

It should come as no surprise that each congregation has its own traditions when it comes to worship – especially worship on Easter Sunday. For many of us, a full sanctuary decorated with Easter lilies is the minimum. Others have bright, clear trumpets providing an extra flair to the hymns. Several congregations gather early for Easter breakfast (usually cooked by the youth) complete with hot cross buns. Often this is the day that the veil comes off the cross, an Easter cross (a cross covered with flowers) is set up, and the “Hallelujah’s” are brought back out. It’s rare, but some congregations still have a tradition of gathering for a sunrise worship service, mimicking that early morning trek to the tomb that the two Mary’s made in our gospel reading. These traditions are all filled with meaning, symbolism, and nostalgia for most of us. These are the ways that we are most easily able to celebrate Christ’s resurrection and the profound way through which God brings life into the world.

Which makes our situation this year even more difficult. No congregations gathering together for worship. No decorations. No flowers. No special music or shared meals.

Beyond the church service, this also means that families and friends can’t gather. No traditional meal with a full house. No travel to see relatives. No Easter eggs or baskets for the grandchildren.

And I wonder if all of those things contribute to us feeling as though we’re unable to really see or celebrate resurrection and new life today. In some ways, the absence of these things might keep us stuck at Good Friday, thinking about what we have lost. They keep us thinking about death.

Because, when we lose those things that have been a normal part of how we live for so long, it does actually feel as though something is dying. Missing those key elements of our celebration – especially within our liturgical traditions – can feel as though we are losing something forever.

These can feel like death.

There are even more profound ways that we have been experiencing death lately. Because of our need to self-isolate and physically distance from one another, we are cut off from others in a way that we have never experienced before. Yes, we have technology and other ways of connecting virtually, but these aren't the same as meeting in person, sharing a hug or handshake, or catching up over a cup of coffee. Even our most introverted people must be missing human contact.

I know that there are people who have not been able to be with loved ones after a death in the family. Others have been unable to visit family in care homes or hospital. We have all had our routines disrupted and the things most meaningful to us are inaccessible.

People are losing jobs and worrying about survival. The help we rely on for our ongoing journeys through addictions, disease, mental health, and other concerns is almost impossible to access.

Each day the news brings us grim projections about what this pandemic will do to our communities, our country, and around the world. Every time we think that things will get back to normal, a deadline is extended; new measures put in place; more restrictions on where we can go and what we can do.

These, too, can feel like death.

But... As Christians in the Lutheran tradition, we believe that God acts most powerfully and most visibly in death.

The cross of Good Friday is the place where God's work of salvation, forgiveness, hope and life come to us. The cross – the place we normally associate with death – is the place where death is actually defeated. The tomb is the place where God buries our sin and hopelessness.

So while our fear and uncertainty in the face of the death we are surrounded with is real to us, we also need to remember that God has already brought us to new life. While we worry about what

to do next, God has already done it, and moved us to life again. The mystery of our faith is that Christ *has* died, Christ *is* risen, and Christ *will come* again.

Today, we are living in the present of Christ's rising. The resurrection that we celebrate today starts our new life in light of what God has already done at the cross. "Christ *is* risen" is a promise of the ongoing reality that Christ is alive here and now with us. Even when we are physically separated, Christ is here and Christ is alive.

Christ's resurrection gives us hope that in our sickness, we have a healer. In our loneliness, we have a friend. In our stress, we have calm. In our death, we have life.

But resurrection life isn't just the same old life.

Following Jesus in a resurrected life means living in a new way. It means taking seriously that God has made a new creation through Jesus and through the cross. It means living our lives knowing that God has already forgiven us and already showered us with grace. It is a call to living in a way that shows God's gift of new life to everyone around us. Jesus didn't die on a cross with the hope that we would be passive recipients of God's grace. Jesus meant for all of us to live a resurrection life.

A resurrection life means forgiving others in the same way that God has forgiven us. It means letting go of grudges and being reconciled to the people with whom our relationships are damaged. It means actively doing what we can to maintain community and connection as we support each other through difficult times.

A resurrection life means loving strangers and people who are different from us in the same way that God first loved us. It's a life where we care less about 'fair' than we care about 'just'. It means

making decisions that are good for all of God's people, not just good for us. Resurrection life is serving, not being served.

Bishop Sani Ibrahim Azar from the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan and the Holy Land says that faithful living in this time means that we will encounter Jesus in places where we don't expect to find him. He says that in the light of Easter, **"...we must look with Resurrection eyes. With Resurrection eyes, we can see that the Risen Christ is with us, wherever we are. With resurrection eyes, we can see that even if we can only gather in small numbers to celebrate, this is how it was when Jesus arose from the tomb. There were just a few women there to witness the miracle! And yet because of them, the Good News has traveled throughout time and across the world to reach us today."**

Throughout the season of Easter we are going to hear gospel stories about the things Jesus said and did as part of his resurrection life. We are going to learn what it means to look at the world through 'resurrection eyes.' We are going to hear Jesus' final instructions to the disciples, and we're going to hear how he ministered to the people around him with the time he had left.

In those stories, we will hear God's call for us to live in the gift of an empty cross, the hope of an empty tomb, and a life lived in new ways because Jesus lives.

I don't know what the next weeks and months will bring for us and for our congregations. I hope that we will be able to gather together before too long. But whatever our lives look like, I know that God is speaking to us, caring for us, and offering us hope and new life through the cross and empty tomb of Christ.

Blessings to you all this Easter, in the name of the one who gives us new life each day, Jesus Christ.