

Michigan Conference of The United Methodist Church
Easter Service Order of Worship

Sunday, April 12, 2020

Prelude Music "Christ is Risen"

Words of Welcome/ Invitation to Worship - Bishop David Alan Bard

*The writer Anne Lamott says, "Poetry is the official palace language of 'Wow!'"
Is there anything, then, more poetic, than the words, "Christ is risen!"?
Are there any words more powerful?*

Hymn "Christ the Lord is Risen Today"

Opening Prayer – Rev. Kennetha Bigham-Tsai

God of new life, new birth, empty tombs, we gather this Easter morning as on others singing, "Christ the Lord is Risen Today." We gather to shout and sing "Alleluia!" This is a song of joy. We share a story of good news. Yet sometimes this all seems so distant, so long ago and far away that it may seem "an idle tale." Is there still joy to be found, good news to hear? We gather because we think there is, and we want to sing again, be moved again, have our hearts enlivened, our minds rekindled, our souls stirred. So much in our world feels like a heavy stone in the way of life, particularly this year. So much in our world speaks of death and discouragement. Yet with you, these do not have the last word. The power of hope, the power joy, the power of love, are stronger. Christ is risen, and we awaken to new life in the Jesus way of love and justice, peace and compassion, forgiveness and kindness. Amen.

Bishop's Pastoral Prayer

Bishop David Bard

The Lord's Prayer

Rev. Paul Hahm

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.

Children's Time

Rev. Kathy Pittenger

Hymn "Now the Green Blade Riseth"

First Reading Jeremiah 31:1-6 NSRV

Rev. Paul Hahm

Gospel Matthew 28:1-10 NSRV

Rev. Kennetha Bigham-Tsai

Sermon

"Again"
Bishop David Bard

Greetings in the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the peace and power of the Holy Spirit.

I am David Bard, the Bishop for the Michigan Area of The United Methodist Church. Whether you are watching this on Easter Sunday, or the Sunday following Easter, or knowing how things live on when they are on-line, you

are watching this in the middle of the summer, or next winter, thank you for giving me the privilege of your time.

One of the traditional greetings of the Christian faith at Easter is “Christ is risen, risen indeed!” It is meant to be offered with joy and enthusiasm, though in the upper Midwest enthusiasm often comes in rather mild forms. “Christ is risen, risen indeed!”

Let’s be honest, given the coronavirus/COVID-19 pandemic, enthusiastic Easter greetings can feel a little hollow. Our joy this Easter is tinged with grief and sorrow. Perhaps we know someone who has suffered because of contracting the virus. Maybe we’ve lost someone dear to us to this awful disease. We have friends and family members and church members who have lost jobs. We worry about friends and relatives who work in health care or other jobs which increase their risk. We have physicians and health care workers in our immediate family, one of whom is a COVID-19 survivor. We are thankful to be able to say that. The Easter “alleluias” can feel a little hollow this year. We seem stuck in Lent. Lent feels like the permanent season of our lives right now. It feels like the heavy stone remains stuck over the grave. We are not together to sing the Easter hymns. We are not together to embrace one another warmly, and we wonder when next that will be safe. We are not together to watch the sun rise or share an Easter breakfast. I will not soft pedal how difficult a time this is. We are going through something none of us have experienced in our lifetimes. No lilting, lily language can simply roll away the pain, fear, frustration, grief, and difficulty we are experiencing. I know. I understand. I feel those same feelings. This Easter Sunday I also want you to know that God understands. God is not aloof from our pain and suffering. God does not shy away from our frustration. Rather, the God of Easter is, in the words of a philosopher, “the great companion, the fellow-sufferer who understands” (Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, 532, old edition). Hear that good news this Easter.

But there is more to say. That is not the end of the good news.

The words of Jeremiah speak to me and to us today. *Again I will build you, and you shall be built.... Again you shall take your tambourines and go forth in the dance of the merrymakers.... Again you shall plant vineyards on the mountains.* These words were written to a people who had been militarily vanquished and exiled from their homeland. These were people whose entire lives had been turned upside down. These are words written to people who knew pain and sorrow and disorientation and fear. The good news here is that such times will end and renewed life will come again.

Again. Easter is an “again” kind of a day.

Today we need to hear that life outside of the coronavirus and stay home/stay safe orders will come again. Again we will build. Again we shall take our tambourines and dance the dance of merrymakers. That may also look a little different in the upper Midwest, but we will dance. Again we will plant. Again toilet paper and hand sanitizer will be plentiful on the shelves. Though like returning exiles this experience will continue to shape us, we will not forever be confined to our homes or afraid to offer a hug.

This time will end and something approaching normality will come again. But we will be different for having traveled this road, hopefully a little kinder, a little more patient, a little more appreciative of the simple gifts of life. I think of Jane Kenyon’s poem, “Otherwise,” in which she reflects on the joy and pleasure of simple objects, simple tasks, simple gifts.

*I got out of bed
on two strong legs.
It might have been
otherwise.*

She goes on to notice taste of cereal and fresh peaches. She celebrates a walk with the dog, good work, an afternoon nap with her husband, a dinner on a table with candlesticks, a room with paintings on the wall. The poem ends:

*But one day, I know,
it will be otherwise.*

We know the experience of “otherwise,” of being taken out of routines.

Stay home/stay safe is an otherwise experience. Something more normal will return, but when that “again” day comes, when we again build and plant and play music and dance, may we do so with deep appreciation for

life's good gifts, with a little more kindness, a little more grace, a little more forgiveness. Easter has something to do with that sort of "again."

Before celebrating those "again" moments, though, the prophet Jeremiah speaks these words: "The people who survived the sword found grace in the wilderness."

Easter is about "again," it is an "again" kind of day. These days of severe social distancing will end and renewed life will come again. But with that promise we might also ask where we have experienced grace in the wilderness. The people who survived the sword found grace in the wilderness. Today it may feel like we are still being pursued by the sword, but might there be grace in the wilderness? What might that look like? I have experienced grace in this wilderness when I have seen how Michigan United Methodists have risen to the occasion to be in ministry together in new ways. Ministries that feed the hungry and shelter the homeless have adapted to these strange and difficult circumstances. When we have been unable to gather together for worship and prayer, you have found ways to reach out through the internet and social media. The phone has become an important tool of pastoral care. People have continued to be generous with their churches even in this challenging time. Prayer has intensified. You have been grace in the wilderness for others.

I have witnessed powerful and profound acts of kindness.

You have prayed for my family when our son-in-law, a physician in Germany, was diagnosed with COVID-19, and offered prayers for our daughter who is also a physician. Children came and wrote on our sidewalk with chalk – "stay safe," "be the good people," and drew smiley faces. People are sewing face masks and finding ways to thank health care workers and postal workers and grocery store clerks. Grace in the wilderness. We can know such grace. We can be such grace for others.

And there will be grace in the wilderness as we learn something about ourselves and our spirituality in this time. Let's not forget the lessons we are learning in this wilderness time. Yes, there are the lessons about washing our hands for twenty seconds that we should continue to carry forward. We are learning new ways to connect with others and to reach out to others. We are learning something about the power of our relationships. We are learning something about our resilience rooted in God's grace and the power of God's Spirit. We are learning something about the incredible love of God. In the words of Jeremiah, God says, "I have loved you with an everlasting love." There is grace in the lessons we are learning in this difficult wilderness time, and we can carry them forward, like the risen Christ carried the marks of his crucifixion. Easter has come around again in this sermon.

Easter is an again day.

With Easter, we trust that our current difficulty will end and better days will come around again. While most public health experts are assuring us of this, too, we hold this hope with a certain depth, a certain zest. While we want to emerge from this crisis like everybody else, we want to emerge a little kinder, a little more patient, a little more appreciative of the simple gifts of life, a little wiser, a little more compassionate. With Easter, we trust that there are things we can learn even in this wilderness time, there is grace to be found in the wilderness, and such grace both helps see us through and helps make us better. We trust that God can continue to work on our souls again.

But Easter is an even more profound "again" day than simply saying we will get through this and might learn something along the way. Easter proclaims a God who is always about agains, always about new beginnings, always about resurrection, and always about the power of love. Easter does not deny pain, anguish, difficulty, and sorrow. The entire Easter story takes seriously the reality of evil, corruption, injustice, pain, and death. Jesus is betrayed by a friend. Angry crowds rail against him. Political and religious leaders conspire to silence him. Friends deny and abandon him. There is death and darkness and the silence of a tomb.

Easter does not deny pain, anguish, difficulty, and sorrow, but Easter offers an again.

The voice of an angel, and a great "again." "Do not be afraid; I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. He is not here; for he has been raised." Christ the Lord is risen today. Compassion wins again. Justice wins again. Forgiveness wins again. Love wins again. Just as the power of God's love in raising Jesus overcame death, so Easter arrives for us in the midst of this difficult time. Just as God's love, fully present in the life and teaching of Jesus could not be encased in a tomb, but burst forth in new life on the first Easter, so we are touched by the power of that everlasting resurrection love today, again!

This is an Easter like no other we have experienced, and we trust that there will be better days ahead.

Yet even now, Christ is risen. Today we can again hear the voice of the risen Jesus say to us, "Greetings. Do not be afraid." Know you are loved by God with an everlasting love. Know that Christ is risen even if we

Nora Shaffer
Matthew Greenberg

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MUSIC

Christ is Risen

Performed by Organist Connie Gamage
Words and Music by Philip Moore
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Christ the Lord is Risen Today

United Methodist Hymnal
Performed by Organist Connie Gamage
Soloists Nora Feldpausch, Matthew Greenberg
Words: Charles Wesley 1739
Music: Lyra Davidica 1708

Now the Green Blade Riseth

Performed by Organist Connie Gamage
Soloists Nora Feldpausch, Matthew Greenberg
United Methodist Hymnal
Words: J.M.C. Crum 1928
Music: Trad French Carol; by Martin Shaw 1928
Harm. By permission of Oxford University Press

The Wonderful Cross

Words & Music Jeff Benett.
Performed by Connie Gamage
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Easter People, Raise Your Voices

United Methodist Hymnal
Performed by Organist Connie Gamage
Soloists Nora Feldpausch, Matthew Greenberg

Christ the Lord is Risen Today

Words: Charles Wesley 1739
Music Arranged by James Pethel
Performed by Organist Connie Gamage
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