

HOW WILL YOU RESPOND TO THE GOOD NEWS THIS EASTER?

(Online Easter Message) Matthew 28:1-9 - April 12, 2020 - Immanuel - Senior Pastor: Dr. Kelly McClendon

Let me say up front, that I'm well aware that this is an Easter unlike any we've ever seen. I'm standing in a sanctuary looking at a camera and two other people. This room would normally hold 400+ people, twice on Easter, while our Wesley Hall would hold that same number of people again, and our Boone Campus would have a large crowd of people as well. There ought to be a huge choir behind me, and brass instruments, and guitars and drums, and the smell of lilies tickling my nose. It's very different, and I've got to admit it's just not the same. I miss seeing the faces of my church family, I miss hearing your voices lifted up in song and worship. I miss the hugs and the handshakes and the laughter and the caring that usually fills this place - and I know that you miss of all that too, so I acknowledge this is hard - especially today.

But, at the same time, I declare, that nothing can stop our worship or joy or our celebration of all that Easter represents - IF - we choose to respond to the resurrection of Christ as we should.

Earlier this week I keep thinking of the Dr. Seuss story, "*How the Grinch Stole Christmas.*" I was trying to rewrite it to speak to Easter and the Covid-19 Coronavirus pandemic. As I was struggling to make some rhymes, a friend posted the fruit of someone else's labor on Facebook.

This woman, named Kristi Bothur, did a better job than I possibly could, with what she titled, "*How the Virus Stole Easter*" (with a nod to Dr. Seuss).

Twas late in '19 when the virus began
Bringing chaos and fear to all people, each land.

People were sick, hospitals full,
Doctors overwhelmed, no one in school.

As winter gave way to the promise of spring,
The virus raged on, touching peasant and king.

People hid in their homes from the enemy unseen.
They YouTubed & Zoomed, social-distanced, & cleaned.

April approached and churches were closed.
"There won't be an Easter," the world supposed.

"There won't be church services, and egg hunts are out.
No reason for new dresses when we can't go about."

Holy Week started, as bleak as the rest.
The world was focused on masks and on tests.

"Easter can't happen this year," it proclaimed.
"Online and at home, it just won't be the same."

Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, the days came and went.
The virus pressed on; it just would not relent.

The world woke Sunday and nothing had changed.
The virus still menaced, the people, estranged.

"Pooh pooh to the saints," the world was grumbling.
"They're finding out now that no Easter is coming.

"They're just waking up! We know just what they'll do!
Their mouths will hang open a minute or two,
And then all the saints will all cry boo-hoo.

"That noise," said the world, "will be something to hear."
So it paused and put a hand to its ear.

And it did hear a sound coming through all the skies.
It started down low, then it started to rise.

But the sound wasn't depressed.
Why, this sound was triumphant!
It couldn't be so! But it grew with abundance!

The world stared around, popping its eyes.
Then it shook! What it saw was a shocking surprise!

Every saint in every nation, the tall and the small,
Was celebrating Jesus in spite of it all!

It hadn't stopped Easter from coming! It came!
Somehow or other, it came just the same!

And the world with its life quite stuck in quarantine
Stood puzzling and puzzling. "Just how can it be?"

"It came without bonnets, it came without bunnies,
It came without egg hunts, cantatas, or money."

Then the world thought of something it hadn't before.
"Maybe Easter," it thought, "doesn't come from a store.

Maybe Easter, perhaps, means a little bit more.”

**The churches are empty - but so is the tomb,
And Jesus is victor over death, doom, and gloom.**

So this year at Easter, let this be our prayer,
As the virus still rages all around, everywhere.

May the world see hope when it looks at God’s people.
May the world see the church is not a building or steeple.
May the world find Faith in Jesus’ death and resurrection,
May the world find Joy in a time of dejection.
May 2020 be known as the year of survival,
But not only that - Let it start a revival.

I’ve got a contemporary Christian song by Zach Williams, playing in my head. It’s not particularly about Easter, except that it could be, like every other song we Christians sing.

I got an Old Church Choir singing in my soul	Can you hear it? Can you feel it?
I got a sweet salvation and it's beautiful	It's the rhythm of a gospel song
I've got a heart overflowing 'cause I've been restored	Oh, once you choose it, you can't lose it.
There ain't nothing gonna steal my joy	There ain't nothing,
No, there ain't nothing gonna steal my joy	there ain't nothing gonna steal my joy

Now, I’m not saying that keeping your joy now is easy. Sometimes the joy of the Lord just comes over us, but most of the time we’re required to make a choice - when we might feel like pouting or complaining or feeling sorry for ourselves and turning inward instead.

Led by the Holy Spirit, in Philippians 4:4, the Apostle Paul wrote, *“Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!”* You probably know that verse, but you may not know that most bible scholars believe that Paul wrote that verse from a prison cell facing a death sentence. Choosing joy in those circumstances required a special power and motivation. I know many of you feel like you are under house arrest now. Some of you are struggling with loneliness and boredom, while others are overwhelmed with responsibility for child-care and home schooling even as they try to work from home! (I don’t know how you’re doing it - God bless you!)

I’m not saying any of this is easy - what I’m saying is that we can still choose faith and joy - and we must, at any and all times, but especially in times like this, especially in light of Easter.

I believe that the message of Easter speaks a Word from God about how to live through all kinds of disappointment, and discouragement, and disaster, and even death.

I believe Easter reminds us that our ability to cope with, and overcome the struggles of life depends, in part, on your vision of the future - and the final reality on which we stake our lives.

What do we really believe about the story of our lives - how does it turn out, how does it end?

- Are death, and the things of death, the last word in our existence?
- Will anger, or despair, or futility, or fear, be the last words... the last realities of our lives?
- Is death the final reality? Do we end in darkness? Is this all there is?

Or is there a power that is greater than death? Is there a light that overcomes the world’s darkness? Is there a hope and a truth that will enable us to face whatever tomorrow may bring?

I believe the answer to all these questions was given on that first Easter when the Angel proclaimed - HE IS RISEN! What do you believe about the resurrection of Christ?

When people heard the news of the resurrection, they had to choose how they'd respond. We need to choose our responses as well. I believe that the way we respond to this news makes all the difference in how we will respond to all the challenges and hardships of this life.

Today I want to look at some of the response of the biblical characters, and some common responses of people in general. As I work through these responses, put yourself into the story and consider this question - how will I choose to respond to the news: Christ is risen!

One of the most common first responses was FEAR. In all the gospel accounts the news of the risen Christ evoked fear - the Roman guards were afraid; the women were afraid; the religious leaders were afraid. In Luke 24 we are told that when the disciples first saw the Lord they were frightened, *"thinking they saw a ghost."*

Why were they afraid? First of all, they were surprised. If someone comes up from behind and touches you, you might jump in fear. (Especially at Kroger's!) Now imagine if you just attended that person's funeral a couple of days earlier! The disciples and other followers were surprised that morning. They weren't really expecting Christ to show up. They were startled.

They were also cautious. The disciples had been hurt deeply when Jesus died. They were afraid to believe He had risen, what if it were just a cruel joke and they fell for it, then it would be like salt being poured on their open wounds of grief - and so they were too afraid to hope.

In one of Father John Powell's books, he cites a study that was made of people who claimed to have no faith in Christ. The reasons the people gave were catalogued. One of the main reasons was really surprising to me, I still think it is profound - they said:

"Faith does not ask too much; it promises too much. It is not that God's word is too hard to believe; it is rather that it is too good to believe. Could a God of infinite power and majesty really lean out of heaven to take me in his arms, to claim me as his child, the child of his heart and the apple of his eye? They said, "I don't think so. It is too much. It is too good to be true."

(Let me interject - Oh - but it is true!)

Some responded in fear because they were convicted of sin. The religious leaders and the Romans got caught with their *"hand in the cookie jar."* No - that is too nice - they were caught at the scene of a crime with blood on their hands. They were guilty, deserving of God's wrath.

If Jesus was raised from the dead, it meant that He was vindicated, He is everything He claimed to be, and they were exposed as people who denied, disobeyed, and dishonored God.

People still respond to news of the resurrection with fear for many of the same reasons. If this news is true - then it changes everything - and we can't escape the challenge it represents.

Another common response to the news of the resurrection is SKEPTICISM. I once asked a lady if her husband believed in life after death. She shrugged, laughed and said, *"Nah, my husband doesn't even believe in life after supper!"*

Mark says the disciples "did not believe it" when Mary Magdalene said she met the risen Jesus. Luke says they thought the words of the women *"seemed like nonsense."*

Many people continue to respond to the message of the resurrection with skepticism. It is, after all, an incredible story. God the Son - Christ - becomes man... He lives among humanity teaching us how to live, then He gives Himself up to death for an undeserving humanity... then He rises from the grave three days later, and now He is alive forever more. It's an amazing story. However the skepticism of the disciples gave way to the assurance that came from the evidence. They were able to meet with Him and to experience His presence and power.

I believe Jesus is alive because I see the evidence of His impact on human history that is unlike any other person. Mostly, I'm no longer skeptical about Jesus because I've met Him. I believe Christ is alive because He lives in me. Meeting Christ, and experiencing His presence, changed my life. My life can be divided into before and after - and what came in between - was meeting the Risen Christ and coming to know Him personally.

The first disciples were skeptical at first, but after Jesus revealed himself to them alive, and after they personally experienced His presence, they rejoiced, they bowed down to worship Him, and then they rose up to join in His mission to redeem the world.

Another common response to the news of Jesus's resurrection is INDIFFERENCE. Many people will go through this entire Easter day and never have a serious thought about Christ - and that would be true even if we were meeting together as usual.

There are many people who celebrate Easter, even in a religious sense, who still haven't responded to the resurrection with faith in Christ. They are in denial. If they can keep the resurrection of Jesus right next to the story of Santa Claus and the Easter Bunny, they can just enjoy the story without having to deal with the implications. Because, deep down, they know if Jesus really did rise from the grave, it means God is calling them to give up a superficial faith.

I read about a large church which celebrated Easter each year with an awesome display of 500 lilies. The lilies were paid for by church members in memory or in honor of loved ones.

They were displayed on an upper ledge high above the choir. No one tried to take the lilies home since they were out of reach. They just assumed the lilies were put to good use. After years of this tradition in the church one woman decided she wanted her lily after the Easter worship. So her husband hoisted her up from atop a choir chair to retrieve it.

When she picked it up, she blurted out for all to hear, "It's plastic. It's plastic!"

People thought they were buying lilies but the church was putting out the same plastic flowers year after year. Of course there was a big uproar. The minister, and those who knew about this scheme of deception, defended it by saying that (1) It had raised a good bit of money over the years and (2) The plastic lilies were great symbols of the resurrection because they never died.

Unfortunately, for some folks, a plastic lily could be used to represent their faith.

But when we come to recognize and really believe that Jesus rose from the dead - then we realize that a shallow, superficial, plastic kind of faith is not an appropriate response.

So, what is the proper response to the message “Christ is risen”? It is JOY (and worship).

Matthew tells us that the women were *"filled with joy."* When the other disciples finally believed the good news, Luke tells us they were also filled with *"joy and amazement."*

When Mary saw the risen Christ she fell to her feet *in worship.* Thomas fell to the floor and worshiped Christ saying, *"My Lord, and My God!"* It took awhile for those first disciples, but once they finally grasped the reality of what happened - the most common response was joy and worship followed by a passion to tell the world - to spread the news - Christ is risen!

WHY? What is it about the resurrection that inspires us to respond with joy and worship?

It means, first of all, that Jesus Christ is who He claimed to be. He is the Son of God, the Savior of the world. He is the Christ - the Messiah. He is the only way to the Father, the only door to heaven, the only Source of salvation. He is Immanuel - God with us (but not just God with us - He is also God for us! In Him we know that God is for us and not against us!).

Talk is plentiful, but resurrections are rare. Great teachers, moral philosophers, and ethical men we have aplenty, but a man who rises up after being crucified, dead, and buried - well that is another matter. There is only One in human history who died and rose never to die again.

The resurrection means that Jesus' death is the sufficient sacrifice for our sins. The Bible says that the wages, the payment for sin, is death - not life. So if that payment were not fully satisfied - Jesus would still be dead and we would be left to pay for our own sins with our own deaths. On the Cross, Jesus said, *"It is finished!"* This meant that the work of our redemption was finished. It means the death of Jesus on the cross is a replacement for our own.

We are saved by His sacrifice, but it is the resurrection that reveals that the Father accepted the death of the Son as a payment for our sin - God raised Him from the dead to prove it. The bible says, *"For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord."*

It is the risen Christ who says to us, with conviction, *"I have conquered sin, and death and hell for you. You are forgiven. Trust in me, and not in yourselves, and you will rise with me."*

The resurrection means that Jesus is true to his word. He said He would rise from the dead in three days, and He did, contrary to the expectations of His slow to believe disciples. This means we can take Jesus at His Word about everything else: **Like when Jesus says** that if we repent, confess our sins, and trust in Him - then we can live as forgiven people - free from guilt, free from shame, and regret; **Like when Jesus says** that God loves you - just as you are - and He also loves you enough to mend the brokenness in your life and grow His holiness in you; **Like when Jesus says** that He has returned to heaven to prepare a place for us - so that we will be with Him forever. All His promises are true. His rising from the dead shows it. *When we trust in the risen Christ - we trust in one who is the way the truth and the life.*

The resurrection means that the new creation has been made possible. The resurrection of Christ transformed the first disciples. Not only did they know Christ was alive, but the Holy Spirit also filled them with the same power that raised Jesus from the dead.

The first disciples knew that the resurrection didn't just open the gates to heaven for them, it also created the possibility for an abundant life - here and now. They knew that for those who trust Christ, all good things are possible. For them a new life without the old limits had begun.

The apostle Paul called Jesus the first-fruits of those who have died. The first-fruits are like the first tomato to ripen on the vine. It is the sign of more to come. The resurrection of Jesus means that there is more rising to come. Rising up - is now the destiny of all disciples of Christ. The resurrection of Jesus is a declaration of independence from all bondage to the powers of sin and death and hell - and all the junk related to those things. As the scriptures say, *"If anyone is in Christ, they are a new creation. The old has gone, the new has come."*

The first disciples responded to the resurrection with joy and worship. The whole tenor of their life was altered. Their joy gave them confidence in their victories and times of blessings, and also in the face of persecution, hardship, and even in the face of death. They knew there was more to come - more love, more power, more life, more purpose, more peace. They knew that whatever challenges they faced in the short-run would rise with Christ in the long-run.

When you trust in the risen Christ - you can know that the ultimate reality of our lives will not be despair, or futility, or death - but instead - it will be hope and purpose and life eternal.

Hear the good news of Easter - Christ is risen! How will you choose to respond?

Will you choose faith and respond with joy and worship? That is my choice, my response.

Every time I hear or think about the fact that Christ is risen - it inspires me to choose joy and to choose worship! Not just on Easter, not just in a church building, not just when times are good, or easy, or comfortable, or familiar - but any time and every time and every where.

For me it is only the resurrection of Christ that makes life worth living.

For me, it is the resurrection that enables me to have hope, and to have the courage to face all the challenges of today, and whatever challenges that may yet come in this earthly life.

Christ is risen! He is Risen indeed. Hallelujah! Praise the Lord!

As the old song says,

*“Because He lives I can face tomorrow
Because He lives all fear is gone
Because I know, He holds the future,
and life is worth the living, just because He lives.”*