

Easter Sunday 2020

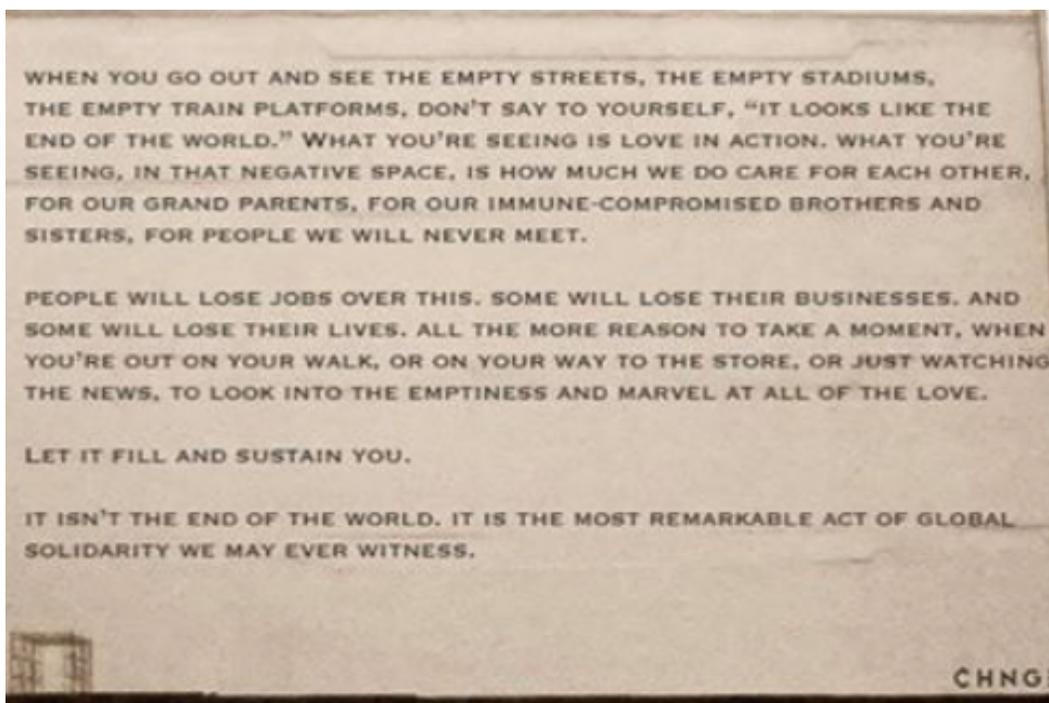
“Alleluia! Christ is risen. The Lord is risen indeed. Alleluia!”

With this traditional Easter greeting we open our worship this morning, and even though we have made this proclamation together over the years, today, this Easter morning, it sounds somewhat different. Of course, we are not gathered together in our beautiful sanctuary at Good Shepherd, we are not overcome by the sweet smell of Easter lilies, seeing the sun streaming through the stained glass, smiles on faces that are familiar and faces of people we don't know, hearing the stirring sounds of the organ, all working together to proclaim the resurrection of Jesus, making this proclamation in ways that are comfortable and familiar. Of course, today we no longer live in a world that is comfortable and familiar. With the advent of the coronavirus outbreak, with the anxiety and sorrow this event has brought, with all the dreadful consequences that we must practice to take care of each other and ourselves this Easter, our physical distancing, shutting down businesses to prevent further infections, not being able to “pack the pews of the Churches,” as the President had hoped, seems like an inconsequential loss in the face of so much other loss of life and livelihood. There is consolation, consolation that while physically distant, we are still able to gather in prayer, still able through the power of technology to praise God on this most special day, still able to shout out as Christians have done together through the centuries, “Alleluia! Christ is risen. The Lord is risen indeed, Alleluia!”

A few days ago I listened to an interview with Jon Meacham, a Pulitzer prize winning historian now teaching at Vanderbilt University in Tennessee. Meacham is also a very faithful Episcopalian, and he recently wrote *The Hope and Glory*, meditations on Jesus' last words on the cross. In the interview, Meacham spoke about some of his thoughts on celebrating Easter this year during the pandemic. He said, perhaps this is an opportunity to rediscover what our early Christian ancestors experienced as they proclaimed Jesus' resurrection; our early Christian ancestors did not gather to worship in beautiful sanctuaries. No, they gathered in their homes, they gathered with a few other friends and fellow Christians in houses to celebrate the Good News of Jesus' resurrection. Meacham went on to say that even being “socially distant” was not unknown to the early Christians. They were kept socially distant by a deeply stratified society that kept the rich and the poor worlds apart, and most of the early Christians were from the poorer classes. But their message, as well, kept our early Christian sisters and brothers socially

distant: they dared to proclaim a peasant from the village of Nazareth as the son of God, the Prince of Peace, the Lord of Lords. These were titles that were reserved for the divine emperor, not for some jumped up nobody from the sticks in Galilee, so anyone who made these claims was going to be socially isolated. And then, then to make the outlandish claim that the one who underwent the horrific and humiliating death on the cross, a death reserved for rebellious slaves, for treasonous terrorists and for the poor, to make the claim that this one was raised by God from death was a direct challenge to all, and those who persisted in making this treasonous claim would indeed have to keep themselves socially distant or become liable to being given a cross of their own. So Professor Meacham sees some very close parallels in our proclamation of Jesus' resurrection today in the world of pandemic and the proclamation of our spiritual ancestors, the early followers of Christ at the very origins of the Church. So maybe, while this social distancing and gathering in our homes might feel new to us, this experience is one our spiritual forebears knew very well, and in the midst of the adversity they faced, they yet remained faithful in their proclamation of Jesus' resurrection, knowing the power of God's love to transform their lives and striving by the power of the Holy Spirit to seek God's justice and righteousness, to share the love of God they found in Jesus, the Risen Savior, with all the world. For us as well, for you and me, my sisters and brothers, in this time when our world and our lives seem so different, with our physical distancing one from another and our anxieties about the future and what we face currently and what is yet to come, we still come together like Christians have through the centuries, like our earliest spiritual ancestors did, to proclaim on this day that God's love overcomes even death and the grave, that nothing will separate us from the love of God we have in Christ Jesus.

But even as close as the parallels between early Christian experience and our lives today that Professor Meacham observes, I found an experience that perhaps goes even deeper. Earlier this week, Brother Thomas Berube, a brother in the Order of St. Edmund's serving at St. Michael's College sent me a picture of a sign, I don't know where it was posted, and if the technology allows me I'm going to put it up on your screens for all to see right now (you see, maybe having to use all this technology might even make a sermon more interesting!)



SOURCE: BR. THOMAS BERUBE, SSE

The sign talks of seeing our empty streets and other empty public spaces, but notes that this is not the end of the world we are seeing, no, but it *is* the most remarkable act of global solidarity we may ever witness. As I contemplated this, I realized that as Mary came to the empty tomb, she was terrified, terrified to see the tomb in its stark emptiness, terrified, because what she expected, the normal course of events, was completely disrupted for her that first Easter morning staring into the depth of that empty tomb. But for us, for you and me my sisters and brothers, maybe the empty streets, the empty stores and restaurants, empty schools, maybe this is the empty tomb for us this year for Easter. Just like for Mary, our “normal” has vanished, empty tombs and empty streets are not normal for our experience, but that emptiness shows us something far beyond our regular reality. In these empty streets we can see this most remarkable act of global solidarity, all around the world people keeping others safe by the practice of physical distancing and even putting their livelihoods on hold for a time in order to stem the tide of this viral outbreak and to save lives of those we may never see or know. And for Mary, and for the other friends of Jesus she called to tell them about this empty tomb, they see there not only their lives disrupted, but even more deeply, the remarkable solidarity of God for us, raising Jesus from the dead, abandoning the tomb and bringing life to triumph over the power of even death itself. Our Easter proclamation, “Alleluia! Christ is risen, The Lord is risen indeed.

Alleluia!” this is our recognition of this remarkable solidarity of the love of God in our lives, God filling that emptiness with a love supreme, Jesus standing with us in the midst of our weeping, just like Mary, and comforting us by showing us the depth of divine love to fill our lives and our world once again. Yes, the empty streets show us that now our “normal” has vanished, but as Christians we have never really lived by the normal, but we are blessed to be loved by God in Christ Jesus and given faith to see the never failing and everlasting love of God in the face of Christ, just as Mary does that first Easter morning beside that empty tomb. In Jesus’ resurrection, God comforts us, bringing us joy even in the midst of deep sorrow, that we can celebrate this Day of Resurrection with the deep and joyous proclamation of our faith, that today we see this remarkable act of global solidarity, each one of us showing love for others by keeping them safe, and that today, as we too are confronted by the empty tomb, we can proclaim once more, “Alleluia! Christ is risen. The Lord is risen indeed. Alleluia!” Amen.