

Easter Sunday, 2020, During A Pandemic:

Introduction:

People of God,

I've delivered many Easter messages; both on Easter Sunday, and on other Sundays. Easter is, to me, the most basic, most exciting, most wonderful Christian holiday there is.

Not because it promises we'll go to heaven for all eternity. Easter doesn't. Hear me, here, because even though I've said this for a decade I don't think we get it yet. The hope that when we die we'd be at rest, we'd be at peace, we'd be with God has been a hope and even an expectation of God's People long before the Church started. It's still a promise that we depend on. When we die in the Lord, we go to "the hand of God," we enter into peace and rest. But that is itself a temporary thing. Heaven is for real, but it's not for forever. What's for forever is the resurrection of the dead, what's forever is Easter, which won't happen until after Jesus returns. As N.T. Wright puts it, the Christian hope is "life after life after death," the weird, unusual Christian promise is that the world will be remade, without death, and because Jesus was resurrected, we'll all be resurrected, too. And that resurrection life will be even better than Heaven, even better than the peace and rest that our loved ones are experiencing right now.

Jesus' resurrection, Paul tells us, was the first of many, many, many resurrections to come. Our hope for life after death is a real, actual hope. Resurrection isn't a metaphor for a life in heaven. Jesus' resurrection was the very first resurrection of all the resurrections to come, including our own. He was the first one in line, and he's going to open the door so we can all crowd in. We won't even need to keep six feet apart when we do.

I saw a morbid, bleak cartoon a few weeks ago that said we need to choose whether we'll be six feet apart from other people, or six feet under the ground. Dark, right? But, let's dissect it: The idea is that right now, standing six feet apart from each other, what we call "social distancing" but is really "physical distancing" or just, you know, "distancing," that doing this can save our lives. And it is saving lives, perhaps our own, but definitely those who rely on the hospital beds that we're not taking up. But, look, everyone: Six feet under is coming, no matter what. Not now necessarily, and not because of COVID-19, but because to be alive in a world marked by sin and death is to eventually die. Jesus' trust in God broke that sure thing when he was raised from the dead never to die again. And theologians have spent 2,000 years talking about how, but the crux of the issue--if you pardon the phrase--is that when we trust in Jesus' faithfulness, we're given an invitation to Easter.

Jesus was resurrected, and everything else will be, too. His was the first; there are many to come. And even those who are dead and in heaven right now want Easter to break out permanently, so they can be resurrected, too. They want to hug us again. They want to eat Easter dinner with us, and feel the breeze on their faces, and hug us with all their strength, without any embarrassment at a goofy show of affection. Because that's the Christian hope. Life again, without death and sin and vengeance and patriarchy and racism and profit's extractive demands and retribution and pandemics and all the bad stuff, like Wham! or Whoopie cushions. Kidding.

So, again: Easter is my favorite. The best thing we've got, you know, after the Spirit. The hope of the world's freedom from death and sin's stuff, and the devil's final loss. But again, and finally: Jesus' resurrection is not a metaphor for our ascendance to heaven; it was a real thing, that will be our real thing. But it was such a huge thing that it becomes an amazingly powerful metaphor, you know?

There's a lot of meaning in saying something is like resurrection. It's like he or she or the company or the plan just rose from the dead. And not in, you know, a zombie/revenant way, but in a good way, a better-than-before way. Resurrection is a great metaphor; but before it's a great metaphor, it's a real event in Jesus' life, and a future event in the life of the world. And we declare it, we hope for it, we need it,

desperately--or at least, every single person.

Conspiracy:

I've been thinking of the Holy Spirit a lot this week. This "breath of God" that "groans" in us, groans in harmony with the "groaning of creation," which longs for resurrection, for an end to the chains death and the devil have chained it up with. And I've been thinking about how we are meant to be, we Spirit-filled, Spirit-known, Holy-Ghost-haunted people, we are meant to conspire together, with God. Do you like conspiracy theories? This is one.

Conspire means to "breathe with," to "breathe together." And we are the ones who God breathes with, the ones among whom the breath of God, the Holy Spirit lives. There is a conspiracy, and we're it: the ones who, with God, exist for one thing: Ending the power of Satan. Resisting the power of death, because we've been vaccinated against it. Standing alongside Jesus, who declared at the beginning of Luke, "the Spirit of the Lord is on me," who said, "I must go so that the advocate, the Spirit, can be upon you, too." So we can conspire together, together, to "proclaim good news to the poor, proclaim freedom for the prisoners, recovery of sight for the blind, set the oppressed free," and "proclaim the year of the Lord's favor," that is, declare Jubilee.

Jubilee:

The Jubilee Year was prescribed by God in Exodus 23

and Leviticus 25. Every seven years in ancient Israel, people were supposed to not work at all, to save up so that they could rest, and let the land--which God claimed as his own--rest. People and animals were supposed to live off extra produced during the sixth year of this cycle. These years of rest were called "sabbatical years." Every seventh sabbatical year was to be followed by a Jubilee Year. So this is something that, at least if it was followed, should happen every 50 years.

And the Jubilee Year was awesome--well, for most people. In the Jubilee Year all sorts of amazing things happened. All land that had been bought or sold or traded or hawked--it all went back to its original owners. And Israelites who had become bought or sold or traded, who had hawked themselves into debt because of bad luck or bad choices: they were set free, too. It was a year of resets, a year of hope, of balance being restored.

At Jesus' birth, an old man tells Mary that Jesus is destined to cause the rising and falling of many in Israel. This is what Jubilee did--at least, the very wealthy lost the slaves and fields that made them that way, and the very poor--the ones so poor that they had turned into property--they got a chance to begin again--or at least their children, and definitely their children's children did. Remember, in a basically agricultural society, when you're not allowed to make money off of money-lending and interest, land is one

of the most important things you can have. It's a gift, a resource, a hope.

And most people think Israel conveniently ignored this command from God. Even faithful people have a way of figuring out ways to keep the status quo, when the status quo has been good for them. I mean, if you're rich, you're not going to let things get redistributed out of your grasp, right? Even if God says you should. And we always assume our hard work is what's gotten us what we have, and that other people have lost out on wealth or comfort or peace because of some moral deficiency. Think of people in debt: they are in debt because of their bad decisions, right? Addictions, which ruin lives all the time, are usually described as some moral failure, a weak character that a person has that keeps them from really living with will-power, will-power like we, who are winning, have. These are ways of thinking that are common, and especially helpful when we aren't in debt, aren't addicted, things are going well for us and people think highly of us. But whether or not Israel ever lived up to the Jubilee command has nothing to do with how powerful an idea it is or could be, especially for a poor, faithful day-laborer whose attending synagogue like he usually does, listening to Jesus early in Luke, as he reads this aloud.

He's saying, there, "I'm the one who's been anointed and I'm the one who's doing these things that you've been looking forward to, and I will continue to do

them. You've been expecting someone; I'm the one you've been expecting. I'm kicking off Jubilee, today, in your presence, right now."

This is the conspiracy that we're meant to join Jesus in. We are the anointed ones, now, who have the Spirit, our advocate, who helps us pray when we don't know what to pray, and who helps us do, together, as Jesus' himself promises, greater things than Jesus himself did. We're the ones who take on Jesus' role for himself: We're the ones who, guided and empowered by this Spirit, breathe in sync with the Lord, and proclaim good news to the poor, proclaim freedom for the prisoners, recovery of sight for the blind, set the oppressed free, and continue on in the Jubilee work that Jesus began. We live a resurrection life in a death-defined world. We do this because we can, if we have the will. It's what God made us for. This is Easter.

Opportunity Will Knock:

Look: We are in a unique time. Our society, even our world, perhaps--but America, at least, will have a chance at a metaphorical resurrection in the future. Weeks or months from now, when this pandemic is over, and we're looking at the new world with its new needs that we have. And it will be up to us who have the privilege of power and influence and strength, who who are Christ's co-conspirators, to help make this society of ours more in line with Jubilee. That is not our opportunity right now, maybe. But I don't want us to forget it when that opportunity comes. We'll have a

unique opportunity to live up to our older brother's example, and tear down the deathly and devilish powers and structures and ways of the world, which hurt the homeless, the poor, the lost, the sick, the imprisoned, the disenfranchised and discouraged and disturbed who Jesus aligned himself with and died among.

But let me focus for a moment on the discouraged, because the opportunity we have to make the kingdoms of this world more like the kingdom of our God and the Lamb may not be in season yet. But the opportunity to help the heartbroken and hopeless is.

So: I'll go quick.

There's one moment that happens just on the other side of Jesus' resurrection. We didn't read it today.

Toward Emmaus:

Two people, a man named Cleopas and a friend, have left Jerusalem after Jesus was trussed up on a cross. The two walk. They're talking about Good Friday, although not thinking there was much good in it. They were around when Mary and Mary and Joanna came and told the disciples Jesus was alive. It's left them with stuff to think about, but they're getting out of dodge. Someone comes up to walk with them; a normal thing on a dangerous road. It's Jesus, but they don't recognize him. Jesus asks them what they're discussing.

And they are “kept from recognizing him.” We could ask why, but there are some things that there aren’t answers for. We know that generally, when Jesus appears to people after his resurrection, he’s not recognized at first, but is eventually. What this means for us when the resurrection of the dead takes place, I don’t know, except that we will all recognize one another.

They tell Jesus about all that’s happened, and are surprised that he hasn’t heard because Jesus’ life was a public life and so was his death. He was a celebrity, and those he healed are still walking around town even as these two have gotten out of it.

Their faces are downcast as they talk, and this makes sense, because of course: their hopes died when Jesus did. They say, “He was a prophet, powerful in word and deed before God and all the people. The chief priests and our rulers handed him over to be sentenced to death, and they crucified him; but we had hoped that he was the one who was going to redeem Israel.”

Jesus walks these two through the Bible, points out to them why what happened to him, happened to him. He points out that they can trust that what happened to Jesus wasn’t failure and cause for hopelessness, wasn’t foolishness or a stumbling block, but was somehow redemptive, and should have been expected

if only they could have understood the Bible rightly and well.

But Emmaus or some other village--we can't tell for sure--is coming up. And Jesus seems to keep going on, but they urge him to stay with them. It's nearing night, after all, and those roads can be dangerous. They lived in a world where strangers were obligated to care for strangers, rather than the other way around. And maybe something about the way Jesus cared for people has taught them to care for others, too.

And Jesus--still unrecognized to them--stays. He sits down for dinner, takes a bread loaf, and begins to say a prayer of thanks. Something about this opens their eyes; they recognize him, and just as they do, he disappears.

It's crazy! They're shocked! "Weren't our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us?" They bolt back to Jerusalem, to where the first eleven disciples are and everyone else, and they are immediately told the good news, the best news: "It's true."

"The Lord has risen."

The Lord Has Risen:

Cleopas and his friend are downcast, sad; and they have every right to be, because of course, they had hoped Jesus was going to redeem Israel, and now they

think he won't. Their hopes are disappointed. They're discouraged, and wondering what to do with themselves, now. They were committed to a future that has disappeared.

And if we've reflected at all on Palm Sunday, we can definitely think of the ways we've been disappointed, even of the ways we've put our hope in the Lord, and found that hope unmet. If we're alive today we recognize what it means to be uncertain about what the future holds. The trouble with lingering there, with loitering on the road to Emmaus is that Easter gets in its way. We may not be ready to conspire to reshape the world into a Jubilee shape, but we have to be ready to do what Jesus did, here, which was help Cleopas and his friend discover hope again. We could be more specific: We could talk about how he helped them rediscover him, helped them trust him again, helped them see how God was at work in the very thing that had discouraged them.

We're blessed any time anyone can remind us of the hope we have in Christ. We're blessed anytime we get a whiff of Easter. Anytime we are reminded that we're alive to Christ, not dead to God or God dead to us, we're blessed in a particular way. And we can return that blessing.

Cleopas and his friend bless Jesus for blessing them, even before they realize who he really is. He gave them hope as he walked and spoke with them, and

they invited him in to stay with them. People who have hope renewed in them, whose “hearts are strangely warmed” as they realize just how much hope the Bible promises them, how much God will see them through their sadness, do become kinder people, people who invite others into their lives. We may not be ready to die for Jubilee, or live for it, but we may be ready to do that.

In the story, they only recognize Jesus as he breaks bread and gives thanks for it. It reminds us of communion, of course, of Maundy Thursday, but it also reminds us that it is exactly when we gather with others who are thankful to God and who help “open the scriptures” to us that we are most able to recognize Jesus who is always at work in our lives and theirs. It happens whenever we gather with our co-conspirators, our Easter company, those of us who haven’t forgotten Christ isn’t dead, but alive. It happens every time we gather with others whose hope is in the Lord.

And it can even happen right now, even when we think we can’t gather with others at all. It can happen right now, as we wave to neighbors from our front porch or the sidewalk. It can happen right now as we call each other, text each other, send letters or emails. It can happen right now over Zoom or Facetime or Snapchat. It can happen when we leave gifts at other people’s doors, ask a neighbor if they need anything, and remind anyone around us who will listen that even

though right now is a time of disappointment, discouragement, or crushed hopes, nothing in the world is beyond redemption. Anytime we can, for a moment, breathe in sync with another person, conspire in their hope, in their blessing, in their encouragement, we who always have God breathing right alongside us prove that Jesus' resurrection is real. We bring Easter about in our discouraging, pandemic-filled world. We become oxygen to those who are having trouble taking a breath, and sometimes just breathe for them, because they cannot breathe on their own.

Conclusion:

I'd leave us with this:

I don't expect to inspire us with Jubilee, not this morning. I don't expect us to imagine a world in which everything terrible is set right. Not today. I just want us to remember, when our chance comes, to conspire with God in making this world better than it is now, for the sake of all those who do not have the power we ourselves have.

When it comes today, I want us to remember this: The simplest way we can do Easter, live up to our Easter mandate, is to bring hope. Any hope is God's hope, because God is the maker and sustainer of hope. So bring it however you can, from whatever distance you have to offer it, whether that's from six feet away or just across a table, breaking bread. Breathe deeply of

the Spirit of God; remember your death, and what will come beyond it. Look forward to the Resurrection of the world, when all will be set right. Be the ones who strangely warm others hearts, because we are the ones who God breathes through, and conspires alongside, in driving death and the devil away until Christ, who is risen, returns.