

A Sermon preached for Easter
 April 12 2020
 The Rev. Kyle Wagner
 Rector, Christ Church, Dartmouth

“HE is RISEN, The Church is Alive: Let’s Laugh”

Today is the day in which God shows no partiality. This is the day that the Lord has made, for HE is risen indeed! Christ brings new life to everyone, and right now, this Easter of 2020 is one that we will all remember. The COVID-19 virus also shows no partiality, for it touches the lives of everyone. But the Easter message also reaches the whole world, and perhaps in a radically new way this year. This Easter is one for the ages. As we continue in physical isolation, we watch the world cope with the pandemic of COVID-19. Our churches are empty.

Today is a time where we help one another grow in the Easter message and in our response to the virus as we practice safe distances. Mr. Fred Rogers once wrote concerning children and change:

In any time of family, community, or worldwide stress, the most important question in a young child’s mind is “Who will take care of me?” Young children can’t take care of themselves, so in order to survive, they must have others to take care of them. The best we adults can do is let our children know that we’ll take good care of them—no matter what. That’s what helps them grow—in good times and bad.”¹

My friends, I believe that what we are experiencing today is a period of growth for the world, for ourselves, and the church.

You see, the message of Easter does not end with Jesus rising from the dead. I believe that the true message is when Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples and said, “I have seen the Lord.” The Easter story is not merely a spectator sport. It’s not something you experience on the sidelines. As an active thing, the story of the resurrection asks us to bare witness to God’s love, to share it, and to live it. In Acts, Peter says to his listeners the resurrection, “He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one ordained by God.”

But as we sometimes know, it’s difficult to express this joy to the broader world. Even the visitors to the tomb came expecting death, but instead, they found new life. This is what the church is experiencing right now. *But I will get back to that in a minute.* You see, those at the tomb were both joyful at Jesus’ absence from the tomb, but they were also terrified. How afraid the world is today considering the virus. And now the world is in a preputial vigil, a watching over, sincere prayers from all faiths for healing. We shake in fear. But perhaps we can recall Jesus’ words to Mary when she reaches out to touch him. Jesus describes the resurrection and perhaps of faith, saying, “I’m right here, but you can’t hold me.”

¹ Fred Rogers from *A Beautiful Day in the Neighbourhood*, (New York: Penguin Books, 2019), 104

Over the years, you may have heard Bishop's, Clergy, Lay Ministers and others claim, "the church is not the building, the church is the people!" For some of us, we cringe at these words, because we love our church buildings so. As we are home isolated, we become fixed on what we have, and this is no different than in the relationship with our beloved churches. This claim "the church is the people, not the building" has become more exact this Easter season, more than any other. We are unable to be in our church spaces; the sacredness of worshiping at home is not as palpable as being in our historic church. Dust settles on the pews, and no Holy Communion shared—this is upsetting. Within England, this is the first time of massive church closures since 1213. Of course, the reason then was political, not because of a "plague." Yet, I find myself asking the question, "is the church empty?" The more I reflect, I truly believe that the church is more engaged, fuller than it has been for quite some time.

But I have seen the church in action this season of Lent. People are stepping up to support the online ministry, phone chains established to continue connections. Parish staff going above and beyond. This delights my heart. This is the Easter story; we rise out of the tomb to spread the Gospel in a new way. In a radical way.

Today I encourage us to laugh. Of course, we all have a different sense of humour, but it helps us cope. COVID-19 is no laughing matter, but trying to connect through this gift, I believe, can be life-giving. For me, humour is the most significant activity of the brain. Laugh, you say? What do you mean? The study of laughter is relatively new. Some believe that it increases our catecholamine levels, which affect our mental functions, including our interpersonal responsiveness, alertness, and memory. It is also suggested that it stimulates the release of endorphins, which can result in decreased pain and a sense of euphoria. Finally, laughter has been shown to reduce the secretion of the stress hormone, serum cortisol.

A favourite play of mine is *Lazarus Laughs*. A play by Eugene O'Neill and written in 1925 it tells the story of the man from Bethany. Within the play, Lazarus explains to his friends that there is no such thing as death, only God's Eternal Laughter.

In the drama, the following scene plays out:

Lazarus' friends ask: What is beyond there, Lazarus? What is beyond there? What is beyond?

Lazarus responds: There is only life! I heard the heart of Jesus laughing in my heart; "There is Eternal Life in No," it said, "and there is the same Eternal Life in Yes! Death is the fear between!" And my heart reborn to love of life cried "Yes!" and I laughed in the laughter of God!

After reflecting on Lazarus' words, his friends begin to sing:

*Lazarus laughs!
Our hearts grow happy!
Laughter like music!
The wind laughs!
The sea laughs!
Spring laughs from the earth!
Summer laughs in the air!
Lazarus laughs!*

Laugh! Laugh!
Laugh with Lazarus!
Fear is no more!
There is no death!

Laugh! Laugh!
Fear is no more!
There is no death!

Dear friends, Jesus is alive. The church is more active than it ever has been. The church is alive in you and me! The church is alive in the kind call to a friend, in the caregivers long shift, in the researchers effort to find a vaccination, in the nurse who struggles to keep their mask on because its uncomfortable, in the doctor, and in the long haul truck driver. In the employee who stocks the shelves at our grocery store.

The church has never been more alive than right now, today. And if we thought it wasn't, well, maybe we might need to laugh at ourselves!

AMEN.