

Worship for April 9, 2023  
Easter

Welcome and Announcements

\*Call to Worship

Alleluia! Christ is risen!

**The Lord is risen indeed! Alleluia!**

\*Hymn 232      Jesus Christ Is Risen Today

Prayer for Easter

O Christ, in your resurrection,

The heavens and earth rejoice,

**Alleluia!**

By your resurrection you broke open the gates of hell  
and destroyed sin and death.

**Keep us victorious over sin.**

By your resurrection, you raised the dead,  
and brought us from death to life.

**Guide us in the way of eternal life.**

By your resurrection you confounded your guards and executioners,  
and filled your disciples with joy.

**Give us joy in your service.**

By your resurrection you proclaimed good news to the women and apostles,  
and brought salvation to the whole world.

**Direct our lives as your new creation.**

God of mercy,

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.**

**Where we have strayed from your example, forgive us and restore us to right relationship  
with you and those with whom we live, love, work, and play,**

**through Christ our Lord,  
who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit,**

**One God, now and forever. Amen.**

Hymn 698 Take, O Take Me as I Am

Assurance of Forgiveness

Jesus, the Alpha and Omega, our beginning and our ending, has come to save us from our sins and turn us toward the grace and mercy of God.

Friends believe the good news of the gospel. In Jesus Christ, our sins are forgiven.

**Alleluia! Alleluia! Amen.**

First Reading Luke 24:1-12

Choral Anthem He Lives

Time for Young Disciples

Gospel Reading John 20:1-18

The Morning Message

Scripture tells us that when Jesus uttered his final words, “It is finished,” thunder rolled and all the light went out in the world. Mid-day, the world was plunged into deep darkness.

In some Christian traditions, the sanctuary is stripped at the end of the Maundy Thursday service, the cross is draped in black, the lights are extinguished, and the final insult is the sound of the Bible being slammed shut as if salvation history itself had been defeated.

My husband had to be out of town for several days recently on music education business. You would think after forty-plus years I would be used to this annual absence. But, it always makes me uneasy. I don’t sleep well. To cope, I usually read late into the night and eventually my eyes fall victim to gravity.

But, this time I wasn’t completely alone. I had five-month-old Maeve, our little Havanese mix. She may be a toy breed, but what she lacks in size she makes up for with her Rottweiler-like bark.

One night I had read until at least 1AM, before falling into a deep sleep. At three o’clock I was awakened by my tiny guard dog barking her head off. If you ever been awakened like that, you can understand that I was disoriented, groping around to turn on a light, and fumbling for my glasses.

What was going on? She must need to go out. Since we are still potty-training, I rushed to pull on my robe and ran downstairs hoping to get her outside while keeping her crate undefiled.

And then I heard the rain. Great. I grabbed my slicker from the closet, shoved my bare feet into my boots, located Maeve's leash, released her from her crate, snapped on the leash, grabbed my little lantern because I can't see in the dark, flipped on the back porch light...and Maeve just went crazy, lunging and leaping and barking, doing her best to defend us against a most dangerous...watering can. It had apparently been blown onto the patio from somewhere in the yard and had wakened Maeve when it crashed into the door.

In the dark, even harmless objects can wreak terror in our imaginations and in our hearts.

As I was preparing for the events of Holy Week, I looked at some sermon files. Back in 2021, we had lived thru a whole year of Covid, but we were still somewhat in the dark about the disease. Today, we are still learning about it and people are still getting the latest strain.

When Covid was first emerging, our days seemed dim and joyless. So many were spent alone, quarantined by choice or by doctor's orders. Easter came and went and, don't tell anybody, but, to me, 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 that first Easter of Covid. She had recently lost a dear friend and now the whole world was in the valley of the shadow of death.

Three years later, things are turning around, we are adapting, we know how to treat it. We're learning to live with the constant presence of a serious and contagious disease. The veil of darkness is lifting.

It is about darkness that 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? Or in war-torn Ukraine? Or on the streets of Tel Aviv? Or in the Covenant Presbyterian Church School in Nashville?

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 40 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."

I've shared this story before, but, it's appropriate for Easter. When our grandson, Tad, was three, he had a day out of school and he spent it with Daddy. Like a holiday or birthday, the event was 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, a video:

Tad is in his car seat.

"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.

\* Hymn 240 Alleluia! Alleluia! Give Thanks

\*Affirmation of Faith The Apostles' Creed p. 35

\*Hymn 580 Gloria Patri

Reception of New Members

Special Music He Lives

Sharing Our Joys and Concerns

Pastoral Prayer and the Lord's Prayer

Presenting Our Tithes and Offerings including One Great Hour of Sharing

\*Hymn 607 Doxology

\*Hymn He Arose (insert)

\*Blessing

Christ is risen!

**He is risen indeed!**

Christ is risen!

**He is risen indeed!**

Christ is risen!

**He is risen indeed!**

\*Postlude