

Easter 2020

Happy Easter!

I say that pretty particularly, not just wanting but expecting it to be happy.

I say it even to convince myself, since some of it doesn't seem what I'd like. I'm not going for a family lunch later, to watch nephews and nieces chase for hidden eggs and gobble chocolate. I'm not going to eat deviled eggs and get to sample beers. I'm won't get to laugh in a full room. I don't like that.

Maybe at least important is that you're not here in this room. Mary Rowe has said that it makes her sad to see the empty chairs onscreen. This current setup and Kaisa's videographic skill is trying not to catch the rest of the Blessing Room, to make it feel and serve (as much as this can) to bring your familiar congregational home to you on your computer. But something is missing. I know. I'm sorry.

I love any time I get to see you. I really, really do cherish it. I don't say that now; I say that as who I am. A day like Easter is usually the most of that, as there would be crowds, people bright and cheery and full of greeting, plus festival brass and communion and fragrant lilies and lighting the paschal candle. This morning is one of my normal most beloved times.

That includes maybe my favorite phrase of the whole year, a call and response that fills me with delight and embodies so instantly the good news we gather around in community. I look forward so much to the first hearty proclamation of "Alleluia! Christ is risen!" and get excited as it catches on and you get perkier at responding. You'd have to yell it REALLY loud for me to hear your response now.

Of course, that is pretty small in one perspective of things not being how they're supposed to be. Having a church service run differently may not be tops on your personal list of what's affected and wrong. You may have too much work or too little work or money. You may not know how to do your classes at home. You may not get the contact you want with grandkids,

or you may miss your friends and sports. You may turn on the radio and wish for a Brewers game. You may want to go on a trip, or to a state park, or out to eat, or to the grocery store. Who would've thought that could be a luxury! You may be bored or may be worn out by the stress, or may be both at the same time. You may be nervous with masks. You may want to give all of the pent-up hugs.

Still, all that is pretty small of not being how it's supposed to be compared to those directly dealing with the virus or mourning deaths, small next to those who have no stores or food in regular times or who are always fearing for their lives or without homes to stay in.

Sure. But I also want you to hear that. I'm not telling you to stop complaining, not telling you to get over it because it could be worse. I don't want you to feel that what you're feeling isn't valid, that it already felt bad and then is worse because you shouldn't be feeling so bad. I won't tell you to grieve more. For not wishing you should be different, John Prine gave the advice in a song "You are what you are, and you ain't what you ain't."* It's okay, what you feel. It's real.

To flip it around, there are certainly things to be pleased about right now. You may take relief that spring is on the way (even with a few Wisconsin snowflakes). There is color back in the landscape of greens and flowers popping and delicate leaves. Maybe you're more aware of time outside. Maybe you value connections you're making or maintaining in distanced greetings and video chats. Maybe this has given you more family time or appreciation of your dog. Maybe you're more tuned in to news and what democracy means, or maybe you don't want to deal with that and instead are tuned in to music or binge-watching something fun. Maybe you contribute to the care of mask-sharing and kind words and support of health care workers. Maybe you value the creativity and innovation as we're all figuring out how to do things differently in the quote-unquote "new normal." Or maybe you still

* https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LJVFY_LX9Ik

are finding old normal and realizing everything *hasn't* changed.

With all of that, with more perspective than I can hold onto or certainly know of how you're feeling and thinking and doing, bad or good, lament or celebration, Easter is different from all of that, but Easter speaks into it.

It's easy to say Easter is more than pastel eggs and jelly beans and bunnies.

More, Spring springing is nice and we cherish it, but the cycle of seasons that brings back life that was never really gone isn't Easter. In the end, lilies and green blades rising or butterflies may even be misleading metaphors for Easter. This isn't "life will find a way" survival in Jurassic Park.

Again, then, hope is not just looking on the bright side, not just trying to list more good things than frustrations or sorrows. That can probably be a helpful practice to de-stress and re-orient, but it's certainly not Easter to set aside bad thoughts and focus on the seemingly positive and cheery.

The resurrection wasn't to make the women at the tomb feel dumb for having grieved, to erase it and say "oh, nevermind," as if they should've known better or gotten over it. Easter is something more.

On Thursday my grandma died. I want to thank you for your kind words and love and prayers. And thank you for your laments about it being at this peculiar time when some contact isn't possible. Either side could become definitive, either the outpouring of love or the limit of love, either the fortunate relationships that help or unfortunate distance that hurts. It's all true and real. And neither is enough; I need more.

I could approach my grandma's death with gratitude for her 97 years and having her around so long and how much she encouraged me as a pastor and think of the good memories. Or I could let it be defined that I didn't see her the last time I was in Eau Claire, which maybe shouldn't even have been the last time I was in Eau Claire, and I could focus on those regrets and regrets of what her life was or wasn't, from 1922 until Thursday.

Thursday also marked the 75th anniversary of the death of Dietrich Bonhoeffer in a Nazi concentration camp. I shared some words of his on Good Friday partly because of that date, and partly because he's got good words. Those were about God closer in suffering than in happiness. Here's another dose, where he directly says what I've been leading toward:

Where it is recognized that the power of death is broken, where the mystery of the resurrection and of the new life shines into the midst of the world of death, there one does not ask eternities from life, there one takes from life what life can offer—not everything or nothing, but good and evil, important and unimportant, joy and pain; there one does not frantically hold on to life, nor does one throw it foolishly away; there one is content with measured time and does not attribute eternity to earthly things; there one leaves death the limited right it still has.*

These days have some good, and have bad. They may be scary or stifling, or they may be quiet. Spring may be arriving like usual, or it may be unusual as the new normal or with a changing climate. Singing birds may make us think of all creation joining in alleluias of praise, or maybe they are just trying to find a mate. My grandma had joy and disappointment, and her death may have come at a good time or a rotten time. We take what life offers, and take it for the full, real thing it is. We help each other, and realize it's not everything. "You are what you are, and you ain't what you ain't."

For whatever that is and for whoever you are and aren't, Easter meets it, speaks into it, or as Bonhoeffer phrased it, "the mystery of the resurrection and of the new life shines into the midst of the world of death." The risen Jesus doesn't whitewash over the bad and doesn't pat on the back the good, as if it's on its way toward glory. Resurrection is a new word for all of it.

So in details of these days and how you're managing, there isn't some that's closer than the rest to Easter, to Jesus, to God. There isn't the right perspective that's godlier. There isn't health

* in *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: The Mystery of Easter*, p19

or service of life that's almost resurrection. There's something more.

Even in worship, the dispersed community doesn't mean we're apart from God's blessing. Festive Alleluias do acknowledge and proclaim it, but don't actually put us nearer to new life. The sad days of peak death counts and the bleakness as this wears on are met by a new word that puts even that in context. It is not ultimate. Even that is limited. It may feel and may be important, but it is not all.

We do what we can. We find joy. We lament sorrow. We continue through life. It will have its variety, and is okay. But beyond that, and yet coming into the midst of it, coming into your life right now and into the room as you sit with this screen, a totally different new normal of resurrection's promise. There is more. There is more. There is God's presence and love, "saving, healing, here and now." There is blessing that will leave nobody out. There is good news. There is peace, and there is encouragement.

There is this message: do not be afraid. In the Gospel reading, the dead person, Jesus, doesn't act like a dead person. Instead it's those men in fear who shake and act like the dead. I take it to mean in resurrection there is something beyond fear, undoing fear, a very real reason to reiterate: do not be afraid. Jesus comes to meet you, to reassure you, to tell you: there is more.

And it is for that reason and not because of any of the other circumstances, not because I'm glad we can still worship across the internet, not because Alleluias rise, not because it'll be a calm and peaceful day, not because the curve is flattening, not because we've got it figured out, not because of anything else. It is because there is more with the risen Jesus that I am confident to say: Happy Easter.