

A DIFFERENT KIND OF EASTER

Acts 10:34-43

What now do we do with this?

A sermon preached by
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Easter Sunday

There are many ways to respond to a crisis like the coronavirus pandemic. A couple in Denver started a Facebook group a couple of weeks ago called “Go outside and howl at 8pm.” The idea was based on wolves that howl at night to communicate with the rest of the pack. The purpose of humans howling all together was to honor and support health professionals and first responders who are working to stem the tide of COVID-19. It was also to give people a cathartic emotional experience to help deal with the stress of the pandemic. This week the Facebook group claimed over 450,000 followers from Denver to California to Montana to New York and around the world. In many places, people are stepping outside at 8:00 p.m. and howling at the top of their lungs.¹ I haven’t heard howling in Fort Smith yet, but there was a news report of a neighborhood in Fayetteville that was having a nightly howl. (Feel free to try this at home.)

The howling reminded me of one of my favorite Easter stories that I have told on several Easter Sunday mornings. Margaret Sangster Phippen wrote about her father, a British Methodist pastor named W. E. Sangster. He was great preacher and leader in post-World War II Methodism in England. While still in his 50’s, Sangster noticed some uneasiness in his throat and a weakness in his leg. He was diagnosed with an incurable disease that caused his muscles to deteriorate. He would eventually be unable to walk or talk or even swallow.

But Sangster did not give up with the diagnosis. He threw himself into his ministry with even more vigor. He could still write and devote himself to prayer. He wanted to remain in the struggle. He told Margaret he felt like he was only in the “kindergarten of suffering.” So he continued to write books and organize prayer cells as long as he could.

Gradually Sangster’s legs became useless, and he lost his voice. On his final Easter, he wrote to his daughter, “It is terrible to wake up on Easter morning and have no voice to shout ‘He is Risen!’ But it would be still more terrible to have a voice and not want to shout.”²

We may not feel like shouting on this Easter Sunday. There are good reasons to be more subdued than usual. The world is in the grip of a viral pandemic. The infections and deaths in many places are still on the increase. The economies of the world are in chaos. Families are suffering

hardships and grief. There is suffering everywhere you look. When Lent started six weeks ago, none of us had any idea how much we would have to give up before Easter.

How easy it would be for us to hear only the first part of the angel's message this morning: "He is not here." Where is Christ in the midst of pandemic? We look in the hospital emergency rooms, filled with exhausted health professionals who do not have the protective equipment needed to keep themselves safe, yet they continue to serve, and we might be tempted to hear, "He is not here." We walk into a grocery store, and we are afraid to breathe the air that might be infected from one of the other shoppers, and we think, "He is not here." We see a home where the parents have been laid off, and the kids are home from school, and trying to get their lessons done is driving everyone crazy, and we wonder, "Where is Jesus? He is not here."³

But that's not the whole story, is it? When the women came to the tomb early on Easter morning, the stone was rolled away. The tomb was empty, and the angelic messenger said, "He is not here." And they thought, "Oh, no! Where is he? Where have you taken him?" The angel said, "He is not here. (Wait for it.) He is risen!" He is not here, because he is not dead anymore! He is alive; go tell his disciples!

So this is a different kind of Easter, says the guy preaching to an iPhone in an empty room. But at the same time, it really feels like Easter. Maybe it is precisely because we are in the situation we're in that Easter is so real today. We don't have all the usual distractions to keep us away from the reality of the event. We didn't go out Easter shopping this week for new clothes or decorations. There was no big, crowded, chaotic egg hunt for the kids. (We did make Easter baskets for them, but it was pretty calm.) There are no big family gatherings for Easter dinner, unless you have a big family already in your house. And we don't even have to worry about all the moving parts of four services and musical extravaganzas and lilies and processions and so forth. All we have is us and Jesus and the resurrection.

Yet this might be the biggest Easter we have ever had. Through the miracle of technology, we can reach people wherever they are on the planet, and so can all the other churches. Last week, we had nearly 4,000

engagements on our Facebook services. If we ever needed Easter, we need it now. Gloop, a Christian marketing firm, did a poll asking people what they needed from their church this Easter. 34% said they needed a message of hope; 27% said they needed connection and community; and 21% said they needed emotional support. People are hungry, particularly right now, for the good news of the resurrection of Jesus.

This is what the theologian John Stott called “the up-to-the-minute relevance of Jesus’ resurrection.” He said, “The resurrection somehow resonates with our human condition. It speaks to our needs as I reckon no other event of antiquity does, or even could.”⁴ In other words, we don’t need to generate a hunger for the Gospel; we are already hungry for some good news. We don’t have to try to make a 2,000-year-old event interesting; it’s the most interesting thing that ever happened. We don’t have to do a bunch of extra stuff to make Easter exciting; we are already excited by the fact that whatever else ever happens to us, we can now have hope.

I don’t know about you, but I have been inundated with information for the last three or four weeks. One of the many things I normally read is a newsletter out of Wesley seminary in Washington, D.C., called *Leading Ideas*. One of the constant features of this church leadership newsletter is called “The Right Question,” because sometimes leaders are not the ones with all the answers. Sometimes leaders are the ones with the right questions. This week’s question came from a friend of mine, a church consultant named Gil Rendle, who may be one of the wisest people I have ever known. Gil said in times of chaos (like now), it is important to observe and reflect on what is happening. Once we gain some understanding, we can follow our observations with this question: “What now will we do with this?” That is the right question for this Easter morning. We have observed the chaos of COVID-19 all around us, and we have heard the proclamation of the resurrection of Jesus. What now will we do with this?

The first disciples of Jesus felt compelled to share this good news that their Master was still alive. By the 10th chapter of Acts, the Jesus movement had begun to spread throughout the region of Palestine. Peter found himself summoned to the home of a Roman centurion named Cornelius. Cornelius had been prepared for this meeting by the appearance of an angel. Peter had

been prepared by a dream in which God made unclean things clean. So Peter stood in the home of this Gentile Roman and gave what many scholars call the perfect apostolic sermon. This is the message that changed the world.

Peter's sermon started by saying that God welcomes all people regardless of their nationality or background. Anyone can be accepted by God. Then Peter tells the story of Jesus: baptized by John in Galilee, given power through the Holy Spirit, a healer and worker of miracles, put to death in Jerusalem by crucifixion, raised by God on the third day. Peter and others saw Jesus alive, and he commissioned them to testify that God ordained Jesus to be the judge of the living and the dead. This is Peter's witness, and it is consistent with the prophets of Israel. Whoever believes in Jesus receives forgiveness of their sins.

This is the word of hope for us today. We know that in Jesus Christ, our sins can be forgiven. Whatever failures you have experienced, whatever you have done that you shouldn't have done, whatever you did not do that you should have done, it's all forgiven, wiped clean, erased. Jesus went to the cross and gave his life so that we could be set free from bondage to the mistakes of our past and start over ...and over ...and over again, until we begin to look more and more like Jesus in the way we live and love.

This is a word of transformation. When we believe in Jesus, we start at point A, but we don't stay there. We grow and grow and grow until we get to point B or C or Z. We become different people because the grace of God begins to work in our lives. As Paul said when he was describing the resurrection, "*Listen, I will tell you a mystery! We will not all die, but we will all be changed.*"⁵

We won't all die in this coronavirus pandemic. Our hearts are broken for those who do. But we can all be changed. We are not powerless. We are not hopeless. God can use this time to make us better people, more compassionate, more connected, even more holy. Our God is a God of transformation. Look at the world around us. While we have been hunkered down and socially distancing, spring has taken over. The dogwoods are blooming; the azaleas are magnificent. Did you see the Passover moon this week? All the world around us is a reminder that God is still God. The

world is not doomed. We will come through this time, and God will still be with us.

I've said it a hundred times—this month! “In all things, God works for good.”⁶ I said it last week: God is a specialist at bringing good out of evil. I have hope that when we look back on this time in years to come, we can see the good that came out of it in the shape of transformed lives. What if this time of forced slowdown is the start of the spiritual revival we have been praying for?

Our hope for forgiveness and our hope for transformation is a hope for life. The gift of Easter is the gift of life. Jesus came to give us life in all its abundance. Whenever we experience the fullness of life, the risen Christ is with us.

Charlie Baber is a Methodist pastor who draws a comic strip based on a modern-day version of John and Charles Wesley. This week in an email he shared with his readers:

Where are you finding Christ in surprising ways? Christ is risen. He is risen indeed. And the risen presence of Christ is most certainly with us by the Advocate and Comforter, the Great Holy Spirit who intercedes when we don't even know how to pray. The loss of our routines and traditions gives us the opportunity to discover how Christ is alive in spite of them. In the boundless energy of my six-year-old son who so clearly just wants to play with friends. And in the pages filled with creative drawing from my nine-year-old daughter. And in the mother bird nested on my patio, who feeds and protects her chicks from me every time I step outside. The full moon that I got to watch slowly rise while I remembered how we too reflect back the light of the Son. Meaningful conversations over the phone with people who really just called to say, “I love you.”⁷

Where are you seeing the risen Christ today? In the springtime exploding around you? In your family? In a Scripture? In a song? Wherever Jesus is, he connects us to life, a life lived fully now and a life that will continue after we die. This is the reality of the resurrection. Scholar and missionary Leslie Newbigin wrote: “Resurrection is no longer a mere doctrine: it has a living face and a name. Jesus is himself the presence of the life which is God's gift beyond death. To be bound to Jesus by faith is to share already

now the life which is beyond death.”⁸ Jesus is the name; Jesus is the face of the resurrection, and because he lives, death has been defeated. Because he lives we can begin now by faith to live eternal life.

That’s good news in a pandemic. That’s a word of hope when over 100,000 people have died from COVID-19, 20,000 in the U.S. Even if the worst should happen, and you or I should perish from the virus, that is not the end of life. That is only the beginning of life in glory. Because in Jesus Christ, there is resurrection.

It’s been a different kind of Holy Week and Easter this year. But in many ways, it may be the best ever. This time of social distancing is giving us the opportunity to reset our souls in God. This strange celebration has given us a chance to get down to the essence of Easter, the core proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ: “He is not here. He is risen!” That light still shines.

In Jerusalem, the Church of the Holy Sepulchre is the site believed to be the place where Jesus was crucified, buried, and rose again from the dead. Each year on the Orthodox Easter, which is a week after the Western Christian Easter, thousands of pilgrims will gather in the church to see the Holy Fire. During the Easter vigil, the night before their Easter, specially chosen Orthodox priests will enter the Edicule, the structure that is built over the tomb of Jesus. They carry unlit candles. There, inside the Edicule, on this one night in the year, the candles are said to spontaneously ignite. The mystery of the Holy Fire is a closely guarded secret, but when the priests emerge with candles on fire, the flame is passed from candle to candle among the thousands of worshippers in the church. Then it is taken in special containers to Orthodox communities in other countries.

But not this year, of course. Because of the pandemic, Israel is closed to public gatherings, and foreign travelers have to be quarantined. But it is still Easter. So next Saturday, the Israeli government is allowing 10 leaders of the different Orthodox denominations to enter the Edicule and receive the Holy Fire. Representatives from other countries will be allowed to fly into Israel and wait for the flame to be delivered to the plane so the fire can spread across the world.⁹

The fire of Easter is still lit. Jesus Christ is risen; he is alive, he is with us! Does that make you want to shout? Does that make you want to howl?

In Jesus we have a hope that will never die. No virus can kill it. No quarantine can break it. In Jesus we are forgiven and transformed. In Jesus we find life in all its fullness, life at its best, life forever. That is the hope, that is the promise, that is the story of Easter! What now will you do with it?

¹ <https://www.newsweek.com/denver-couple-get-locals-howl-moon-every-night-show-coronavirus-solidarity-1496762>.

² https://www.methodistevangelicals.org.uk/Articles/523392/W_E_Sangster.aspx.

³ Charlie Baber, *Wesley Brothers*, email 4/7/2020.

⁴ Matt Woodley, *PreachingToday.com*, 4/6/20.

⁵ I Corinthians 15:51.

⁶ Romans 8:28.

⁷ Baber, *op. cit.*

⁸ Leslie Newbigin, *The Light Has Come* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans), 142.

⁹ <https://www.timesofisrael.com/israel-to-help-christians-share-holy-fire-ritual-amid-pandemic/>.