

Easter 1

Easter Two, Gospel of John
Bishop Deborah Hutterer

Christ is risen! He is risen, indeed! Alleluia!

Each year on the eve of my children's birthday I call and recount in detail their birth story. When they were younger, they liked the story. For quite a few years, they rolled their eyes. But now, I believe they like to hear their story. We are story people. We like to listen to stories. We like to tell them. When you tell your story, there are places that it connects with my own life story and reminds me of people and experiences. Stories help us create meaning out of life, in the good and painful times. We tell stories so that we might laugh at ourselves. We tell stories to give us courage and make us brave. We tell stories to give us hope. That is what the Bible is full of—stories of God and God's people—stories that remind us of who we are, who we belong to and stories that sustain the gift of faith.

I don't know if there is a more perfect time for this gospel story.

Each Gospel writer has his own version of the resurrection. It is evening, that same day the disciples were in a room with the doors locked for fear of the Jews when Jesus came and stood among them. His first words were "Peace be with you." It's hard to imagine how happy they were. Jesus showed them his hands and side where he had been pierced and Jesus said again, Peace be with you. Then he told them, as he had told Mary that her mission was now to tell others about Jesus so that they might believe and have new life.

Thomas was not there and without seeing for himself could not believe. And when Jesus comes back a week later and offers Thomas the chance to put his fingers and hands on the resurrected Jesus, he has only to see him and responds: "My Lord and my God!" And Jesus responds, "Blessed are those who believe and have not yet seen."

We understand fear all too well. It's always been something or someone to fear as individuals. But this year, we are behind locked doors for fear of spreading or

catching the COVID virus. We watch with fear about the numbers of deaths and available medical equipment. We fear for our jobs and the future of our economy. Fear paralyzes and keeps us locked up, inside.

And we, like those first disciples wonder if Jesus is really present.

There's one thing that seems to be consistent in the post-resurrection stories – there is some kind of honest doubt. Some hesitancy to believe, even when hearing the testimonies of trusted friends. Even with the risen Christ stands right there in front of them. This should be a comfort to us. And maybe it can be the time when we confess our doubts, our struggles to believe.

The third article of both the Apostle's and Nicene Creed speaks to the gift of faith. Two of the Holy Spirit's works are to bring faith and keep us in faith.

It is the gift of faith from the Holy Spirit, the Comforter, the Advocate that Jesus sent. The Holy Spirit allows us to believe these stories are for us and strengthen us for the work. The gift of the Holy Spirit gives us boldness to testify to places where we have seen the risen Christ.

Into their fear Jesus breathes on the disciples the gift of the Holy Spirit AND Jesus gives the gift of peace. The familiar words that we exchange in worship—the same words we offer to each other—peace be with you. This peace is not just the absence of war or some type of silence. The peace that Jesus gives offer fullness of life, wellbeing. Peace that leans into the anxiety and fear so that they do not have no hold over us. Not just a gift for us, but a gift for all people.

The Gospel lesson concludes with why John captured and recorded these stories: Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God and that through believing you might have life in his name.”

The gift to believe brings life. The two are inextricably linked. The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King wrote: Science investigates; religion interprets. Science give

knowledge, which is power religion gives wisdom, which is control. Science deals with facts; religion deals with values. The two are not rivals.”

In this time of COVID-19 we are grateful for the people in science and medicine as well as those who support them. They give us physical well being. Those men and women give directives and guidance that all may have life.

And yet, we know that not all people know this fullness of life. It’s been said that the poor and vulnerable among us—the homeless, those in nursing homes, the undocumented workers, refugees will be most affected. They do not have access to some of the most basic needs. But God meant these gifts for all people.

As people claimed by Jesus, believing and having life guides the way we live—our values. Values that call us to care for our neighbor.

I was forwarded an email warning from one of my ecumenical colleagues that said, if you get an email that begins with: Knock. Knock. Don’t open it. It’s a Jehovah’s Witness working from home!

For Lutheran Christians who happen to be shy about sharing our faith, our brothers and sisters model for us. We are called to witness to God’s love for the world through our actions and through our words so that WE might also have life.

You witness to life as you try to understand new technology with computers and tablets and ipads to connect with your church and neighborhood. You witness to life as you become the teachers for children in your home. You witness to life by making and wearing face masks, delivering food, checking in on those who are near and those who are miles away. You witness to life as you share your financial resources with your church and with the GCS and we do ministry in our neighborhoods and the wider world. Ministries like World Hunger, Lutheran Disaster Response and Lutheran World Relief can continue to support those near and far who do not readily see, and yet God wants real and abundant life for them too. God uses us and those gifts we’ve been given to be a blessing.

We bring life by telling our resurrection stories. The stories where God has brought new life to you.

In these days of being surrounded by the grim and very real stories of COVID-19, and the regular day to day life of family and friends battling cancer or depression or addictions—just regular places of brokenness and loss, we need a resurrection stories to remind us that fear and anxiety and death do not win.

We are Easter people who believe in radical grace.

The risen Christ comes to us today breathing on us the new life that empowers our doing and our telling.

This breath of Jesus gives us the same peace he gave the first disciples— the peace that passes all understanding that guards our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.

Christ is risen! Christ is risen indeed! Alleluia!