

The Rev. Josh Stephens  
St. John in the Wilderness  
April 12, 2020

### Easter is for Times Like This

Good morning to you and happy Easter from St. John in the Wilderness in Flat Rock, NC! Whether you are a parishioner of St. John, a friend of this parish, or someone who joining us for the first time, we welcome you, we wish you a most happy Easter, and we would love to get to know you better. I think it's safe to say that this is an Easter that we will not soon forget. This is my first Easter at St. John in the Wilderness and it has been a rather unique one. In fact, I hope you don't mind, but I have some ideas about how we might do things differently next year. I'm thinking that we should try something crazy like holding a couple of services in the Church. What do you say?

This is such a unique time that we are living in and we are thankful to be able to gather to celebrate Christ's resurrection in any way that we can. Indeed, we are compelled to do so. In fact, if you are watching right now, I think that the people who are watching with you could use a sense of community, a sense of the Church gathered, so comment now and say hi or tell us where you are watching from. Write a comment that proclaims Christ is risen, or says "Amen," or shares the peace. Participate in this service with us. Let's make a wave of digital Easter joy, connecting us with Christ's empty tomb and with each other to share Easter all over the world. I'm going to regret saying this but you can even comment on my sermon! Just keep in mind if you are new to online etiquette that the rule is you don't type something in unless you'd say it to that person's face. And I'm a very sensitive guy. Maybe give

me some encouragement, in fact, and the sermon will get a little better from here.

I was reminded this week of an image I saw a few years back of an Orthodox Church in Syria. The civil war has raged on in Syria for years now and has impacted everything there. This Church had suffered close calls before and eventually it was hit directly by a mortar blast which left it in ruins. Stones had fallen on stones. Pews were upended. Light came through the massive holes in the ceiling. At the center of this photo of that church, was a make-shift altar amidst the rubble where a few people gathered with their priest to share in the risen life of Jesus Christ.

Today we find ourselves celebrating Easter -- proclaiming that Christ is risen -- in the middle of an international public health pandemic the likes of which most of us have never seen before. Upwards of 20 million Americans are unemployed. An estimated 50% of small businesses say they don't think they can survive much longer in this current climate. And I heard on the radio that the very height of the virus's impact -- the peak of the curve could be today, Easter Sunday. Over 20,000 people have died already and who knows where it will stop. We who often took things like school and church for granted, long for these communities. We long to grocery shop without restriction, to go out without face masks, to let kids play with friends again. We long to visit with family and to have friends over for dinner. We long to bury our dead. How can we celebrate Easter with empty pews? How can we celebrate Easter in the middle of such darkness and despair? Can we proclaim that Christ is risen when the groans of suffering are so deafening? Maybe it would make sense to skip Easter this year. Maybe we should reschedule Easter for better times.

The uncomfortable truth for most of us is that we have lived relatively comfortable lives as Americans, Canadians, as citizens of the West. We all have our issues and our trials, but we have lived good lives most of the time. We have had food to eat. We have driven nice cars and lived in nice homes and slept in comfortable beds. Even when things have been hard, we've still believed that things would more or less work out. Easter has so often been for us a nice social occasion. It's often been a time for baskets of candy and pretty dresses, a nice church service followed by an Easter brunch. It's often been that way for me and chances are for you as well.

But this year, there is something different going on for us. This year, we re-discover what Mary Magdalene and the other Mary and the disciples found out on that first Easter morning when they were reminded not once, but twice, "Do not be afraid!" We learn what early Christians knew when proclaiming Christ is risen was challenging the order of an Empire. We realize this Easter why in England they decorated bombed out parishes with flowers. We find out why our Moravian brothers and sisters form brass bands early on Easter morning to march to the graves of those who have died to declare that even when death is everywhere, even when despair falls like a spring rain, that we are living and breathing embodiments of an Easter hope which came into the world exactly for moments like the one we are living right now.

Easter has always been about proclaiming life in the midst of death. It's always been about light breaking through the darkness. It's about making an altar to praise God in the rubble and having hope when hope is hardest to come by. Even with all of the difficulty of these days, when

I look around at our communities, I see that Easter hope shining through. I'm hearing about people picking up paint brushes and sitting at a canvas for the first time in years. Others are playing instruments and making videos for each other. Neighbors are checking in with one another as if they need each other when they always have. I'm seeing friends getting out into Creation to garden and to go on walks, thankful to God for every breath of fresh air. Children are getting quality time with their parents -- maybe a little too much time! I see kids playing in creeks and it gives me hope.

In life, yes, there is difficulty. There is sorrow. There is death. But today we are proclaiming that death does not win because Christ has overcome it for us all. So join us in being followers of Jesus who have a well of hope in our souls. Join us in flowering the cross in our churchyard today, rain or shine, but especially in the rain. Make a joyful noise with us by going outside at 10am to ring bells, or bang pots and pans, or just shout out "He is risen!". God's love is the most powerful force in the universe and that love is yours, it is yours this Easter day. Hope abounds for us. Christ is risen. A happy and a hope-filled Easter to you.