

Easter 2 April 19, 2020

I would usually begin a sermon on this 19th day of April making a reference to “Patriot’s Day,” the April Day in 1776 in Massachusetts when farmers and citizens stood up to the tyranny of the British imperial forces, beginning with Paul Revere’s famous ride and cry throughout the countryside that the British are coming to the stand at the bridge in Concord where the Minute Men, “fired the shot heard ‘round the world.” But today, we a nation, as a world, and here as Vermonters, we face a very different sort of crisis. And in this time I think we need to hear a very different sort of voice. My wife, Elizabeth, received a prose poem from her supervisor this week. I was deeply moved by this poem, as it spoke to the meaning of the times we are facing. Perhaps you have already seen it, as even the author noted ironically, this poem went ‘viral’ on social media. But I was very moved to read it. The author has worked as a teacher and a hospital and hospice chaplain, and she has been called the “poet laureate of the pandemic” by Oprah Winfrey. Also, again since we have the technology, I’ll put it up on the screen:

And the people stayed home. And read books, and listened, and rested, and exercised, and made art, and played games, and learned new ways of being, and were still. And listened more deeply. Some meditated, some prayed, some danced. Some met their shadows. And the people began to think differently.

And the people healed. And, in the absence of people living in ignorant, dangerous, mindless, and heartless ways, the earth began to heal.

And when the danger passed, and the people joined together again, they grieved their losses, and made new choices, and dreamed new images, and created new ways to live and heal the earth fully, as they had been healed.

- Kitty O'Meara

Prayer: O wonderful God, once again we come to you in prayer, coming together again in our faith and we hear your Word for us of the risen Christ. May this Easter faith strengthen us in these difficult times and help us to support our neighbors in all we do. This we ask in the Name of Jesus our savior and friend. Amen.

I thought that Kitty O'Meara's poem was especially fitting not only as a poem about this time of pandemic, but also fitting for this Sunday after Easter as well. Earlier this week, we had a Bible study

on the lessons we read this morning. Bill Crowther, one of the participants, noted how the Biblical lessons seem to resonate much more intensely now. With the pandemic in the background, and mostly seeming even closer than that, the words of Scripture speak in a deep fashion, a fashion we might not have noticed previously. For example, as I mentioned in the sermon on Easter Sunday last week, the disciples, the followers of Jesus are seen in Gospel this morning practicing some pretty serious social distancing, gathered in fear behind locked doors. They are not doing this like Kitty O'Meara envisions, making art and reading, learning new ways, no they are cowering behind those locked doors because of the sheer terror, an unrelenting fear, that took over them. Jesus comes to them in this state, and over and over, Jesus says, "Peace be with you." But one of the fellowship, Thomas, is not there during this event. When Thomas comes, the others tell him excitedly about their experience, and they declare, "We have seen the Lord!" Their enthusiasm, however, fails to sway Thomas; as he says, "I will not believe..." "I will not believe, unless I see the mark of the nails, put my hand in his side...I will not believe." Well, Thomas' unbelief is so true...how could anyone believe what the others told him? How could anyone even begin to think they told the truth...And Jesus returns with that same message, "Peace be with you." Thomas has that same experience for himself, indeed Jesus lives, he is risen, and then Thomas goes beyond the others, Thomas puts into words the very depth of this experience, Thomas proclaims, "My Lord and my God." For Thomas now, belief has become his new reality...he finds in the risen Christ standing before him the truth of all truths: Jesus lives, the love of God has triumphed and the world is made new. Like that last stanza of Kitty O'Meara's poem, "the danger passed, and the people joined together again, they grieved their losses, and made new choices, and dreamed new images, and created new ways to live and heal the earth fully, as they had been healed." This is the new life of faith opened to Thomas that day by Jesus, the way of faith in the love of God, coming together in faith to live as God intends for us, creating with God our new way of living together, healing ourselves and our world, living in the power of Jesus' resurrection to bring God's righteousness and justice to all.

This is the hope and the vision we now live with. Still even on this second Sunday of Easter, we remain apart, we worship together, but still in our own homes, still physically distant from each other. Last week I spoke about the emptiness of our streets, our Churches and schools, the emptiness of our public spaces and that to me, this emptiness was emblematic of the emptiness of the tomb that Mary

and Peter saw on that first Easter morning. It is an emptiness that is not expected, an emptiness far beyond our normal experience of the world. An emptiness that our spiritual ancestors stood before and confronted, an emptiness that disrupted their lives, a disturbing emptiness for them. And for us as well, this emptiness we confront now in our times, the emptiness of our streets and public places also disrupts our lives and disturbs our understanding of the world. But also, as I mentioned last week on Easter morning, there is something we can “see” in that emptiness, something that lies beyond that emptiness that can be life hanging for us, that will transform our lives and our spirits: that emptiness is a sign of care and concern, that great act of global solidarity of people showing care and love for others, care for people they might not ever know to prevent the spread of coronavirus, to help ensure the health and well-being of their neighbors. And, as Kitty O’Meara reminds us, there is a hope that despite our empty streets, we may someday soon come together again and make new choices, have new dreams that take this cue and concern to a new level to care for others and to heal our world. And this morning, this second Sunday of Easter, we hear of the early followers of Jesus confronting that emptiness as well, the first disciples realizing that Jesus is risen, brought from the tomb and now in their midst, bringing the divine message of peace. But for Thomas, Thomas sees something even deeper in that emptiness: as Jesus comes to Thomas and brings him the word of divine peace, Thomas is overcome, because in that completely disruptive experience, Thomas makes that extraordinary confession, “My Lord and my God!” A confession that signifies that Thomas now sees in that emptiness that he and the others confronted on that first Easter morning is full of the promise of God, that Jesus is the divine one in their midst, bringing the fulness of God’s love to life, bringing a new and powerful hope for the fulness of God’s love to be present in our lives and in the world. Thomas’ confession in the face of that emptiness, now seeing the risen Lord before him, is to acknowledge the complete love of God embracing him in his life, surrounding him and bringing him new life as well.

This is the vision for you and me too this Easter season. As we too proclaim the risen Christ along with Thomas and the earlier followers of Jesus and along with our sisters and brothers in Christ the world round this year, we do so gathered in new and unsettling ways, we do so knowing our churches and streets might be empty, but we do not simply take that as a fact, but as a vision, a vision for the love that emptiness represents, and this Easter season we see that even in the emptiness, God is here for us, here to embrace and surround us with that divine love, bringing us a fulness to overcome our fears, to overcome our separation to overcome the shadow of darkness that too often seems to be

creeping up upon us. But even deeper, I believe, even deeper is that the vision and hope the risen Christ now brings us is that as this storm passes over we will find the new ways to live in this love, to continue the acts of kindness and solidarity, to continue that outreach of love and care for others, especially remember the least of these, the most vulnerable and the outcast and marginalized. We see now how closely we are all connected, and the physical distancing makes this all the more apparent to us, and the vision and hope we are so graciously given this Easter season is that like Thomas, we come to a faith that brings us to a deeper love for God's care and mercy bringing us together in the life of the risen Christ. Thanks be to God for this amazing grace we find in the depth of the empty tomb and on our empty streets and church sanctuaries, a grace to lead us to a stronger faith in loving God and loving our sisters and brothers. And once again, let us proclaim together in our Easter faith, "Alleluia! Christ is risen. The Lord is risen indeed, Alleluia!" Amen.