

## Small Easter

John 20:1-18

April 12, 2020 Easter Sunday

Rev. Cynthia Cochran-Carney, First Presbyterian Church, San Rafael, CA

**1** Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb. **2** So she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him."

**3** Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went toward the tomb. **4** The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first.

**5** He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in.

**6** Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there, **7** and the cloth that had been on Jesus' head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself. **8** Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; **9** for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead. **10** Then the disciples returned to their homes.

**11** But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb; **12** and she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet. **13** They said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping?" She said to them, "They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him."

**14** When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus.

**15** Jesus said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?" Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away."

**16** Jesus said to her, "Mary!" She turned and said to him in Hebrew, "Rabbouni!" (which means Teacher). **17** Jesus said to her, "Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.' "

**18** Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, "I have seen the Lord"; and she told them that he had said these things to her.

John 20:1-18 NRSV

I love Easter. I love the beauty of the music, the gathering of people, the liturgy of worship, the flowers. When my boys were young, I spent time before Easter buying new shirts and knit vests for them in coordinating colors and finding fun Easter basket treats. Easter was and is a busy day as a clergy couple. Easter is a day of families, church families, and all kinds of families gathering. It is a day of joy.

None of that will happen this year, and that makes me sad. It looks different this year, but Easter still comes. We are certainly ready to be done with Lent this year. Clearly we also long to be done with this the season of sheltering in place, don't leave your house, love your neighbor by washing your hands and wearing your mask and keeping your distance to break the chain and spread of the coronavirus.

How do we begin to describe the difference between this year and what we love about typical Easter Sundays to someone who may not have experienced it? I was interviewed by a reporter from the Marin IJ newspaper this week. He said, "Describe what would usually be happening in your church on Easter Sunday." My words came flooding out – so much beauty, so much music, so much joy. Dozens of Tulips and lilies displayed at the front of the sanctuary. The Art and Aesthetics team would have created beautiful displays with fabric on the communion table and hanging from the ceiling. Chancel choir singing full rich thrilling music along with trumpets and other instruments. Handbell choir ringing a jubilant piece Sermon on one of the Easter texts about the empty tomb and Jesus' resurrection. Singing Easter hymns. Our children would have a special part in the worship service. The sanctuary is packed.

One of the words I thought of was "Big." It is obvious I guess, but Easter is Big – a big celebration central to Christian theology of good news of Christ. Bigger than Christmas. Maybe people go to church on Easter Sunday out of obligation. Maybe people go in the hope they will hear something, experience something, that resonates deeply in their life.

This year we are not having a big Easter but a small one. A small Easter. We're not supposed to have small Easters. Ever. Because Easter is big. Except when it's small. A small Easter.

This year I feel like we had a big Good Friday. It is not supposed to be that way when the stories of Jesus' last supper and facing death and being alone in sorrow looms larger than Easter.

After Jesus' death and burial, his friends and followers were scared and weeping and finding places to grieve alone. We understand. We are having a big Good Friday this year. And a small Easter. Which seems wrong. But it is what it is. I have felt that weight over the last 4 weeks. Maybe more. Good Friday in our world right now felt big, looming, real. So much fear and death and bodies to be buried. So how do we move toward Easter?

In hearing and reading the Easter story from John, I realized that many people have had small Easters—even on that first miraculous, world-changing Sunday morning.

Mary Magdalene's Easter began as just an agonizing extension of Good Friday. Her weeping continues there by the tomb in the darkness. Then she notices, the stone is rolled away. The body of her beloved teacher must be gone, stolen, desecrated. Running—and still weeping—she takes the news to the disciples.

Peter and the “other disciple” literally race to the tomb, the other disciple getting there first. Peter was the first to go in. They see that Jesus’ body is indeed gone. They see that the grave clothes are in a pile, with the head covering rolled up, set aside. We are told the other disciple sees and believes. But we don’t know what he believes.

Whatever he believes, it doesn’t lead to any big, dramatic scene. The disciple and Peter simply go home. Rather anti-climactic. Not the actions of men who have grasped the full meaning of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Not the actions of men who are experiencing a big Easter. And what about the other disciples? What about Jesus’ mother and brothers and Aunt? What about Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea? What about all of the people who sang hopeful “Hosannas” on Palm Sunday?

Many of these people had very small Easters indeed. Nobody logged onto Facebook to see Mary Magdalene’s status update: “Talked to the Risen Lord this morning by his tomb!” There were no Twitter feeds. Not even a good old fashioned phone tree. Many of the people who had grieved so deeply on Friday do not hear the news of the resurrection on Sunday. Or Monday. Or Tuesday. For many of them it was likely weeks, maybe months before the trickles of rumors hit them. “They say that Jesus rose from the dead.” “I heard the disciples took his body.” “I heard it was the guards.” (1)

Eventually, people come to hear the full story. To make some sense of it—at least as much sense as can be made of it. Eventually, a new, community forms among those who believe in the Risen Christ and are experiencing resurrection in their own lives. Practicing resurrection. Truth is proclaimed. Social boundaries are broken down. The fear of death is swallowed up in the knowledge of God’s vast and all-consuming love for us.

Eventually. But not that morning. That morning, it was a small Easter. Maybe not for Jesus. Maybe not for Mary. But for most people.

We live in a world where Good Friday is reality. It can be so big. When we know of the evils people can do to each other; when we read of the violence running rampant in the world; when words of ignorance and hatred receive loud applause; when we witness the people we love struggling with illness or addiction, when fear of death, of loss, . . . Good Friday can be big.

Sometimes Good Friday is so big that Easter has to start small.

It may take a while Easter to sink deep, deep into the fertile, broken up soil of our hearts. It may take a while to see the resurrection promise begin to grow, and bud, and bloom. It may take a while for us, as it did for Jesus’ first disciples, to dry our tears and open our eyes to the truth that this resurrection promise is not about a one day of lilies and trumpets.

The resurrection promise is not about things being the way we want them to be or a return to normal. That would make for a very small Easter indeed.

The resurrection promise is about the deep reality of an abundant life, even in the midst of violence, sickness, and death. The resurrection promise is about God's radical and deep and inclusive love for all people and creation. Resurrection is about reminding us who we are – beloved.

Easter is small this year but maybe closer to the truth. And Easter is empty instead of full.

There is plenty of reason to feel empty and to lament in such a time as this, a time to be brutally honest with God and with each other as we all pass through this gauntlet of grief and fear. But we need not lament that on Easter most of us will not be physically together. Instead, we have the opportunity to turn such bane into blessing by retelling the Easter story in a way that is, in fact, most biblical. (2)

Christ's Resurrection did not begin (or end) with large gatherings of Christians accompanied by choirs and organ blasts. It began with an "empty tomb" and fearful women—a tomb emptied of death. This is the Easter to ponder such emptiness, to linger over it, indeed, to revel in it.

This is the Easter to let our sanctuaries and chancels, our narthexes and choir lofts, remain utterly empty, not in despair but in testimony that lives are being saved in doing so.

Emptiness, in this case, is life-giving. By abandoning our sacred gathering places, we are not abandoning the gospel. Far from it. We are testifying to what the white-robed messenger announced at the tomb, "He is not here."

Where, then, is he? According to John's Gospel, the resurrected Jesus made his first public appearance with his disciples in their social isolation, huddled in fear—a locked room. To be sure, their social isolation was for a different reason than ours. But no matter. Christ will surely find us this Easter, wherever we have isolated ourselves. Christ will again offer the words his disciples needed to hear and so do we "Peace be with you."

Easter is small this year.

Easter is not full but empty this year.

And Easter is not a day but a journey living and seeing hope and beauty.

Perhaps this is the year to really focus on the truth that Easter is not a day. It is a way of life. It is a journey. Easter living, resurrection living, is living into the belief that with Jesus's death and resurrection, living into the kin-dom of God. Easter living is believing that nothing, not even this pandemic, can separate us from the love of God. Easter living is living respecting the honor and dignity of every single person and all of creation. That every person is made in the

image of God. This year we are more connected to whole human family in ways we may not think about but it is a deeper truth. This is what it means to be human.

Easter living knowing there are times of letting go and dying comes new life. Easter living is living into this new kingdom, a kin-dom where love conquers hate, compassion replaces fear, abundance and generosity trumps hoarding and greed, and unity defeats individualism.

Easter Sunday is not a day we show up to learn there's hope. It is the day we show up to be reminded again, and to choose again to live into that hope. The hope that is not wishful thinking, but rather that believes there is a better way, a different way, a way that God has invited us to live. Finding ways to help those most vulnerable. Care for and protect the natural world.

Easter living means seeing differently. A different kind of beauty on this Easter journey this year. There is beauty in the health care workers donning gowns and masks and returning again and again to the hospitals to care for all. There is beauty in waving to and smiling at people you have never noticed before. There is beauty in notes and cards sent and received. There is beauty in saying thank you to those who show up as cashiers and to stock the store shelves. There is beauty in when we offer rolls of TP when we have more than we need.

Here are some of the surprising kinds of beauty I see around our church.

- Church "attendance" rising through online media and virtual worship, compared to physical attendance. Our YouTube services averaging 140 – 150 views which is higher than regular attendance. Many people who do not usually go to church at all are watching online services of churches across the country and world.
- There is a rediscovery of the value of routine spiritual practices
- Our church and others paying staff even as there is no work for them to do at this time
- Check-in phone calls by Deacons. There is a deep quality of connection that people appreciate that is different than only a few months ago
- New partnerships – HHS, Street Chaplaincy and our church providing meals to homeless
- A sudden deep-dive seeing what new technologies work. Experimentation, failure, and trying again until it works. Zoom, YouTube and others. People helping each other learn how to Zoom so we can see and talk with each other. It is thrilling when it works! And so much grace along the way.
- Laughter and smiles, in spite of grimness and hardship
- So much creativity – writing, poetry, musicians, singers, families are home dancing.

I hope we will remember in the future some of the truths we are learning this year -  
Easter is small, is empty, is a way of life and seeing beauty.

Close with a poem that has been meaningful to me. "Grace in the Wilderness" by Rachel Keefe. In fact that is where we started in March. The theme for Lent this year 2020 was *Journey Through the Wilderness*. We could never have imagined how this would be our truth this year of the coronavirus pandemic. Here are some of the stanzas that resonated with me.

## **Grace in the Wilderness**

By Rachel Keefe  
(excerpts)

mostly masked faces  
hands raised in greeting  
keep a healthy distance

...an empty tomb  
waited to be noticed  
by women bent on grieving

...a mistaken gardener  
calls Mary by name  
opens her being

...we who come in fear and grief  
missing the benediction  
and the new life

...take a breath  
listen for the One  
who calls us by name

grief and fear accompany us  
yet do not know our names  
and offer no promises

behind the masks  
across the six-foot divides  
Christ arises

on this virus-infected Easter  
let us come  
with our tears and fears

experience the emptiness  
the loss and despair  
of world-wide grief

may we also see  
benediction in the rising and setting sun  
new life all around us

Christ is risen  
the promise of steadfast love  
the hope of eternal life continue

Breathe deeply  
God shows no partiality  
and always provides

Grace in the wilderness  
in the fear-filled places  
in the heaviness of grief

may we see Christ  
in every face  
in every place

may we breathe in  
the scent of hope  
the promise of new life

from this moment  
be forever changed  
by Love for Love

Christ is risen  
Christ is risen indeed  
Alleluia

go in peace  
thanks be to God  
amen

*For complete poem, click on link*  
<https://rachaelkeefe.wordpress.com/2020/04/08/grace-in-the-wilderness-a-poem-for-easter-2020/>

1) Rev. Joanna Harader, "Small Easter," 3/21/2016, Spacious Faith  
<https://spaciousfaith.com/2016/03/21/small-easter/>

2) Dr. William Brown, "The Life-Giving Emptiness of Easter," 4/8/2020, Columbia Theological Seminary  
<https://www.ctsnet.edu/the-life-giving-emptiness-of-this-easter/>