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Scriptures: Matthew 28:1-10, Colossians 3:1-4

Celebrating Easter during a Pandemic

We most often read the Easter account from the Gospel of John. And maybe that's the one I should have chosen today since we read four stories from John during Lent and only two from Matthew. John's account is longer than Matthew's and involves lots of running. Mary Magdalene is seen running from the tomb. Peter and John go racing to the tomb.

Matthew's account begins quietly with two women named Mary arriving at the tomb, and then BOOM, there's an earthquake. They witness an angel descending from heaven, rolling away the stone, and sitting on it. The action in this account of the resurrection occurs suddenly and includes lots of drama – an earthquake, lightning, guards who shake and become like dead men, and an unexpected appearance by Jesus.

Matthew's account of the death of Jesus includes lots of drama as well. The world goes dark in the middle of the afternoon, a huge curtain in the temple tears in two, the earth shakes, rocks split, tombs open, and dead people begin walking around.

For Matthew, Easter is an earthquake – frightening and unsettling. A cosmic event is taking place. Creation is being turned on its ear. We're so used to hearing the Easter story that it's hard for us to recreate the shock and awe. Often when we read the story we miss the surprise, suddenness, reorientation, drama, and fear that the people who were there experienced.

Earthquakes are the result of a seismic shift. Earthquakes shake our stable world and grab our attention. The earthquakes in Matthew's account give dramatic emphasis to the life-altering change that is happening.

Perhaps this is the year our Easter experience most closely matches the experiences of the first followers of Jesus more than 2000 years ago. The COVID-19 pandemic has caused a seismic shift. Our middle class, middle American lives have been altered.

The list of difficulties caused by living under the shadow of this virus is lengthening. It's been four weeks since we gathered in our church building for worship. Schools and businesses are closed. Work lives are altered. Restaurant dining rooms are closed. Travel plans are cancelled. Money is tight.

We're not able to get together with family and friends. Or perhaps, we're spending more time in close quarters with family than is comfortable. We crave face to face interactions. We want to give and receive hugs. We want to come to church on Sunday morning, shake as many hands as we can find, share smiles with others who are happy to see us, sing hymns together, and share the love of Christ with each other.

It's been longer than four weeks since we started hearing the news – first from China, then from Italy, then from New York, Washington, and California. We've watched the number of infections and deaths rise daily, spreading from country to country, from state to state, from county to county. We wonder who will be next. Will it be me? Will it be someone I love?

We see the ripple effects caused by the pandemic. The stories are heart wrenching. People dying alone. Overworked hospital employees forced to make difficult choices about who receives care. Those with underlying health conditions living in fear, wondering which seemingly small choice might cost them their lives. Asian Americans enduring hateful looks and

remarks. People of color afraid that wearing protective masks in public will exacerbate racial profiling. Unemployment websites crashing. Lines of cars at food banks extending for miles.

Into all of this comes Easter. Perhaps Easter is more necessary than it has ever been before. If we have to celebrate any holiday during this pandemic and from this state of self-isolation, maybe the best one to occur is Easter.

Easter brings a message of hope that we need right now. The story begins with death. Jesus joined the human race in the experience of death. He knew the pain of being separated from loved ones. He knew the feeling of being utterly alone. His cry “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” feels especially relevant now as we watch so many die. Jesus didn’t die of a virus, but he faced the fear and the isolation this pandemic brings. When we cry out to Jesus, he knows our pain.

After Jesus’ death, his followers were in hiding. They couldn’t give Jesus a proper funeral and burial. They couldn’t mourn and go on with their lives as usual. They were trapped in a place of fear, separated from the community and worried about what would happen next.

We can sympathize with them. Their story helps us in our own isolation and grief. When we know that more than a million people around the world are sick and more than 100,000 have died. When we’re afraid that we or someone we love might get sick. When people are losing their jobs and wondering how to pay bills. What will happen next? The question is the same for us as it was for them.

Easter Sunday completes this story in the best way possible. The women find the tomb empty. The fearful disciples come out of hiding. Jesus visits his friends to show them that he is alive. They move forward to spread the news of a new way of life. The Easter story ends with death reversed, and the promise that we, too, will experience the resurrection.

When the women encountered Jesus, they not only saw the risen Christ, they also glimpsed the resurrection they will experience in God’s ultimate day of Shalom. The apostle Paul writes about this in Colossians, chapter 3. This is how it reads in *The Voice*.

So it comes down to this: since you have been raised with [Christ,] the Anointed One, the Liberating King, set your mind on heaven above. The Anointed is there, seated at God’s right hand. Stay focused on what’s above, not on earthly things, because your old life is dead and gone. Your new life is now hidden, enmeshed with the Anointed who is in God. On that day when the Anointed One—who is our very life—is revealed, you will be revealed with Him in glory!

Easter is an event that reaches across time, redeeming the past and staking a claim on the future. Our encounters with the risen Christ – as individual people and as a congregation – change us. They help us see Christ for who he really is and ourselves for who we really are. These encounters motivate and enable us to seek the things that are above, to work to make things right here on earth, and to share God’s love and joy with those around us.

This pandemic will end, but we don’t know when. This pandemic will end, but our lives may never return to the way they were before. The great joy of Easter is knowing we follow a risen Christ. The great hope of Easter is knowing that love and joy abound right now, even in the midst of isolation and fear. This is the faith we celebrate today. This is the faith we recommit to when we share communion together.

When all hope seems lost, Christ is risen!

When fear hovers close at hand, Christ is risen!

When disillusionment and despair threaten us, Christ is risen!

Come! Celebrate the risen Lord! Alleluia!