

## Easter Vigil 2020 sermon

Alleluia, Christ is risen, the Lord is risen indeed, Alleluia!

A few nights ago, many of our Jewish sisters and brothers were gathered together by the technological magic of Zoom to celebrate the Passover this year. Part of the Haggadah, the ritual for the Passover meal, remembering and celebrating the deliverance of the people of Israel from their slavery and oppression in Egypt under the tyranny of Pharaoh, has the youngest person present ask, “Why is this night different from all other nights?” I heard a radio commentator say that of course this night will be different, and different as well from all previous Passover remembrances, because in the midst of this pandemic our lives and our world have changed. That is so true, of course, and we are all experiencing what it now means to live in this changed world: first and foremost, we see the mounting death toll and the horror of mass graves, of 2,000 people dying in a single 24 hour period in the United States, the stories of families unable to properly mourn the loss of their loved ones; we see the heroic actions of medical personnel and first responders, but also the toll this pandemic takes on them for in caring for others they put themselves at risk and the fatigue, physical and mental, that strains them; we see others stepping up to keep essential services functioning, grocery workers, sanitation workers, taking risks with their health to keep us fed and well; we see families now taking up the necessary work to help their children’s education and the teachers staying in touch with their students through online methods, but some children still left behind with the vast inequalities of our society; and of course we see the millions of newly unemployed workers, staying home to prevent the spread of disease, but facing deep uncertainty with the subsequent loss of income and many times no savings on which to fall back, as well as the frustration of joining thousands of others to get through to a overburdened bureaucracy for some sort of relief. We see all this and we now that in this extraordinary pandemic year of 2020, it seems that every minute is different than anything that has gone on before.

Yet, as we gather here tonight, yes in a different form, since to maintain our physical distance to reduce the spread of disease we gather digitally, yet as we gather here tonight there is something we do that is very familiar, that even global pandemic cannot stop. As our Deacon Beth Ann opened up our worship this evening, we lit a new fire as Christians have done for centuries, and then we have listened to some ancient words, words from the Hebrew Scriptures

to bring us hope and and strength, words that spoke to our spiritual ancestors and that still speak to us today. From creation, through natural disasters, enduring political oppression and tyranny, in all times and places, God is present with God's people, present with us in the midst of seemingly unprecedented perils. No matter what we face as a people, and no matter what we might face in our own lives, God is present to show us the strength and deep care of God's love. We have heard this night God's promise to us to bring new life to our dry bones, we heard the prophetic vision from God, "A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. I will put my spirit within you." With all the changes we are undergoing in our topsy-turvey present times, this Word of God is no different for us in this time of pandemic than it has ever been: in God is our hope and our trust, God is our refuge, a very present help in times of trouble.

But this, of course, is a most special night: with our sisters and brothers around the world and in times past and times yet to come, with them all we celebrate the Good News of Jesus' rising from the dead. As the women come to the tomb, they hear the word, "Do not be afraid." Yes, the word of a stranger, the word of an angel, but a word that God is with them. Then, the risen Jesus greets them and offers this same word, "Do not be afraid." Do not be afraid because God is with them, Do not be afraid because God still calls them onwards, summoning them all to continue onward, to live in the fullness of God's love and to see this love of God in their lives and to show it to others as well. Do not be afraid.

For you and me, for us as we gather here this night, in the midst of the gloom of pandemic, a new light shines for us: no different than in Easters past and no different than in Easters yet to come: we gather to celebrate the Risen Christ as the power of God's hope and promise to us, the power of God's presence with us, the new light of resurrected life breaking forth in our world and in our lives in the midst of our struggles and sorrows. Yes, yes, my sisters and brothers, this Easter is no different for us, but perhaps because of our circumstances, our physical separation and our grief and anxieties of the future we face, the Easter message, this Good News that Christ is risen indeed, is more poignant and more profound than in many Easters past for us. Maybe this is a good thing, as we must change our lives and transform our outlook to save lives and to beat back the deadly tide of this viral outbreak, maybe we are being called by God to look deeper this Easter, to proclaim the resurrection with a more intentional

aspect, that as we work and pray together in these dire times God's amazing grace will bear us up ever more steadfastly, ever more sweetly, ever more comforting, that we may follow God ever more closely. So as we celebrate Easter this night, as we gather to proclaim Christ's resurrection, and as we continue to do so in the weeks to come, may we do so in faith and knowledge of God's love for us, bearing us up in these difficult and different times, with an everlasting love and an amazing grace. Thanks be to God!

Alleluia, Christ is risen. The Lord is risen indeed, Alleluia!