

**A Sermon from the Episcopal Parish of
St. John the Evangelist in Hingham, Massachusetts
Preached by the Rev. Timothy E. Schenck on April 11, 2020 (Easter Vigil)**

Many of you know that this is by far my favorite service of the year. It brings to bear all the powerful symbols of the Christian faith: fire and water, Scripture and song, bread and wine (well, usually). The liturgy reflects the unfolding drama of salvation as told through the foundational stories of our faith, as we literally pass-over from death to resurrection, from darkness to light, from Lent to Easter. Plus there's a compelling element of danger to the whole thing. Not just because the singing of the Exsultet could easily go off the rails, but because priests, playing in the dark, with fire — what could possibly go wrong?

I admit I wasn't sure how it would feel to do the Easter Vigil this year. And I do miss looking out at a darkened church and seeing your faces illuminated by candlelight; I miss the ringing of bells during the singing of the Gloria; I miss hearing the full choir belting out alleluias; I miss smelling incense and watching it waft up into the rafters; I miss baptizing new Christians into the faith; I miss sharing the first eucharist of Easter; I miss our traditional post-service Champagne and Jelly Bean Reception; I miss being in the same room with all of you.

And yet, in many ways, with everyone worshiping from home, the Vigil feels particularly poignant this year. It feels like we're channeling the early church and getting back to the basics of our faith. You know, the first followers of Jesus didn't have beautiful buildings or fancy vestments. There were no pipe organs or vested choirs, no silver chalices or stained glass windows. On Easter Eve, they gathered in their homes or in secret places and prayed until sunrise; baptizing new converts, reading Scripture, remembering Jesus in bread and wine.

And so while we wouldn't write it up this way, this moment does allow us an opportunity to get to the root of resurrection. The joy of the resurrection may stand in stark relief to global anguish and isolation, but it doesn't stand *apart* from it. The resurrected Christ stands right in the midst of this moment. Standing in solidarity with us, weeping with us, grieving with us. The thing is, resurrection and grief are not mutually exclusive — they never have been. Even as the disciples realized and then reveled in the resurrection, they still grieved for Jesus. They still grieved for the old way of being with him, even as he was present with them in a new way.

Our celebration tonight serves as a powerful reminder that resurrection isn't all chocolate bunnies and Peeps and Easter brunch. The road to resurrection is paved with heartache and heartbreak; we don't erase the memory of Good Friday or forget its pain when we celebrate the resurrection. Indeed, the events of the past week are what heighten and deepen our joy. A celebration tinged with grief doesn't make Easter any less joyful. But a side of reality with our resurrection feast makes it that much more meaningful. I think this is part of what the late Bishop Barbara Harris meant when she proclaimed that "we are an Easter people living in a Good Friday world." Resurrection joy abounds even in a world where there is pain and loss.

Now, at one level, none of this being together while being apart thing is anything new. The resurrection has been celebrated secretly in ancient catacombs under the threat of persecution; it has been celebrated on battlefields; it has been celebrated amid plague and pestilence; it has been celebrated in prisons; it has been celebrated alone; it has been celebrated in fear; it has been celebrated whenever and wherever and however Christians have or have not been able to gather.

The circumstances may be new for us, but Jesus Christ, the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end, is the same yesterday, today, and forever. And so, in the ways that truly matter, this Easter celebration is the same as the other 2,000 Easter celebrations that have preceded it. And I find comfort and solace and strength in this. And I hope you do as well.

Because no matter the circumstances, the power of Christ's resurrection cannot be contained or constrained or restrained. New life came bursting through that tomb with such force that the world was forever changed. God's people were forever transformed. That line between life and death was forever wiped away.

And to *that* we can say Alleluia and Amen.