



OFFICE OF THE BISHOP
NEW JERSEY SYNOD
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
God's work. Our hands.
1930 Highway 33, Hamilton Square, NJ 08690

April 7, 2020

Matthew 28:1-10

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." (NRSV)

Dear Friends,

The Easter story from Matthew's Gospel makes one thing perfectly clear – when our lives are turned upside down by unexpected events, we don't need to be afraid! Twice in this short passage, we hear the words, "Do not be afraid" – first from the angel and then from Jesus' own lips. These words are said not so much as a command but rather as an assurance. There is no need to be afraid because God is still present with us. In these days of fear and anxiety, when everything is turned upside down in our lives, it is certainly the gospel word we need to hear.

For a bit over a year, I have had an app on my phone called, "WeCroak". The purpose of this app is to remind me of my mortality. It does that by randomly displaying the message Reminder: Don't forget, you're going to die five times each day. If the sound is turned on on my phone, this reminder is accompanied by a tone to get my attention. If not, my phone lights up with these words to get my attention. Then I can click on the app to read a quote about death and life. There is nothing particularly religious about this app; in fact, most of the quotes are less than satisfying.

In normal times, this app helps me to stop and consider that this life is not all there is. Sometimes that reminder keeps me grounded and relieves the pressure of making every decision a cosmic one. Sometimes that reminder causes me to stop and give thanks for the task or people at hand. We are not, however, in normal times. In fact, we are reminded far too often these days of our own mortality – in daily news briefings, on COVID-19 websites, with a phone call from a loved one.

So, you might ask, have I deleted the "WeCroak" app from my phone? No, I haven't. But my reactions to its daily reminders have changed. In these weeks of our coronavirus Lent, as I anticipate Easter, whenever I see Reminder: Don't forget, you're going to die pop up on my phone, I say – Yes,

I am. But I'm not afraid because with Christ, I will live! It has become an occasion to proclaim the Easter message.

This Easter will seem upside down to many of us. We will not be gathering in person for worship: smelling the spring flowers adorning our worship space, hearing timpani or brass introducing our processional song, shouting "Alleluia" with our fellow worshipers, receiving Holy Communion, listening to our pastor proclaim the living word of life, or greeting new faces of those attending for the first time. Instead, we will be at home, perhaps watching or listening to worship online. Or maybe reading the Easter gospel with our household and praying together for an end to this pandemic. Or maybe listening to the gospel proclaimed in music by a favorite choir on the radio. Whatever ways we observe this Easter Sunday, it will seem upside down to us.

And that's the point – Easter is the day when what we thought we knew to be true – especially about death -- is upended. It's the day when God makes clear that death is not the last word. It's the day we are reminded not to be afraid because Jesus keeps promises and in fact, goes on ahead of us to meet us on the road. It's the day we rejoice in life – even when there are reminders of death all around us.

So put on your Easter finest and prepare to worship – wherever you are. Throw open your front door and remind the neighborhood: Alleluia! Christ is Risen! Christ is Risen, indeed! Alleluia!

Serving Christ with you,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Tracie L. Bartholomew".

Bishop Tracie L. Bartholomew