

“EASTER IS NOT CANCELED!”

Matthew 17:22-23; 27:57 – 28:10

A Sermon by John Thomason

Woodbury UMC

April 12, 2020 (Easter Sunday)

Next Saturday, six days after Easter, I was supposed to be in the state of Delaware to officiate at the wedding of my daughter Kate’s close friend, Joni, and her fiancé, Rob. Only a month ago I received a beautiful wedding invitation in the mail, just as I was preparing to drive to Brooklyn to have a marriage preparation session with the happy couple. Well, you can already guess what happened to those best-laid plans. The Coronavirus outbreak called for social distancing even from cherished friends, as well as the postponement of public events – even joyous family events. I did not meet with Joni and Rob back in March, and they will not have their wedding this April.

This was one of the first times I realized that the current pandemic is not only affecting those who are ill and incapacitated; it is also affecting those who are physically well and active. The postponement of Joni and Rob’s wedding is just one example of the billions of disruptions that people are experiencing all around the world. And it’s not just our daily routines that are being altered; it’s also the special occasions, the once-in-a-lifetime happenings in our lives that are being impacted.

The impact is occurring in two ways. Some major events have been postponed to a future date; others have been canceled altogether. In the world of sports, the Master’s golf tournament has been postponed; the British Open has been canceled. The start of the Major League Baseball season has been postponed; the end of the college basketball season has been canceled. Much closer to home, some of you have experienced both kinds of interruption – first, the postponement and then the cancellation of much-anticipated events like school musicals and ballet performances.

To add to this drama, the fate of some events is still uncertain. What about senior proms, commencement exercises, and summer sports leagues? What about election primaries and party conventions? Will they be postponed, canceled, or take place in a different format? And, most poignant of all, what about funerals and memorial services, which are public occasions for honoring the dead and comforting the bereaved? Will they happen immediately with only a handful of mourners, or be postponed until a time when more people can participate, or not happen at all? The point is, these are all activities that we care about, activities that matter to us; and whether we have to postpone them or cancel them, we miss them and grieve the loss of them, at least for the time being and perhaps forever. I sometimes think to myself, if I hear of one other special event that gets postponed or canceled, causing disappointment and pain to someone like my daughter’s friend Joni, I’m going to scream!

Which brings us to the special, one-of-a-kind event on our calendars we call Easter. Last week, my 92-year old mother, God bless her, forwarded to me a text message she had just received from her accountant. Surprisingly, it was not a statement about what my mom owes on her income tax! Rather, it was the photo of a poster like you might see hanging on the wall of a church office. The poster read: “With all the closings and cancellations, I have some GOOD

NEWS! – Easter is NOT canceled! Christ is still risen!” Given the current state of our world, I’ve thought about that message long and hard.

Easter, like Christmas, is both a cultural event and a religious event. My sense is that this year’s cultural observance of Easter may be somewhat restrained, but it has certainly not been canceled. My 4-year old grandson occasionally gets cabin fever while he is sheltering in my home, so I took him out for a drive this past Thursday. Our goal was to spot animals in the fields here in our area, so we started at the Highwire Deer and Animal Farm on the east side of Woodbury. Well, it was too early in the season to see many animals; but on the lawn of a house just across the street from the farm, we saw Easter eggs hanging from the branches of a tree like Christmas lights. It was a welcome sign that Easter is not canceled.

That same day, the Republican-American carried a feature article entitled “Easter joy to arrive; [the] only change will be how.” The article reported that the Easter Bunny would leave the Watertown Fire Department on Saturday and visit Watertown and Oakville neighborhoods to wave at residents from a safe distance. In Naugatuck, a children’s organization is sponsoring a “Window Easter Egg Hunt,” where residents are invited to display Easter eggs in their front windows for passersby to see and enjoy. In Waterbury, a bakery is offering do-it-yourself kits for making Easter cupcakes and cookies at home. All of these happenings demonstrate that this year’s cultural observance of Easter is not canceled; it’s just different.

For similar reasons, this is also true of our religious observance of Easter. We’re celebrating Easter today in a way that is not only unusual but unthinkable. I’m preaching to a nearly empty sanctuary that would normally be filled to the brim; you’re watching and listening in the quiet shelter of your own homes. As painful as it may be, our Easter gathering is not going to happen; but at the same time, our Easter observance is going on as scheduled; and this is because of the message announced by the poster my mom shared with me: “With all the closings and cancellations, I have some GOOD NEWS! – Easter is NOT canceled! Christ is still risen!”

Now, I would hasten to add that not all people would agree with that cheery message. Some folks have struck Easter from their calendars and have serious doubts about a risen Christ – especially at a time when disease and death dominate the headlines. The truth is that Easter has always had its skeptics, its naysayers, its opponents – dating all the way back to the first Easter. In looking again this past week at the story of Jesus’ Passion, I noticed that there are two men in this story who make a concerted effort to cancel Easter – to make sure it never happens, to deny its truth.

Before I identify these two men, I’ll offer a little background. At the mid-point of his earthly ministry, Jesus announces to his disciples that “the Son of Man will be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him, and on the third day he will be raised” (Matthew 17:22). Jesus is referring, of course, to himself, to his own destiny. In fact, not once, not twice, but three times he predicts his suffering, death, and resurrection. The disciples don’t like what they hear from Jesus, and they tell him so. It’s inconceivable to them that their superhero Messiah could die a dishonorable death; so why would a resurrection, if there is such a thing, even be necessary? For the disciples, Jesus’ words go in one ear and out the other.

Ironically, the religious authorities are better listeners than the disciples. They overhear Jesus predicting his resurrection and file it away for future reference. Sure enough, after Jesus is crucified and buried, the chief priests and the Pharisees go to Pilate and tell him what Jesus had said: “After three days I will rise again.” They are concerned that the disciples will steal Jesus’ body and make false claims that he has been raised from the dead. So they ask Pilate to command the guards to seal the tomb.

For his own part, Pilate doesn’t want any more trouble from Jesus’ followers, and he may even be a bit spooked by Jesus himself. During his trial, Jesus proves to be an elusive witness, a mystery man, someone who is difficult to nail down. Perhaps Pilate is worried that not even the nails of the cross can nail Jesus down. In any case, Pilate does exactly as the Jewish leaders ask. Better to play it safe: Easter was clearly on Jesus’ calendar; and it may still be on his disciples’ calendar; so Pilate makes sure to cancel Easter before it happens. Seal the tomb! Don’t let the dead man out! Over the centuries, others have tried to cancel Easter for a similar reason: they know that if Christ truly lives again, he will challenge their status quo, and their lives will never be the same.

The second person who tries to cancel Easter does it in a very different way – a way you and I more easily identify with. As it turns out, it is the disciple Judas Iscariot who betrays Jesus into human hands. But then, after seeing Jesus condemned to death, Judas tries to undo the damage he has done by returning the profit he makes from his act of treachery. The chief priests and elders could care less about Judas’ change of heart and resolve all the more to execute Jesus. Judas is so remorseful that he throws down the thirty pieces of silver, flees from the scene, and, in the ultimate act of hopelessness, hangs himself.

Do you see how Judas, too, tries to cancel Easter before it happens? The ultimate tragedy of Judas’ life is not his betrayal of Jesus; it’s that he does not hold on until Sunday to see what God would do with his betrayal and despair. How tragic it is that Judas isn’t at the tomb on Easter morning to see that there is forgiveness even for his sin and relief even from his despair.

Friends, we have been going through a very tough stretch, so I am not being facetious when I ask you: have you been tempted to cancel Easter this year? Are you stuck in the darkness of Good Friday? Have there been moments when you surrendered to despair? Have you come close to giving up on yourself or on the grim circumstances you’re living in? Have you even been tempted to give up on God?

Some of you may have read the famous sermon and book by Tony Campolo that was the inspiration for a song by the same title: “It’s Friday, but Sunday’s coming.” This is the essence of the Easter hope. Whether we’re in the midst of a global pandemic or our own personal tragedies, it feels as if Good Friday will last forever, as if Easter has been erased from the calendar. But as the poster says, “Easter is not canceled! Christ is still risen!”

What this means for us at a personal level is that our despair is always premature and our hope is never in vain. However, Easter provides a reality check on this delicate thing called hope. Easter asks us, in what or in whom do we place our hope? For some, Easter is nothing more than a sign of springtime renewal – the advent of warmer weather; the appearance of crocuses, daffodils and forsythia blossoms. For others, Easter is just a symbol of our human

instinct to be hopeful – you know: times are tough, but “this too shall pass”; cures are eventually found for dreaded diseases; good finally wins out over evil.

But you and I need to be very clear about this: Easter is not a celebration of human hope; it is a celebration of divine power, which is the only firm foundation for our hope. In times like these, it’s natural for us to place our hope in doctors and hospitals, treatments and cures; it’s natural to hope for good health, steady employment, and financial stability. But these kinds of hopes always prove to be fragile, and they are never fully realized. Christian hope is grounded in something outside our own feelings and strivings. Hope comes to us as a gift from beyond; it is created by an act of God. Our hope is based on the conviction that this one man, Jesus, is risen from the dead, which is a complete game-changer for all humanity. Because of Easter, we affirm that Jesus Christ is Lord, that God intends to bring all things under God’s dominion, that life will triumph over death, and that ultimately God’s purposes for the world will not be defeated.

A pandemic doesn’t change any of this; nor does any failure or defeat in our personal lives. No catastrophe can cancel Easter; no person can cancel Easter. Pilate tries, but the sealed tomb cannot hold the risen Jesus. Judas tries, but Jesus offers forgiveness and hope to the worst of scoundrels. You and I may try to cancel Easter, too; but we won’t succeed, because Jesus is in charge of our calendars and our destinies. Try as we may to do away with Easter, Easter will not go away, and you and I will just have to learn to deal with it.

“I’m cancer free,” the woman said. “Wonderful!” her pastor replied. Having stood by her through months of difficult treatments, the pastor was delighted to be there to celebrate with her. The one who was once considered terminally ill had been fully restored to health. “Yes, wonderful,” she said, “but also a bit disconcerting.” “Why do you say it’s disconcerting?” the pastor asked. “Well,” she said, “I took the doctors at their word. They said I was terminal, that there was little chance that the therapy would be successful. So I planned to live for about a year and then die. That was what they told me to expect. Now, to be told that I have many more years to live, that I have a future – well, it’s just a bit disconcerting. I’ve got to go ahead and live despite my plans to die!”

Has it ever occurred to you that one reason why people find the resurrection so difficult to believe is that it is so challenging, so demanding? Easter not only gives answers about the future; it also raises questions about the future. Since you and I now know that Easter is not canceled, what are we going to do with the rest of our lives?