

Easter 3 April 26 2020

One evening last week my wife Elizabeth was talking with her friend Liz who lives in Brooklyn. At 7:00 pm on the dot, Liz said, “Hold on,” and then opened her window and held the phone outside. We heard all the people on Liz’s block coming out to applaud, to bang on pots and pans and to shout a hearty “Thank you” to all the New York City medical personnel and the Emergency Medical technicians and first responders. It was really amazing. It went on for about five minutes, and then slowly quieted down, but I heard one last, “Thank you!!” rolling up the block. This has been going on now for weeks on end, every day at 7:00 in the evening. I know amidst the terrible toll of death and the heartache that the sickness due to the coronavirus has caused, such a simple gesture seems almost insignificant, but I have to say I was really moved to hear it and to know each night at 7:00 pm it is going on again and again, each evening until the end of this pandemic.

Prayer: O most merciful God, this day as we once again gather by means of our technology, we ask that your Word speak to us to calm our fears and to open our hearts and souls to serve in the Name of the Risen Christ. Amen.

The story Russell just read from Luke’s Gospel is fairly well known, but like everything these days, the words though familiar seem to have a different significance now. When Jesus breaks the bread the eyes of the

disciples are opened, and throughout Christian history this has often been seen as a reference to the Eucharist, to the presence of Christ with us in the communion, “Jesus was made known to them in the breaking of the bread.” That communion reference, the sense that soon after the resurrection, the Risen Christ is known to the disciples as they come together and share the meal of fellowship just seems so obvious. For many years, that is certainly how I have thought about this story, as a way in which the Gospel of Luke points to the centrality of Communion for Christian life and fellowship, coming to the Altar and finding the presence of the Risen Christ there in the bread. But today, today of course, that seems so distant, so quaint, so far from our present reality. This is now the seventh week in this pandemic period in which we are *not* gathered around the Altar at Good Shepherd. The lovely sanctuary is still empty. This morning, our Sunday morning fellowship is once again taking place only digitally, and we cannot share the bread broken in the mercy of God, nor the wine poured through God’s amazing grace. Yes, we gather once more in prayer, but power and the mystery of communion, our Eucharistic faith, lacks any of the full expression we experienced in the past. And, as far as any of us may be able to see, it will be weeks, if not months, before we will be able to gather together again once more around the Altar and to have the promised presence of Christ in our midst. That fellowship that so nourishes us, that bread that feeds us spiritually, these are no longer

available to us. In a way, it seems like we have very quickly entered into a new form of Exile. Our lesson from 1 Peter this morning tells us to, “live in reverent for during the time of your exile.” Well, certainly there is some fear of course, and to learn to live that fear in a reverent manner would be a good thing. But this puts me in mind and Exile that feels of the Exile of the Israelites in Babylon, and as we hear in Psalm 137, they are wondering as they sit by the waters of Babylon how they might sing the Lord’s song in a strange land. Well, we are certainly now in a strange land, a place none of us has ever experienced before, a time and a place in which uncertainty, fear and constant change seem to be the most prevalent experiences we have day by day. Earlier this month, our Holy Week and our celebration of Easter had a completely different feel and expression than ever before. And it is in this context, of course, that even the words of the familiar story we hear this morning seem so different. Those early disciples of Jesus, even in their fear at the terrible events that took place, the arrest, crucifixion and death of Jesus, the one they hoped would be Israel’s Redeemer, and now the exceptionally strange news that some of the women reported they’d been told that Jesus lives, this overpowers these early disciples, more than they can take in, so they decide to get out of Dodge, in their fear they vote with their feet and beat it out of town, leaving Jerusalem in the dust and heading out before what happened to Jesus happens to them as well! It is in that fear and confusion and

perplexity that Jesus comes to Cleopas and his companion, comes to them and calms their fears with his insight into God's ways and then breaking the bread with them.

In this period of pandemic, we too, have this same fear, confusion and perplexity, but we cannot be together and we cannot break bread together in the presence of Christ. And question that confronts us here, the difficulty we face, I think my sisters and brothers, is how can we now see Christ present with us in our midst? How do we see Christ, just as those early Christian ancestors of ours saw Christ in the breaking of the bread? Recently, in my emails, I've written often that I will "see" you soon, always putting it in quotation marks, and sometimes even saying that I'll "see" you virtually or digitally, knowing that now, of course, this is how we gather, and so "seeing" each other must be different. I think that might give a little clue as to how we might "see" Jesus this year during this pandemic that has forced so many changes on us, how we might "see" Jesus even at a time when we cannot gather together and when we cannot break bread together in Jesus' Holy Name. The question for us this morning is simply this: how can we see the Lord when we cannot gather together and cannot break bread? In these strange and topsy-turvy times in which we live, I think that God is calling us, perhaps, to a new way of seeing. Just as I contemplated parallels between the empty tomb of Easter morning and the empty streets our times, they both require a different way

of seeing. Usually, to our ways of thinking, if something is empty it is useless, for example, an empty bottle of milk isn't really any good, unless it has milk in it. We usually see the emptiness as a void, waiting for something to fill it. But our resurrection faith helps us to see this emptiness in a new way: the empty tomb shows us the power of God's love to bring new life into our world, our Easter faith shows us that the empty tomb is God's love fully manifest for us in the Risen Christ. And so now, our empty streets show us that great act of global solidarity of each one of us caring for the vulnerable in our world, preventing the spread of the coronavirus and seeking to heal a sick world by staying home and keeping ourselves and others safe. I believe that same Easter faith now helps us to "see" in a new way today as well: we are not able to "see" the Risen Christ in the breaking of the bread as Cleopas and the other disciple did on the evening of that first Easter Day, but we are called to see in this emptiness power of God in our lives to bear us up in the midst of this pandemic, to give us the strength and courage needed in our day to take care of others in denying ourselves the opportunity to come together and gather in our sanctuary around the Altar. In our empty sanctuary there is a witness to the power of God's love in our lives to bring us together, if only digitally, to praise God and ask for God's mercy and love to help us overcome the difficult times we now face. Our empty stores and our empty restaurants are a sign for us to see the power of God's love in taking care of our

neighbors by remaining physically distant while still praying together, or like they are doing in New York City every evening at 7 o'clock, showing deep appreciation for the frontline workers, for the essential workers putting their lives on the line to overcome the pandemic. Today, in our times, we are called to a deep faith, a faith that might even be deeper in our lives than in the lives of our early Christian ancestors, for Cleopas and the other disciple could be together and break bread together with Jesus to learn the depth of God's love in their world. For us, for you and me, my sisters and brothers, while physically distant, while deprived of breaking bread at our Altar, we are now called to live in a deep Easter faith to see the Risen Christ in the midst of the strong emptiness of our world, the strange emptiness of our lives deprived of the fellowship as we gather together. But even in that emptiness, our Easter faith enables us to see in a deeper manner the power of God's love to bring us together, to move us to gratitude and thankfulness, to grant us the trust in God's love to bring new life to us, to our lives and our world in the midst of these uncertain and topsy-turvy times. With our eyes now opened like Cleopas and the other disciple, we can now recognize the Risen Christ in our Easter faith, still even today as we gather in prayer, and together we can still make that Easter proclamation, "Alleluia! Christ is Risen. The Lord is risen indeed! Alleluia!" Amen.