

"Easter Triumph"

Grace, mercy, and peace be to all of you, wherever you may be. A very happy, blessed Easter to each of you. But this is an Easter so unlike any other Easter we've ever experienced, or even imagined. The pews are empty. The parking lot is bare. There are no lilies, no choirs, no praise team, no handbells, no brass ensemble, and no Easter breakfast to snack on. For me, for Pastor Lew -- for you, too, I'm sure -- this is an Easter like no other.

Yet it is Easter! It is still the Lord's day! And this resurrection day has powerful meaning, has real-life value for all the days of our lives, especially these uncertain, fearful days we're living in right now.

You know, every year, on the days before Easter, I watch the weather reports like a hawk. "What's the weather going to be at 6:30 on Easter morning?" I want to know. Because my favorite part of Easter is the outdoor Sunrise Service we normally have here at Hope. Are we going to see the sunrise? Is it going to be raining? Are we going to freeze out there? I'm always checking the weather report for Easter morning.

I don't really know why, though. We always have our service, regardless of the weather. Some years we get to watch the beautiful sun rays peeking through the trees to the east. Some years all we see is clouds. But here's the thing. Whether we see the sunrise, or whether the weather gets in the way, or whether a virus keeps us from getting together on Easter, the sun still comes up every morning, does it not? Clouds may obscure it, but God makes the sun rise every single day, as he keeps planet Earth spinning around.

In our minds and hearts, this day -- this Easter -- may seem like one of those gloomy, bad-weather days. But the sun still rose today, didn't it? And the Son of God rose from the dead on this very day, didn't he? And the message of Easter, the triumph of Easter, the earth-shaking, life-changing energy of Easter, is exactly the same as it's always been.

You know, when we think about it, this isn't the first Easter on which the people of God couldn't be together. There have been times of plague before in human history, or times of war, when churches couldn't open on Easter. Not in my lifetime, and not likely in your experience. But the world gets in the way sometimes. The people of God have had to endure many fiery persecutions, many fierce trials. And now we're enduring, too.

I'm not suggesting it should be easy, or we should be smiling about it all. Our lives are turned upside down. We're cooped up. We're isolated. We're scared. We're trying to keep the faith, but these are tremendously frightening times. This Easter seems to us to be an Easter unlike any other Easter we've known.

But we've all read about another Easter -- the very first Easter, in fact -- when the followers of Jesus Christ were also hidden away, locked up, anxious and afraid. Their fear wasn't a pandemic. It was persecution. Their leader, their Messiah, had been arrested, put on trial, beaten up, sentenced to death, crucified, and buried. Jesus was dead. His enemies had killed him, and the disciples of Jesus feared they were next. Their hopes were all shattered. So the followers of Christ locked themselves away, hiding from the world, convinced that that Sunday morning was the worst, gloomiest, scariest day ever.

But it was still Easter! It was the Lord's day! They couldn't see through the clouds, but the Son rose from the dead. He

came back to life. The Son of God had sacrificed his life to pay for all our human sins, willingly dying in our place. But on Easter Sunday, the stone was pushed away from his grave. The seal was broken. The guards couldn't stop him. The Lord Jesus broke the power of death, and smashed the power of the grave. Body and soul, his resurrection was a total triumph over sin, Satan, and all the forces of evil.

The women, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary, got to share the Lord's triumph. Matthew tells us they came to see the tomb, observed an earthquake, heard incredible news from an angel, saw the empty tomb; and were understandably mixed up and confused. Elated, but still scared.

And, then, "Suddenly Jesus met them. 'Greetings,' he said. They came to him, clasped his feet and worshiped him. Then Jesus said to them, 'Do not be afraid.'" This was the living Lord Jesus Christ, the resurrected Savior, suddenly right there with them. Mary and the other Mary held him, worshipped him, and they became part of his Easter miracle.

The lives of those two women were never the same. Their relationship with God? Forever changed. Their mission in life? Their fear of death? Suddenly altered. Their perspective on the world's troubles? Their outlook on things like sickness and suffering? Completely transformed.

And not just for Mary and the other Mary. For all the followers of Jesus Christ. For all who believe in Jesus as the Son of God. For every Christian who knows the forgiveness Jesus won on the cross, who clings to Christ alone for salvation, who worships him on this majestic day with humble faith. Jesus shares his Easter triumph with Mary and the other Mary, with Peter and John, with doubting Thomas, with you and me.

"I died for you," he tells us today, "And I rose from the dead for you. You are my disciple, and you are my friend. And no matter what the world does to you, or tries to tell you, or sends your way to scare you, just hold on to me. For I am holding on to you. Believe in me, trust in me. I am with you always, through it all. And I will share my Easter triumph with you forever and ever."

You see, when you live by faith in the resurrected Lord Jesus, you become one with Christ, in a beautiful, miraculous way. You become part of his Easter triumph. You can be certain of God's great love. You can be confident of the Lord's eternal plan for you. You can celebrate the Sonrise, even when it's a dark, scary day.

These are certainly frightful days. But this day is Easter. The Lord is risen! He is risen indeed. Alleluia! Let's pray together.