

**we no longer look for Jesus among the dead.
for he is alive and has become the Lord of life.
From the waters of death, you raise us with him
and renew the gift of life within us.
Increase in our minds and hearts
the risen life we share with Christ,
and help us grow as your people
toward the fullness of eternal life with you,
through Christ our Lord,
who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit,
One God, now and forever. Amen.**

Hymn 232 Jesus Christ Is Risen Today
But the pains which he endured, Alleluia!
Our salvation have procured, Alleluia!
Now above the sky he's King, Alleluia!
Where the angels ever sing, Alleluia!

Sing we to our God above, Alleluia!
Praise eternal as his love, Alleluia!
Praise him, all you heavenly host, Alleluia!
Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, Alleluia!

A Time for Young Disciples

Scripture Reading John 20:1-18

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. So she ran and went straight 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." Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went toward the tomb. The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in. The Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there, and the cloth that had had been on Jesus' head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself. Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead. Then the disciples returned to their homes.

But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb; 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. 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 taken him.” When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. 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.” Jesus said to her, “Mary!” She turned and said to him in Hebrew, “Rabbouni!” (which means Teacher). Jesus said to her, “Do not hold onto me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, “I am ascending to my God and your God.” 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.

The Word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

The Message

He is risen! He is risen indeed!

O death, where is your victory? O grave, where is your sting?

This is the day, Easter Sunday, the feast of the resurrection of Jesus from the dead, that we’ve been waiting to celebrate since March of last year.

When I first learned of the merciless Corona Virus, it was in the church office. Besides serving us, Jessica was teaching a number of Chinese students on-line. They were reporting their experiences with this mysterious illness. Lonely and isolated. Sad. Scared. Soon, Jessica was becoming a counselor, or more accurately, their “con-sol-er.”

One of the students hadn’t been out of the house for two months. Unthinkable. Two months? Almost overnight, the unthinkable arrived on our doorstep. And overnight, it seems, we were isolated, sad, and scared. Some of us were sick. Some of us didn’t come out of our homes for two months...or longer.

Did you anticipate how our lives would change? I certainly didn’t.

As a pastor, I kept anticipating that the governor’s “safer at home” order would be lifted. We would pick up in the middle of Lent, which would lead to a glorious Easter with long-necked trumpeting lilies and children racing through the church yard in search of colored eggs.

But, as Lent lurched on, the reprieve didn’t come. We stayed in our homes and worshiped on-line. Speaking only for myself, I felt a deep sense of loss. Because we are people of faith, we did

what we always do on Easter: we read the scriptures, sang a couple of verses of “Jesus Christ is Risen Today.” Ed and I even had a surprise visit from a socially distant Easter Bunny.

We knew what was wrong: we missed our family and our faith community. The resurrection of Christ is the foundation on which we stand, and we stand with the great cloud of witnesses, in heaven and on earth.

Don’t tell anybody, but, to me, it felt like we had left Jesus in the tomb.

It has taken me a year to make peace with that last statement. *It felt like we had left Jesus in the tomb.*

Apparently, I was not alone. One of today’s young preachers, Sarah Bessey, says she felt a profound sense of grief on Easter last year. That was completely reasonable. She had recently lost a dear friend and now the whole world was in the valley of the shadow of death.

A year later, things are turning around, we are adapting, we’re being vaccinated, it’s less of a threat now to go out in public, to come to church. But we have a long way to go.

It takes a lot of emotional energy to sing joyous Easter hymns when so much of the world is still in the dark, when death still stings. And even when Covid-19 is no longer a threat, we will always have assaults to our well-being, challenges to our faith.

So, today let’s find something to hold onto.

Episcopal priest, Barbara Brown Taylor writes, “As many years as I have been listening to Easter sermons, I have never heard anyone talk about that part. Resurrection is always announced with Easter lilies, the sound of trumpets, bright streaming light. But it did not happen that way. If it happened in a cave, it happened in complete silence, in absolute darkness, with the smell of damp stone and dug earth in the air. Sitting deep in the heart of Organ Cave, I let this sink in: new life starts in the dark. Whether it is a seed in the ground, a baby in the womb, or Jesus in the tomb, it starts in the dark.”

Bessey says, It is in the dark that new life begins and began and is beginning. Still.

But when darkness comes, we don’t always think of the protection of a mother’s dark womb or tulip bulbs growing in the silent earth. In Psalm 137, when God’s people were in Babylonian exile, they lamented, “By the rivers of Babylon we sat down and wept...How can we sing the songs of the Lord while in a foreign land?”

How true that is. We know who we are. God is the ground of our being. We know the scriptures, the hymns, the affirmations, all by heart. But, still, how can we sing the songs of the Lord when

our mother is dying? Or when our teenager gets a DUI? Or when we have denied Christ by our own actions?

How in the world can we sing the songs of the Lord in a Covid ward?

We find this guidance in Scripture: When Jesus found his beloved friend, Lazarus, dead, he didn't sing. He cried. Jesus knew darkness, too.

As I was working on this message, an image came to me of a place I haven't been in over 20 years. My in-laws had a family camp in Pocahontas County. My husband and kids loved it. I wasn't a fan. Except at night. Pitch black. Deep, velvety darkness, made more beautiful by millions of stars. When a cloud passed over, it was like illuminating heaven itself.

Jesus is light in the darkness. Jesus is the Light of the world. Jesus is the resurrection and the life. And in his resurrection is the promise of ours.

We affirm that in every baptism. If we are buried in the baptismal waters like Jesus, we will be raised to new life in a resurrection like his.

Paul wrote in his letter to the Romans, "That's what baptism in the life of Jesus means. When we are lowered into the water, we left the old country of sin behind; when we came up out of the water, we entered into the new country of grace- a new life in a new land!"

One of the things I love about Sarah Bessey and her good friend, the late Rachel Held Evans, is that they are bold preachers who speak with frank honesty and with a spirit of humility. They say out loud what most of us can't: that some days we are unwavering believers. But sometimes we have doubts.

Bessey writes, "And Jesus is – still, now, always-the resurrection and the life. And on the days when I believe this, it changes everything.

On the days when I believe this, I am certain we will also be resurrected and death will not have the final word and all tears will be wiped away and there will be no more night, no more hunger, no more wounding, no more loss, no more good-byes.

On the days when I believe this, I believe death is a dawn and never the last word.

On the days when I believe this, I know the miracle is that God knows the dark and the sorrow just like we do.

On the days when I believe this, I believe that ongoing hope of resurrection changes how we engage in our lives as they stand right now as we love and know and walk with God who brings life out of death, order out of chaos, healing out of sickness, wholeness out of brokenness.

On the days when I believe this, I know God isn't finished with this Story yet.

But there are days when I don't believe it.

And on those, I have this: God With Us, *Emmanuel*.

This Easter, it may be all some of us have. We can't quite get to resurrection and life yet but in that place of exile, we can rest alongside *God With Us*, which is our country of grace for today."

Our three-year-old grandson was out of school Friday, so he spent the day with his dad. All documented by iphone camera. We have pictures of Tad at breakfast, and the playground, and playing with the dog, and eating a lumberjack-sized hamburger at an outdoor café.

Then there was this:

"Do you know the muffin man, the muffin man, the muffin man.
Do you know the muffin man...who...
Do you know the muffin man...who...
He couldn't get to the last line, so he says, "Sing it with me, Daddy!"

"You mean, Do you know the muffin man? That one?"

"Yes! Yes! Sing *that* song with me!"

And they sang it to the end. Together. Because that's the way we open the shutters, cast off the pall, hold hands, and make it to the country of grace for today.

And may you dwell in the country of grace this and every day. Amen.

Pastoral Prayer and the Lord's Prayer

Living God,

You have opened our eyes to see the glory of this new day;
now open our lips to tell of the empty tomb;
open our hearts to believe the Good News;

and strengthen us in body and spirit to carry your message of hope into the world,
In your mercy, heal the suffering, mend our brokenness, restore our relationships, save us from hostility and harsh judgments, show us our purpose, impart wisdom to those in the halls of governments, and bring peace to your world. We pray for ourselves, giving thanks for your sustaining love that has comforted us in our pain and blessed us with occasions of joy. We lift our prayers as Jesus taught us, saying, Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name; thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth, as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory forever. Amen.

Hymn Low In the Grave He Lay (He Arose) Robert Lowry, 1874

Low in the grave he lay, Jesus my Savior,
waiting the coming day, Jesus my Lord.

Up from the grave he arose,
with a mighty triumph o'er his foes;
he arose the victor of the dark domain,
and he lives forever with his saints to reign.
He arose! He arose! Hallelujah! Christ arose!

Vainly they watch his bed, Jesus my Savior;
vainly they seal the dead, Jesus my Lord! *Refrain*

Death cannot keep its prey, Jesus my Savior;
he tore the bars away, Jesus my Lord! *Refrain*

Blessing

Christ is risen!

He is risen indeed!

Christ is risen!

He is risen indeed!

Christ is risen!

He is risen indeed!

***Postlude**

Announcements

You may notice some changes in worship this morning. They have been made to better assure our health and safety. We hope to return to a fuller service soon.

We ask that the congregation refrain from singing at this time. Choir members will sing the hymns from a safe distance from those in the pews.

In order for those joining us from home to be included in worship, volunteers are needed to record the service each week. Please notify any of our elders or contact our pastor, Cinda Harkless, 304.634.5831, right away if you are available.

Tithes and offerings may be placed in the offering plates provided at the end of the service. Next Sunday, April 11, we will receive the One Great Hour of Sharing Offering, one of the special offerings of the PCUSA.

Thank you message from the Frost family here

Assisting in worship today

Elder of the Month	Jon-Tyler Roach
Organist and Choir Director	Mark Baker
Assisting with music	Choir members
Recording Worship	Jessica Kidd
Pastor	Cinda Harkless