

Reflections on Faith and Life for Easter

Christ is risen! **He is risen indeed! Alleluia!** As I write these notes the Wednesday before Easter, how good it feels to finally be able to use the “A” word. **He is risen indeed! Alleluia!**

This is certainly the strangest Holy Week any of us has ever experienced. Let me share with you some of the words written in my *Disciplines* for this week, by Kathleen Stephens, writer and editor of *Upper Room Books*. I quote her texts at length; all bold print is my addition.

Monday, April 6: *Holy week is so poignantly familiar to those of us who have been Christ followers for a while. But if anything about Holy Week can stop us in our tracks and capture our hearts anew, it is the mercy of it. When we pause to ponder Jesus’ death on the cross, we become aware of mercy so wide that it boggles our minds. Mercy happens when we are shown compassion we do not earn or deserve. When Jesus gives his life on the cross in our place, to atone for our own sin—that is simply mercy writ large.... In our scripture reading today [Psalm 36:5-11], we see that God’s mercy is so wide that it includes all people—Jews and Gentiles, saints and sinners, influential people and nobodies.... Because of God’s mercy, nothing gets lost, and no one falls through the cracks. In a world that in so many ways tries to tell us that we don’t matter, don’t measure up, and are not “essential,” God begs to differ. In God’s merciful acts for all creation, every living creature is provided for, loved, and treasured* (p. 126). – Do you see the word “essential” just above, written with quotation marks? That’s how it appears in the book. Consider that these pages were written over a year ago, before the coronavirus became an issue and we were all commanded to go out only for “essential things.” God surely ties everything together in the fulness of time!

Tuesday, April 7—First Corinthians 1:8-31: (The author begins with the discord in the Corinthian Church, saying that what is obvious to us may seem ridiculous to others in Christ’s body.) *One thing we know for sure: When two or three gather together, they are bound to disagree. In today’s reading, Paul takes to task the Corinthian church for its divisions. Like much of the ancient world, they had split into two camps over what constituted greatness. The Greeks prized wisdom. The Jews esteemed the power of miracles.... Paul astounds us by saying neither power nor wisdom is adequate for understanding how God works. Rather than siding with the Jews or the Greeks, Paul takes these two concepts of greatness and turns them on their head. **God’s choice, Paul says, is the apparent foolishness and weakness of the cross*** (p. 127). (Could our politicians learn from this??)

Maundy Thursday, April 9—John 13:1-7, 31b-35: *Loving as Jesus loves means taking on the role of a servant by caring for the needs of others without expecting anything in return. He shows us that we are to do this service not only for those who treat us well, but also for those who disappoint us, hurt us, and even betray us.... Loving one another doesn't mean we must feel affection for others. It means that we are to act in a loving way, even when we would rather not.... This kind of love and forgiveness is only possible because of the one who loves us fully and completely, the one who loves us to the end, even to the cross and grave and back* (p. 129).

Holy Saturday, April 11—Lamentations 3:1-9, 19-24: (After Babylon has destroyed Jerusalem, Jeremiah loses hope.) *We hear his devastation as he recounts the horrific destruction and loss of life. Perhaps even worse, though, the prophet says that when he cries out in prayer, God doesn't hear his pleas. But a tiny ray of hope breaks through the stone-cold silence. As Jeremiah reflects on his suffering, he remembers something he learned in better times: **God's steadfast love and mercies never cease.** When we have eyes to see them, evidence of those tender mercies appear to us every morning. Slowly, the prophet turns from his litany of misery to praise God. "**Great is your faithfulness,**" he declares, marking a turning point in his spiritual experience. We may find ourselves in a state of darkness without any light. Our distress is searingly real, yet we cannot find any comfort from scripture or prayer or from others. Why do we suffer so when God could make it right? Doubt begins to creep in. But as with Jeremiah, a miracle happens. As awful as things are for us, we discover new mercies. We are still alive. Each breath we take is evidence of God's goodness to us. Our sorrow has meaning. It humbles us and teaches us to depend on God rather than on the things of the world. Even in our brokenheartedness we begin to find hope* (p. 131).

Easter Sunday, April 12—Psalm 118:1-2, 14-24: *In today's reading we hear that God is not only our strength, but also our song.... Singing is an appropriate response to salvation. God has turned the tide. Though God tests us, we are not destroyed. In response, we gratefully sing our praise. Today Christians all across the world join in celebration of our risen Savior. The price has been paid. Our sins are forgiven. New life is ours through Jesus Christ's work on the cross.... It is right to rejoice and give thanks.... We remember what we have been given through the Cross—new life with God. Then we can lift our voice in praise. Our vocal cords may be a little rusty from lack of use. No matter. Sing anyway. God provides the song* (p. 132).

I hope with all my heart that these words speak to your hearts and minds, as they have to mine. May Easter joy raise a new song in your heart! Pr. Gail



St. John/St. Stephen Lutheran Parish ELCA, Mission Statement:

“Saints united to be the body of Christ in the world, freed by grace to live faithfully, witness boldly, and serve joyfully.”

Pastor: Gail Sowell

April 12, 2020,

Easter Sunday, the Resurrection of Our Lord!

Easter Day, April 12, 2020

Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! Alleluia!

Children's Time: If you have children, can you find some way to "unbury" the Alleluia? Maybe parents or older kids could bury one somewhere and the little ones could look for it?

Because Easter is the ultimate celebration, we omit the Confession and get right down to the business of praising God. **Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! Alleluia!**

Gathering Song *Jesus Christ is Risen Today* LBW 151, ELW 365

Prayer of the Day: God of mercy, we no longer look for Jesus among the dead, for he is alive and has become the Lord of life. As we are surrounded by turmoil and the threat of death, increase in our minds and hearts the risen life we share with Christ, and help us to grow as your people toward the fullness of eternal life with you, through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

A reading from Isaiah (see The Scriptures page 1)

A reading from the Psalms (see The Scriptures page 1)

Gospel Matthew 28:1-10 (see The Scriptures page 2)

Sermon (see attached)

Sermon Song *Thine Is the Glory* LBW 145, ELW 376

Apostle's Creed (see The Scriptures page 2)

Prayers (see attached)

Offering song *Christ Is Alive! Let Christians* (1,5) LBW 363, ELW 389

Sending Song *Come You Faithful, Raise the Strain* LBW 132, ELW 363

The Scriptures for Easter Day, 2020

A reading from Isaiah, the 25th chapter: (25:6-9, NRSV)

On this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples (gentiles as well as Jews) a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines, of rich food filled with marrow, of well-aged wines strained clear.

And he will destroy on this mountain the shroud that is cast over all peoples, the sheet that is spread over all nations (again, peoples and nations, when plural, mean gentiles); he will swallow up death forever. (the shroud or sheet is the linen cloth that is spread over a dead body)

Then the Lord God will wipe away the tears from all faces, and the disgrace of his people he will take away from all the earth, for the Lord has spoken. *(the "disgrace" of being ruled by foreigners, in this case the Assyrians)*

It will be said on that day, Lo, this is our God; we have waited for him, so that he might save us. This is the Lord for whom we have waited; let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation.

Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! Alleluia!

A reading, Psalm 30 (TNIV)

- *I will exalt you, Lord, for you lifted me out of the depths and did not let my enemies gloat over me.*
- *Lord my God, I called to you for help, and you healed me.*
- *You, Lord, brought me up from the realm of the dead; you spared me from going down to the pit.*
- *Sing the praises of the Lord, you his faithful people; praise his holy name.*
- *For his anger lasts only a moment, but his favor lasts for a lifetime; weeping may spend the night, but joy comes in the morning.*
- *When I felt secure, I said, "I will never be shaken."*
- *Lord, when you favored me, you made my royal mountain stand firm; but when you hid your face, I was dismayed.*
- *To you, Lord, I called; to the Lord I cried for mercy:*
- *"What is gained if I am silenced, if I go down to the pit? Will the dust praise you? Will it proclaim your faithfulness?"*
- *Hear, Lord, and be merciful to me; Lord, be my help.*
- *You turned my wailing into dancing; you removed my sackcloth and clothed me with joy,*
- *That my heart may sing your praises and not be silent. Lord my God, I will praise you forever.*

The Holy Gospel according to Matthew, the 28th chapter:

Glory to you, O Lord!

*After the sabbath, as the first day of the week was dawning, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb. And suddenly **there was a great earthquake**; for an angel of the Lord, descending from heaven, came and rolled back the stone and sat on it. His appearance was like lightning, and his clothing white as snow. For fear of him **the guards shook and became like dead men**. But the angel said to the women, "**Do not be afraid**; I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. He is not here; for **he has been raised, as he said**. Come, see the place where he lay. Then go quickly and tell his disciples, 'He has been raised from the dead, and indeed **he is going ahead of you** to Galilee; there you will see him.' This is my message for you." So they left the tomb quickly **with fear and great joy, and ran to tell his disciples**. Suddenly Jesus met them and said, "Greetings!" And they came to him, took hold of his feet, and worshiped him. Then Jesus said to them, "**Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me.**"*

This is the Gospel of the Lord.

Praise to you, O Christ!

Creed: God has made us his people through our baptism into Christ.
Living together in trust and hope, we confess our faith:

I believe in God, the Father almighty, creator of heaven and earth.

I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord, who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried. He descended to the dead. On the third day he rose again; he ascended into heaven, he is seated at the right hand of the Father, and he will come to judge the living and the dead.

I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting. Amen.

Easter Sermon, 2020 (Mt 26:1-10; Ps 30; Is 25:6-9)

Christ is risen! **He is risen indeed! Alleluia!**

Look back at the printed gospel on page 2 of the scriptures. The words printed in bold invite us to consider the *context* (my favorite sermon word!) of today's text.

And suddenly there was a great earthquake. It often surprises me to see these words in the Easter gospel, though I don't have any trouble remembering there's an earthquake right after Jesus dies on Friday. Earthquakes in the Holy Land in Bible times were about as common as they are in California nowadays, causing some damage but not devastating.

But when such an event is written in scripture, it calls our attention to what God is doing at that time, in that place. During Friday's earthquake "the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom." When this happened, there was no longer anything separating the faithful worshipers of God from his holy presence. (That "curtain of the temple" had sealed off the "holy of holies," the inner sanctum where only the High Priest could go, and that only once a year, on Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement.) Now all God's people could see God face to face, and live!

The guards shook and became like dead men. This is a reference to a dialogue between Pilate and the chief priests and Pharisees on what we would call *Holy Saturday*, the *sabbath*. They told Pilate, "Sir, we remember what that imposter said while he was still alive, 'After three days I will rise again.' Therefore command the tomb to be made secure until the third day; or else his disciples may go and steal him away, and tell the people, 'he has been raised from the dead.' The last deception would be worse than the first." Pilate said to them, "You have a guard of soldiers; go, make it as secure as you can." So they went with the guard and made the tomb secure by sealing the stone (Matthew 27:57-66).

Do not be afraid, the angel said to Mary Magdalene and the other Mary. How many times has God spoken those words to his people in both the Hebrew and the Christian scriptures? **Fear not! Have no fear!** If you were to be addressed by an “angel” today—a being you knew was of God—would you be afraid? Part of the faith and trust we have in God is recognizing that when he is present with us (which is all the time! Remember Jesus, Emmanu-el, God-with-us)—when he’s present with us we really need have no fear!

He has been raised, as he said, the angel told the women. When Jesus made a promise, he kept it—he *keeps* it! All the words he spoke to establish his God-hood, all the *I AMs*, were and are true, and today, Easter, is the day to *celebrate* them. Read them again, and remember what they mean to us as Christians today:

I am the bread of life.

I am the living bread that came down from heaven.

I am the light of the world.

I am the gate for the sheep.

I am the good shepherd.

I am the resurrection and the life.

I am the way, and the truth, and the life.

I am the vine.

I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end.

(When God first spoke to Moses out of the burning bush and told him to go to Pharaoh and say, “Let my people go,” Moses asked God, “What if he asks who sent me? What shall I say?” God’s answer is not spoken in Hebrew, but is translated as “I AM.” “Tell them that “I AM” sent you.” Faithful Jews in Bible times believed God’s name was so holy they wouldn’t dare speak it, so when they needed to refer to God, they used the word LORD.)

Those first four bold-print phrases are background for the last three; and the last three are the ones that should govern our lives.

He is going ahead of you, the angel said, implying that the women should follow after. And he is going ahead of *us*, ahead of *you and me, and all who claim to follow Jesus*. This is what he was born for. This is what he died for. This is why *on the third day he rose again*—words we say in the Creed every time we worship together.

He is going ahead of us, to God, his Father and ours. He sent the Holy Spirit to be our present-life companion, so we could be reminded of all he taught us (John 14:26). So we would remember how to live the love he commanded his disciples at his Last Supper: *Love one another as I have loved you* (John 13:34).

With fear and great joy, they ran to tell his disciples, Matthew tells us. One joke we learned in seminary was that the first disciples must have been Lutheran, because Mark's gospel ends with the women "fleeing from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them, and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid" (Mark 16:8).

But we know better now! *We* have been commanded by an angel of God to "go quickly and tell his disciples, 'He has been raised from the dead, and he is going ahead of you.'"

Whom shall we tell? How shall we convince them that Jesus, who died and was raised to new life, died for *them*? A modern Christian proverb says, "Your life may be the only Bible some people ever read."

When this time of staying safer-at-home has passed, when we're no longer required to shelter-in-place in order to protect others from the deadly coronavirus, *that* would be a good time to invite your family, friends, and neighbors to join us for worship. Our first Sunday together will be a celebration of Easter, of the resurrection of our Lord from the dead.

The *Alleluia* will be unburied, the sanctuary decorated with flowers (but probably not with lilies), and we can sing all the most beloved hymns of Easter.

We'll receive again the long-missed body and blood of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, who died to save *us* from eternal death, who loves us with an everlasting love.

Read again the words of Psalm 30: **I will exalt you, Lord, for you lifted me out of the depths. . . . Lord my God, I called to you for help, and you healed me. You, Lord, brought me up from the realm of the dead; you spared me from going down to the pit. Sing the praises of the Lord, you his faithful people; praise his holy name. For his anger lasts only a moment, but his favor lasts for a lifetime; weeping may spend the night, but joy comes in the morning. . . . You turned my wailing into dancing; you put off my sackcloth and clothed me with joy, that my heart may sing your praises and not be silent. Lord my God, I will praise you forever!**

Amen and Amen!

Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! Alleluia!



Prayers of Intercession

Uplifted by the promised hope of healing and resurrection, we join the people of God in all times and places in praying for the church, the world, and all who are in need.

God of resurrection, from the very beginning you give the promise of your love for all creation. And all your creation praises you: the earth hums, the seas pulse, the stars shine, and the galaxies whirl in glorious harmonies to honor you. Let us hear, and blend our voices in the song. Lord, in your mercy, **Hear our prayer.**

The countries of the world experience disunity and conflict; we set our minds on fear and greed rather than on your rule of justice and steadfast love. Raise up leaders, world-wide and in communities, who will seek to follow your will and your way. Lord, in your mercy, **Hear our prayer.**

We weep with those who weep, and mourn with those who mourn. Cradle the fearful, the suffering, and the dying, assuring them of your loving presence. We know the coronavirus is not of you and will not defeat your mercy and grace. Protect your children from illness, those who suffer from it and those who care for them. Lord, in your mercy, **Hear our prayer.**

The buildings we call “churches” are empty today, but we have no fear. . . so is the tomb! Help us remember that *we* are the church, the body of Christ, the fellowship (even distanced) of believers, the communion of saints. *Nothing* can separate us from you, for you are King of Kings, Lord of Lords, and Everlasting God, and you have given yourself freely for our sake. Lord, in your mercy, **Hear our prayer.**

Risen Lord, you went ahead of us into the grave and defeated the powers of evil. We remember those who have died, whose absence grieves our hearts. Inspire us to live our lives in this resurrection hope, and draw us to you in our final days. Lord, in your mercy, **Hear our prayer.**

With bold confidence in your love, almighty God, we place all for whom we pray into your eternal care; through Jesus Christ, our risen Lord. **Amen.**

Hymns

Jesus Christ Is Risen Today (LBS 151, ELW 365) *Gathering song*

Jesus Christ is ris'n today, Al-le-lu-ia! Our triumphant holy day, Al-le-lu-ia!
Who did once upon the cross, Al-le-lu-ia! Suffer to redeem our loss. Al-le-lu-ia!

Hymns of praise then let us sing, Alleluia! Unto Christ, our heav'nly king, Alleluia!
Who endured the cross and grave, Alleluia! Sinners to redeem and save. Alleluia!

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!
Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. Alleluia!

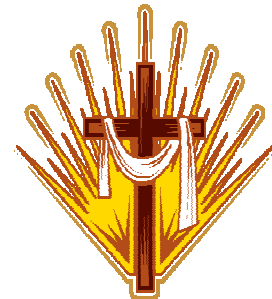
Thine is the Glory (LBW 145, ELW 376) *Sermon song*

Thine is the glory, risen, conquering Son;
 endless is the victory thou o'er death hast won.
Angels in bright raiment rolled the stone away,
 Kept the folded grave-clothes where thy body lay.

Refrain: Thine is the glory, risen, conquering Son;
 endless is the victory thou o'er death hast won.

Lo, Jesus meets thee, risen from the tomb!
 Lovingly he greets thee, scatters fear and gloom;
Let his Church with gladness hymns of triumph sing,
 For the Lord now liveth; death hath lost its sting! *Refrain*

No more we doubt thee, glorious Prince of life;
 Life is nought without thee; aid us in our strife;
Make us more than conquerors, through thy deathless love;
 Bring us safe through Jordan to thy home above. *Refrain*



Christ Is Alive! Let Christians Sing (LBW 363, ELW 389) *Offering song*

Christ is alive! Let Christians sing. His cross stands empty to the sky.
Let streets and home with praises ring in death his love shall never die.

Christ is alive! Ascended Lord—He rules the world his Father made,
Till, in the end, his love adored shall be to all on earth displayed

Sending Song

Come, You Faithful, Raise the Strain

1 Come, you faith - ful, raise the strain Of tri - um - phant glad - ness!
2 'Tis the spring of souls to - day: Christ has burst his pris - on,
3 Now the queen of sea - sons, bright With the day of splen - dor,
4 For to - day a - mong the twelve Christ ap - peared, be - stow - ing

God has brought his Is - ra - el In - to joy from sad - ness,
And from three days' sleep in death As a sun has ris - en;
With the roy - al feast of feasts Comes its joy to ren - der;
His deep peace, which ev - er - more Pass - es hu - man know - ing.

Loosed from Pha-raoh's bit - ter yoke Ja - cob's sons and daugh - ters,
All the win - ter of our sins, Long and dark, is fly - ing
Comes to glad - den faith - ful hearts Which with true af - fec - tion
Nei - ther could the gates of death, Nor the tomb's dark por - tal,

Led them with un - moist - ened foot Through the Red Sea wa - ters.
From his light, to whom is giv'n Laud and praise un - dy - ing,
Wel - come in un - wea - ried strain Je - sus' res - ur - rec - tion!
Nor the watch - ers, nor the seal, Hold him as a mor - tal.

