

**Christ the Lord Church Pinole, CA    Easter 2020**

***“The First Easter”***

Rev. Dr. Lois Williams

Christ is Risen, Christ has risen indeed. Happy Easter everyone, I miss you. As I prepared your Easter bags, each of your faces came to my mind and I realized, I am getting better with your names! Have to be grateful for the little things.

So, here we are, probably for the first time since the disciples sat at a Passover supper a year after Jesus died, there is no gathering, no shared feast, no Easter Sunday best or mimosa with friends, no coffee hour. However, I guess you're stuck still getting the sermon if you are reading or listening to this. Joking aside, I have to put this out there.

I am angry that I still have to go out and put myself at risk, whether it is for work, or just for essential groceries and banking.

I am angry that I have to listen day and night to the news that tells me that my country, the country I thought was one of the richest in the world, does not have enough supplies to take care of health care workers and essential people.

I am angry when I see people not abiding by the rules of social distancing or think that they are on vacation rather than in quarantine lockdown.

I am sad that unsuspecting people, just like you or me could get sick and not know where, when, how or why.

I am sad that people cannot worship, cannot bury their dead without restrictions, cannot visit their loved ones who are in nursing homes or are far away.

I am sad that I don't get to share this sermon with you in person, see your agreement, see your frustration matching mine, understanding that we are all in this together, even when we are far apart.

And this is my COVID-19 Good Friday, "Father, if you are willing, take this cup away from me. Yet not my will but yours be done." *Luke 22:42*

Then there is today, Easter Sunday. Not the Easter I imagined with the smell of coffee coming from the kitchen, the colorful array of sign up sheets, sermon copies, readings, and material about our giving plans in the community. Flowers, I wanted the church full of flowers, to spray you with Holy water as the New Christian Year begins!

But what of my imagination. Here we are, together through word processing and digital recordings. Why would I imagine an Easter Sunday so cozy, basking in the light from the windows, the smell of flowers? I only imagine this because generations of Christians celebrated this way in some form or another. But let us remember we can only celebrate this way because we know the rest of the story. It is the basis of our faith.

So let's talk about the real Easter for a moment. Let's say, I am a disciple, or maybe the wife of a disciple, I had this guru, a worship-at-his-feet relationship with this man that I saw raise someone from the dead only weeks ago. I witnessed this man have control over the wind and the seas. I saw him share endless fish and loaves when I know there should have been none. I thought this man would save us from the Roman Empire and that he would straighten out the Temple politics and taxes and religious sacrifices would not be so rigid. I thought maybe he could lead an army because I saw him drive the sellers in the Temple out with a whip. Actually, I thought he was God.

The next thing I know he is being carted away to Herod, then Pilate, and he died. They crucified him and it was something really different than anything I had ever seen before, and I know they hang people all the time. Just when I thought this man, Jesus, was going to come down from the cross, he cries out to God, the thunder crashes and he dies. He dies. Who was he really? God does not die.

I think the crowd was not happy that he died so fast, even before the other two beside him. He died. And if I am not careful, if I step outside at the wrong time and they think I was part of Jesus' group, they might hang me. And what happens when I get hungry and this bowl of water is gone? I am not even sure where the rest of Jesus' followers went.

All of a sudden a man knocks on the door of the small hut I am staying in at the edge of the city and I let him in. He is breathless, and is sweating from running. Then he tells me that the women who went to take care of Jesus'

body found Jesus there alive. They were so scared they didn't recognize him at first, but then Mary said she recognized his voice and it really was him.

Is she crazy, I think? Did that scene at Golgotha finally get to Mary, was this too much? Did she really see something, hear his voice? Could it be? I used to think he was God?

What does that even mean? If he came back, why? Is this a trick?

Needless to say, those at the crucifixion didn't know the rest of the story. Doubting Thomas, the walk to Emmaus, the ascension hadn't happened yet. That first Easter was not about comfort, music, candles and hymns. It was not about mimosas or Easter egg hunts. It was an uncomfortable, scary time. It was an unpredictable time, it was one where you could lose your life without ever really knowing why. It was a time when women wailed, and men stood silent with their heads bowed. It was a time that saw armies in the streets, and crazy prophets crying about the end of the world.

That was the first Easter, and this also is for most of us a first Easter – an Easter that contains more questions than answers, more anxiety and fear than comfort. But for that very first Easter, for those steeped in their Hebrew tradition, for those who celebrated the passing over of a plague and the freedom from a tyrant by observing the Lord's command to paint the door post in lamb's blood, there was a place to find comfort. That place was tradition. Ritual and tradition, not in the Temple or with the local rabbi, but the tradition that was written on their hearts. The Psalms. The songs of hope, the story of the ancestors brought to life the way that God works in

the world, they remembered the words of the prophet Jeremiah who promised Israel would survive.

Good times come, and good times go, but the same for the bad. What is constant is change. What is unchanging is the need for us to look for God as our rock and anchor. To look to the tradition written in our hearts.

The first Easter turned into the second, and then the third, Christianity became the rule, then Christianity split, and split, and split, and people found a way to worship Jesus the way they chose to, and here we are with Easter images of egg hunts, hot cross buns, and the Eucharist.

Well, this first Easter without being able to worship in community, in person will also pass, and things may get worse before they get better, but they will get better. The risen Christ is here, he is in our midst, we may not be able to recognize him yet, but never the less, he is here. It may be today, or tomorrow, or days, months, maybe even years, but you will hear his voice calling you and recognize that he is Lord.

For although we may get anxious, and although we worry and this may lead us to stray from God, or doubt our faith, Jesus is here, even death could not keep him away from the ones who loved him.

Every day is one step closer to a new normal, maybe a normal that we can create for the better. Maybe it is time to let the plague of greed, real estate, sex, drugs and crime pass over us. Those of us who recognize the blood of the Lamb and the vision of the first Christians who gathered to share and

take care of each other, now we have an opportunity to share the creation of a truly Beloved Community on a nation-wide scale. That means holding onto our faith, voting, speaking out, helping others in any way we can.

This time of isolation and separation will end. We may lose people we love, we ourselves may experience severe illness and fight for our lives, but we too, like the first Christians can call the prophets of Old, and sing the Psalms of generations past, and create or recreate the rituals and tradition written on our hearts,  
Because I will respond to the great prophet Jeremiah.

The people who survived the sword

found grace in the wilderness; *I respond we too will find grace.*

when Israel sought for rest,

the Lord appeared to him from far away. *I respond We can see you Lord just like Mary, but not yet clearly.*

Jeremiah tells us God says, I have loved you with an everlasting love;

therefore I have continued my faithfulness to you. *I say, I will continue to strengthen my faith with your Word.*

Again I will build you, and you shall be built,

O virgin Israel! *I say I promise to do my part in the building of a new and better world.*

Again you shall take your tambourines,

and go forth in the dance of the merrymakers. *I will always continue to sing your praises.*

The Lord is my strength and my song, \*  
*and he has become my salvation.*

15 There is a sound of exultation and victory \*  
*in the tents of the righteous:*

16 "The right hand of the Lord has triumphed! \*  
the right hand of the Lord is exalted!  
the right hand of the Lord has triumphed!"

Christ has risen! Christ has risen indeed!

AMEN