



THE UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

Dakotas-Minnesota Area

Resident Bishop
Bruce R. Ough
bishop@dkmnareaumc.org

Administrative Assistant
Sheilah J. Kyburz
sheilah.kyburz@dkmnareaumc.org

Easter worship message 2020

Hold On!

Christ is Risen! Christ is Risen, indeed!

Dear friends, as we gather this morning in our homes and living rooms to join in this Easter Celebration, I greet you in the powerful spirit of the Risen Christ who, of course, is in our midst wherever two or three are gathered in His name.

More than ever before, we now understand that the Church is not a building, but the people who desire to follow Jesus. More than ever before, we now understand that even in the face of a global pandemic Easter cannot be canceled. More than ever before, we now understand that the resurrection cannot be stopped, or delayed or defeated! More than ever before, we now understand that nothing can separate us from God.

I extend Easter greetings to all the members and friends of The United Methodist Churches tuning into this broadcast. And, I extend a special welcome to all who may be joining us from other faith traditions and to those of you who may not yet have a church home. I know if you reach out to a United Methodist congregation in your neighborhood or community you will be embraced with radical hospitality.

Before I turn to our scripture lesson this morning, I want to thank all the pastors, musicians and production personnel that made this service possible especially members of the Sioux Falls First and Sioux Falls Asbury United Methodist Churches, and to Rev. Trefz our liturgist.

Please pray with me.

Lord, open our hearts and minds, even as you opened the tomb, that as the scriptures are read, and your resurrection promise proclaimed, we may hear and receive, with joy, the new life you offer us this glorious Easter day. In the name of the Risen Christ,



Dakotas-Minnesota Area

we pray. Amen.

Matthew 28: 1-10 (NRSV)

28 After the sabbath, as the first day of the week was dawning, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb. ² 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. ³ His appearance was like lightning, and his clothing white as snow. ⁴ For fear of him the guards shook and became like dead men. ⁵ But the angel said to the women, "Do not be afraid; I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. ⁶ He is not here; for he has been raised, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay. ⁷ 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." ⁸ So they left the tomb quickly with fear and great joy and ran to tell his disciples. ⁹ Suddenly Jesus met them and said, "Greetings!" And they came to him, took hold of his feet, and worshiped him. ¹⁰ Then Jesus said to them, "Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me."

The women who went to see Jesus' tomb on that first Easter were filled with an odd jumble of feelings: fear, confusion, grief, disbelief, astonishment. Mark's Gospel tells us the dominant question on their minds was "Who will roll away the stone from the entrance to the tomb?" Luke's Gospel tells us they were perplexed and terrified. John's Gospel tells us that Mary Magdalene stood weeping outside the tomb. And, Matthew's Gospel, which we read this morning, portrays the women to be in a very unsafe environment. They no sooner arrive at the tomb, then there is an earthquake; then an angel who looks like lightning comes and effortlessly rolls away the huge stone and they see an empty tomb.

This jumble of feelings is certainly understandable. Why would they not express fear, confusion, grief, disbelief, astonishment? Their world had been turned upside down. Their beloved teacher and Messiah had been arrested, tortured, crucified and buried. Their understanding of reality – that death is final – was being challenged by their own eyes, by a new incomprehensible reality.

I don't know about you, but I have this same jumble of feelings on this Easter morning 2000 plus years later. The coronavirus pandemic, and the subsequent social distancing, mounting death toll, economic collapse and constantly changing information and



Dakotas-Minnesota Area

directives fills me with fear, confusion, grief, disbelief and astonishment. The reality of how we relate to our neighbors, work, play, shop even worship has changed. Everything has been turned upside down. The stones in front of the tomb seem too large to roll away. The grief of lost time, lost work, lost income, lost relationships is overwhelming. After 69 years, 44 of them as a pastor, I finally understand the depth of what the women visiting the empty tomb were experiencing. It doesn't feel safe. Am I alone here? Let's see those hands!

As the frightened and astonished, women left the empty tomb running to tell the other disciples what they had witnessed, the risen Jesus suddenly appears and greets them. And what do they do? They take hold of Jesus' feet. They take hold of Jesus' feet and worship him.

In their bewilderment, fear and confusion, they fall on their knees, grab Jesus' feet and offer praise. They wanted to know Jesus was real. They needed to touch him, to feel him. They needed something to grab hold of. They needed to feel safe. They wanted to know that Jesus was truly raised from the dead. They were trying to get a grip on reality – a new reality, the reality of the Risen Christ.

When our oldest son, Lance was just a toddler he could not be separated from his favorite blanket. It was a beautiful light blue crib blanket with blue satin trim. Everywhere he went he carried his security blanket. He not only insisted on holding on to it, but he would chew on it, actually eating little pieces of the satin trim and blanket. By the time he finally gave up his blanket, this is all that was left. We keep this remnant in our hope chest, along with other family treasures. Who doesn't need a security blanket of some fashion? Especially in these days!

I am reminded of the student who shouted to the university chaplain, "The church is a crutch!" The university chaplain shouted back, "You're right! But who isn't limping?"

My questions for all who are gathered in front of your TVs or devices this Easter morning are these: "What are you holding on to today? What is your security blanket? What is your crutch? What is your hope? Where are you finding joy? What fills you with gratitude? What reality are you taking hold of to get you through the difficulties and disillusionment and disappointments of life? What are you holding on to get you through the dark nights of the soul? What reality are you taking hold of to assure you that there is victory over sin and death? That there is abundant life even in the midst of the coronavirus pandemic?"



Dakotas-Minnesota Area

The women running to tell the other disciples that the tomb was empty, took hold of Jesus' feet to assure them that Jesus had defeated death. Thomas, the doubting disciple, touched Jesus' wounded hands and side to assure himself that Jesus had risen and was real. What are you holding on to today?

My wife, Char, is a person who holds on to Jesus' feet and worships him. Early in our relationship she showed me what it looks like to take hold of the Risen Christ and never let go.

Char and I have been married 43 years and we have three sons, ages 51, 48, and 40. I'll let you do the math! The truth is that Char was married before. Char's first husband, and the biological father of Lance and Stuart, was killed in a tragic canoeing accident on the Red River in Fargo, North Dakota. Char and Lance and Stuart, ages 5 and 18 months at the time, watched helplessly from the river bank as the rescue personnel tried to pull Don from the undertow of a small flood control dam. It was clearly a day when a very large stone was rolled in front of the lives of this young family, sealing in death.

Char and I met a couple years after that tragic event and she fell madly in love with me. We decided to be married. This looked like a perfect match for me. I was a poor, struggling seminarian. Char had a house, and a car and needed a husband and father.

The Easter before we were married, Char took the boys to worship, as was their custom. During the service the pastor gathered all the children in the chancel area and told them the story of Jesus' resurrection, using those familiar objects of a cocoon and butterfly, so that they could grasp that wonderful mystery.

After the service as Char and the boys were driving home, Lance, who was now seven years old, turned to his Mom and asked: "If God could bring Jesus back to life, why couldn't he bring my Dad back to life?" As adults we are afraid to ask such questions. But isn't it the right question? Do you believe this resurrection business is real? Does it impact everyday life? Does it impact our current reality in the midst of this pandemic?

Char made three beautiful and appropriate responses to Lance. First, she told Lance that his father was with Jesus in heaven and that he was happy. She went on to tell him that it was okay for him to still love his Dad, to talk about him and to remember him, because God loved him and would want them to remember him. Then she said the



Dakotas-Minnesota Area

most incredible words, she told Lance that, in spite of their tragedy, God still loved them because God had given them a new Dad – Me!

I felt about this big when Char told me the story. Remember, I was in it for the house and car! There is nothing quite so humbling than to realize you are a gift from God to another person. This is true of everyone gathered in your various living rooms this morning. You are God's gift to at least one other person. No one understood this better than Jesus, because he was God's gift to each of us.

This story has an ending. As Char and the boys drove home from church, Lance sat quietly in the back seat trying to absorb all that his mom had told him. Just before Lance got out of the car to run into the house he said to his mom, "I've been thinking, and I guess it is okay to love both Dads."

That is resurrection – tragedy and death transformed into new life, new hope, new potential, new love. A little boy who could have been scarred for life, who could have grown up hating God, took hold of the risen Jesus' feet, was freed from the tomb of grief and anger and confusion and had his love doubled in an instance. God's life-giving love came rushing in and gifted him with a new reality, all because his mother was holding onto the Risen Jesus' feet.

God yearns to unbind each of us from our grave clothes and set us free. God is in the stone removal business. God believes in empty tombs. God is always opening doors of hope. God is always seeking to multiply our love; God desires for us to love as fully and faithfully as God loves.

Friends, here is the bottom line: The Risen Christ is real. His resurrection is our resurrection. His victory over sin and death is our victory. The only way to get a grip on the despair, doubt, disillusionment and death we experience in our lives is to take hold of the feet of the risen Christ and never, never let go! The only way to sustain resurrection hope and joy in our lives is to take hold of Jesus' feet and never let go!

Christ is risen. Hold on to him. Worship him. It is the only way to have abundant life. It is the only way to make the Kingdom reality your everyday reality. It is the only way to release resurrection power into the daily routine and restrictions of this pandemic season. It is the only way to live in the joy and victory of Easter every day.



Dakotas-Minnesota Area

Easter cannot be stopped or delayed or defeated. Christ is Risen! Christ is Risen, indeed! Happy Easter!

Bishop Bruce R. Ough

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