

April 12, 2020
Easter Day (A)
United, Oak Park

Not Missing Anything this Easter

At the conclusion of our online worship service last Sunday I mentioned that today's celebration would be different from nearly any other Easter that most of us have ever experienced. Thanks to Cacie, our director of music, and her musical husband Blaine, we are able to sing the familiar Easter hymns, and hear many of the joyful sounds that we associate with this day. While we are missing a choir, as well as a pipe organ and additional instruments that usually make our Easter Sunday music here at United sound quite festive, and while we are missing out on the ability to hear one another's voices coming together in unison, we still are gathering this morning for a communal celebration that will certainly make do for this strange moment in time.

Even the modest setup that I've been able to pull together in the lounge of our building is missing a few things. Our cross is here, along with a paschal candle and a couple of Easter lilies, but today we are missing the two or three dozen plants that we usually have had in front of the altar. We miss seeing the 20-foot high white and gold banners

flanking our chancel area. We miss seeing many of the extended families that often come together on days like today. We miss seeing the spring wardrobes and saying “Happy Easter” to everyone we meet. And of course we are missing the opportunity to come together at the Lord’s table for Holy Communion. Yes, this Easter is different from nearly every other Easter we have ever experienced. It’s different because of so many of the things we *don’t have with us today*.

And later on today, most of us probably won’t be gathering with our families like we usually do on Easter either. We are likely doing Easter with no out of town guests, and perhaps no one other than immediate relatives who live directly with us or nearby. The day may not seem any more special to us than any recent Sunday at all. It is all together quite ordinary. And that in itself is different from how Easter usually is for us.

But like so much that we are experiencing in our lives these days, this day can be what we make of it. We can either sulk while focusing on what we *don’t have*, or we can consider what we *actually do have*. And if we are inclined to take this glass half full approach to our lives right now, I’m sure that there is plenty for us to celebrate. For one

thing, we are alive today! As Psalm 118 proclaims: “This is the day the Lord has acted; we will rejoice and celebrate in it!”

We also have the technology and the means to join one another in even this rather limited way, something that congregations didn’t have available to them during the influenza pandemic of just over a century ago. There are so many other ways for us to keep in touch with one another now—and safely as well.

As I think about some of the more memorable Easter experiences I have ever had, not all of them were about spectacular displays that we often associate with this day. One of them was when I was serving a congregation in Pennsylvania. Near the end of an exhausting Holy Week with five services and three different sermons in as many days, I went with two young confirmation students to visit a homebound member between our two Easter Sunday services. Lydia was a woman who had become so crippled with rheumatoid arthritis that her entire existence had been reduced to the confines of just her living room where a hospital bed had been set up for her. She had not been able to attend church in years, and her primary contact with her congregation was

through the home communion visits that I made to her just a few times a year.

Needless to say, it was a different experience for her to have a visit from two younger members of the congregation as well on that Easter Sunday. Lydia had taught Sunday school for years and had known the father of one of the students I had brought along with me. She regaled us of stories about how much of a challenge that father had been several decades ago as an adolescent in one of her classes.

Although it's not always easy to get middle school students to open up, they talked about some of the sports and other activities that they enjoyed, and I was even successful in getting them to join me in singing a couple of stanzas of the hymn "Jesus Christ is risen today." It might not have been the stirring rendition that the three of us just coming from that morning's earlier church service had experienced, but to Lydia, who couldn't get out anymore, it was an Easter miracle. It was an Easter miracle simply because we had come to proclaim the presence of the risen Christ in her midst. In the words of the gospel story, in the singing of a hymn together, in the fellowship with other believers, and in the bread and wine of communion, Jesus was present. And for a

remarkable moment that morning I watched as all the clouds in Lydia's life seemed to part and rays of Easter sunshine broke through all of the pain and worries that she constantly endured. Her face was *beaming*, and I could tell that this was indeed *church* for her that day. It was different from all the other communion visits I had made with her because she felt connected to what we had just been doing earlier that morning.

Quite literally, we brought Easter with us that morning, although it had nothing to do with lilies, or brass instruments, or with pews that only get crowded twice a year. Jesus' presence among us in the living room of a woman who had suffered with a debilitating health condition for years didn't have anything to do with what we might normally think about when we mention the word Easter.

Yet the message we all shared together that morning was what the Easter story fundamentally is. We came together despite our fears, our pain, and our anxious hearts and encouraged one another in the faith. Our presence together lifted Lydia out of the challenges she often faced every morning just struggling to get up and moving about her space. Lydia's words of appreciation that morning to two confirmation

students who hadn't considered that they had the ability to minister to anyone else helped put aside many of their anxious fears about the visit we had been planning to make. That moment also encouraged me as a still young preacher who was fearful about not measuring up to anyone's expectations to preach a powerful and flawless Easter sermon. Indeed my simple words with Lydia that morning had been eloquent enough for the occasion.

Right in Lydia's living room we came together—much like the women who came to the tomb on the morning of Jesus' resurrection—with all of our fears and anxieties about our own abilities. Despite what we might have all been feeling before that moment, we confronted anything that might have been holding us back and through one another's presence we became less afraid. Jesus had broken through whatever limitations we were living with, and encouraged us right there.

Might that be the same kind of opportunity that we have during this moment too? This moment when it may feel as if so many things in our lives have been put on pause? Indeed these days we struggle with

many fears of our own: fears about a deadly virus and how to go about our daily tasks and errands safely; fears about whether or not we will get back to work or whether our jobs will even still be around in a few more months; fears about whether or not we will have enough left in retirement investments to sustain us for the rest of our lives, given the uncertainty of the financial markets. So many of our careful plans seem to have been upended in just a few short weeks.

We probably all face many fears today. Yet many of them are not new fears. We have encountered them before. The chief problem now is that we do not know what to trust in. Many of the things that we often depend upon have vanished from our presence. We also want someone to tell us definitively when the *struggles* and *uncertainties* we currently face will be over. *When* will be able to return to normal daily activities without fearing the trips we make to buy groceries or some other necessary household items? When will be able to travel freely? When will be able to put any social occasion back on our calendars?

We don't have easy answers to any of those questions. It's all unsettling this Easter. And that's not what we are conditioned to expect on this day at all. But maybe it's one of the few Easters when we have been able to appreciate some of the fears of Jesus' earliest followers who came to find him at the tomb where he had been placed just days before. In all honesty, we come to this Easter with all of our fears as well, and we wonder, where is our Lord now?

Yet the answer today—and on every day when we seek Jesus is quite simply: “I am *right here* where you need me to be. I am right here and I will lead you forward so that we can face an *uncertain future together*.”

And that means that we can have Easter *every day*. *Every morning* is an opportunity for us to seek God's guidance in facing the opportunities and challenges of *that day*. We don't need to have colorful arrays of flowers or jubilant sounds or throngs of well-dressed worshipers to experience that kind of Easter either. Jesus is with us always. God comes to new life before us *each day*, and that's *all* we truly *need*.