. They have beautifully captured and conveyed the wonder of the resurrection. And, frankly, I hope that's what you hold onto this day — the sheer joy of what we just witnessed.

So, I should really just sit down and let the story speak for itself. But, since that's not happening, I hope you'll bear with me for at least a few moments as we reflect upon this day of resurrection and revel in the glory of Christ's victory over death.

You know, if there was ever a year to celebrate the resurrection, this is it. For the past 12 months we have been surrounded by gloom and doom and tombs. It has been a tough year, a trying year, a painful year on so many levels. The death toll has been relentless. Each day, each news cycle has felt like a mini Good Friday. And we all just want it to stop; we are all so ready to get back to some semblance of the way things used to be.

And with this as the backdrop, it is so tempting to race headlong into the arms of what might be called a societal Easter. To replace the word "hope" with "vaccine," to swap out "new life" for "new normal," to proclaim victory against this pandemic, and call our recaptured life "resurrection." But resurrection, *real* Resurrection as made manifest in Jesus Christ, is so much more than just relief or light at the end of the tunnel or getting back to the things we've missed for so long.

The Resurrection we celebrate today is not found in the joy of indoor dining at our favorite restaurant; or paying \$9 for cheap beer in the bleachers at Fenway Park; or even in being able to hug our grandchildren again. As wonderful as all of those things may be, and as welcome as they will hopefully soon be, they are not, in fact, what Easter is all about. Not even this *particular* Easter.

Because the Resurrection we celebrate this morning is not just about getting our lives back, it is about the very essence of new life. It is about the triumph of life over death. It is about the spirit of the risen Christ being made known to us not just as a distant memory, passed down through an ancient book, but as a real and tangible presence in our lives right here, right now. It is about a God who loves us, forgives us, and walks beside us, right on through that valley of the shadow of death, straight into the new life of grace and hope.

The Resurrection we celebrate this morning is a reminder that even in our darkest moments, and we've had plenty of them this year, Jesus is fully present among us. That he is with us through times of isolation and brokenness, through moments of doubt and despair, through painful realizations and fractured relationships. The Resurrection is a reminder that we are not alone, that we will *never* be alone, that we *can* never be alone. Because we will never, ever be abandoned or forsaken or forgotten. For Christ is alive. And *that's* the power of the Resurrection we celebrate this morning.

But even in light of this reality, the truth is, the resurrected life is not easy. Following Jesus doesn't automatically wipe away grief and pain. It may heal, but not entirely erase the scars and hurts on our hearts. The true mark of Easter joy is not a temporary sugar high, but an enduring relationship with the divine that carries us through all the trials and travails, the temptations and touchpoints of our lives.

While the resurrected life is not always easy, it does point to a path forward. A path through the rubble and debris of our lives to a promised land of a soul at peace. A place where joy coexists with grief; a place not of denial but of perspective. That's where true hope abides. That's where it shines forth, illuminating and filling our hearts with love. Not despite all that we have suffered, but precisely because we have suffered and, with God's help, found the path through. That's true hope. A hope that moves directly through the pain of the cross, not viewing it as an obstacle to avoid, but as a mystical portal into a life of joyful obedience and abundance. That's what the flowers and fancy vestments and jelly beans ultimately point us towards: new life in Jesus Christ.

In John's version of the Easter story, after Mary Magdalene recognizes the risen Christ at the empty tomb, Jesus says to her, "Do not hold onto me." In Latin, the phrase is *noli me tangere*, [NO-lee may TANger-ray] which is literally translated as "touch me not." And as we hold our second online Easter service in as many years, amid a hopefully waning global pandemic, that phrase, that translation jumped out at me. "Touch me not" — *noli me tangere* — has been our collective motto throughout the past year. Jesus is basically saying to Mary, "Hey! Keep six feet apart."

The broader context here is that Jesus is telling Mary he has a mission to fulfill. After a few post-resurrection appearances, Jesus will ascend into heaven. He can't stay. He can't be in relationship with Mary and the other disciples in the same way. New life awaits. Mary must let go of Jesus physically, so that she and her friends and all of us can experience Christ's presence spiritually. Not just in the immediate future, but for all time.

“Touch me not” in the old way, Jesus is saying, but allow yourself to be held in the palm of God’s hand for all eternity. Whenever we can fully embrace one another again, know that you have always been and will always be, embraced by the loving arms of our Lord. Arms that were once stretched out on the hard wood of the cross; arms that are now open wide in welcome, inviting you and loving you into the resurrected life of Jesus Christ. Alleluia and Amen.