

## Easter isn't business as usual, and that's fine

Chris Keating

Woodlawn Chapel Presbyterian Church

John 20:1-18

*Sunday, April 12, 2020*

For Christians, Easter Sunday is generally routine.

We know the drill: those with young children begin the morning with races to candy-filled baskets. Energized by a breakfast of caffeine and marshmallow Peeps, we head to church. Inside, the sunrise crowd's hallelujahs still linger in the lily-scented air.

Worship begins with strong trumpet blasts and shouts of "He is Risen!" A barrage of visitors and guests patiently endure the preacher's half-baked jokes about the "Christmas and Easter crowd." We head home to feasts and egg hunts, ham dinners and patiently frosted lamb cakes.

Normally, it's all business as usual. But not this year. Our Covid-19 Easter celebrations are unchartered territory. For the first time, churches will remain shuttered. It seems as though the Easter message most of us will be preaching will be some version of "The Lord is risen. Stay at home!"

In a time of pandemic, the church, like every other aspect of culture, is scrambling. Our vocabularies have been infiltrated by legions of action words like "streaming" and "Zoom." We're wearing our pajamas all day and washing our hands as if they were crusted with mud. We are rushing to keep up with waves of information and news, all to make sure business continues as usual.

The virus has interrupted all faiths. In Saudi Arabia, access to Mecca has been blocked, restricting pilgrimages of faithful Muslims. Some rabbinical groups have relaxed rules surrounded the foods and technology allowed for a socially distanced Passover, recalling its origins in a time of plague.

Meanwhile, Passover, Ramadan, Easter will all happen, even as we are sheltering in place. Our sermons won't be preached in packed sanctuaries but will originate from living rooms and empty chancels. Offerings will be taken, though ushers will unnecessary. PayPal will do just fine. Prayer concerns will be typed into live stream comments. If you are missing the lilies, you'll have to bring your own. Everything will be different—and ultimately that will be just fine.

We are all in this together, but there is no mistaking the fact this is far from business as usual.

It seems very strange to have Easter without coming to church. It seems odd to be preaching to an empty sanctuary...it is just like the Internet meme someone sent me of Forrest Gump saying, "And just like that, my pastor became a televangelist."

In our response to this strangeness, I believe we are coping as well as can. We've turned bedrooms into conference rooms and dining rooms into boardrooms. Every meeting is planned around kid's nap schedules. Covid-19 has rearranged nearly every part of our lives.

Still, I believe we shall be just fine.

That is not to ignore the awful toll this has exacted on families who are separated, nor am I forgetting the impact the virus has had on our economy and on our incomes...and I am especially not forgetting those who are on the front lines, nor those who are sick.

I believe we shall be just fine even in the face of all of this, because while the pandemic has created unprecedented challenges, there has also been a surge in creativity. In response to fear, we're finding ways to thrive by creating TikTok videos, swapping recipes, uploading webinars and connecting with family and friends through video conferencing. More importantly, we're taking long walks with our kids and eating dinner together.

Inside the eye of this upheaval, there are growing recognitions that we were not well served by our pre-virus choices. It's a good thing to wash our hands, and an even better thing to spend time with our families. For the church, this means accepting change. Otherwise, we will be running the risk of becoming a vestigial relic of pre-coronavirus history.

Like Mary, we are discovering the peace of Jesus' resurrection.

William Barclay once wrote that the peace of eternal life is a peace that envelopes all parts of life – our present struggles, our world's pain, and the promise of life with God after we die.

I'm not trying to find a silver lining in the cloud of suffering. The pain and suffering are real, but they may also reveal possibilities. Those possibilities are revealed in the mysteries of Easter. Christ's passion, death, and resurrection are reminders that God has not abandoned the world.

In John's Gospel, Mary heads to the tomb on Sunday morning, isolated by her grief. She heads there as soon as the Sabbath was over because she understands just what "business as usual" entails. The empty tomb, however, thwarts her carefully arranged plans.

Uncertain of how she'll make this transition from disequilibrium to stability, Mary weeps. It's not until she encounters the risen Christ that she understands things will never be the same—but suddenly she realizes they will be just fine.

Just as he calls Mary by name, so does Jesus call us by name. He comes to us as the promise of God's love and peace despite the uncertainty around us. He says our name; and he tells us, things may never be the same, but they will be just fine. Amen.