

Christ the Lord is *Risen Today!*

AN EASTER MESSAGE FROM
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Michigan Conference
The United Methodist Church

“There is grace to be found even in this wilderness time. God loves you with an everlasting love.”



BISHOP DAVID BARD IS THE EPISCOPAL LEADER OF THE MICHIGAN AREA

Christ the Lord is Risen Today, *Alleluia!*

Singing that wonderful Charles Wesley hymn year after year at Easter never grows old. Though I long to sing it with a crowd of worshippers gathering together in a church sanctuary festooned with lilies and bright colors, it will not be so this year. This year there will only be echoes of that joyous song ringing out due to the coronavirus/COVID-19 pandemic. While many will gather through their computers, I know this is not possible for everyone. It may not be possible for you. You are in my thoughts and prayers and I am delighted to share Easter with you in this way.

Given the pandemic, the “alleluias” can feel a little hollow this year. Our joy 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 through this awful

disease. We worry about friends and relatives who work in health care or other jobs which increase their risk. In my own family, both our daughters work in health care, one is an OB/GYN physician and the other a physical therapist. We have a son-in-law who is a physician in Germany who has contracted the coronavirus. We are thankful that his symptoms have been relatively mild. I know other Michigan United Methodists who have been directly affected by COVID-19.

The “alleluias” can feel a little hollow. 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, not together to embrace one another warmly with the words “Christ is risen, risen indeed,” not together to 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, frustration, grief, and difficulty we are experiencing.

In the midst of this crisis, I read from the Scriptures of our faith, “The people who survived the sword found grace in

We invite you to read

the wilderness” (Jeremiah 31:2). The reference, of course, is to the story of the Israelites leaving slavery in Egypt. They went from oppression to wilderness, not exactly an ideal itinerary. Yet the prophet Jeremiah says they found grace in the wilderness. And why? Because of the love of God. “I have loved you with an everlasting love.”

Yes, this is a tough time, and God loves us with an everlasting love. Yes, it can feel like we have been pursued by the sword only to have made our way into the wilderness, and God loves us with an everlasting love. Our God, the God of Jesus Christ whose resurrection we celebrate at Easter, is a God whose love accompanies us through every wilderness. We, too, can find grace in the wilderness. “The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad, the desert shall rejoice and blossom; like the crocus it shall blossom abundantly and rejoice with joy and singing” (Isaiah 35:1-2a). We remember Elijah’s forty-day sojourn in the wilderness, at the end of which he encountered God in the sound of sheer silence. We remember Jesus’ forty days in the wilderness where he encountered wild beasts and angels.

I have encountered grace in this wilderness time as I have witnessed our United Methodist faith communities find new and creative ways to worship and care for one another. I have encountered grace in this wilderness time as I hear of churches continuing to minister to the hungry, the homeless, and others struggling on the margins. I have encountered grace in this wilderness as I note increased prayer. I have encountered grace in this wilderness as people have continued to be generous to their church. I have encountered grace in this wilderness time through the kind notes sent to me.

There is grace to be found even in this wilderness time. God loves you with an everlasting love.

The prophet Jeremiah is not done yet. “Again, I will build you.... Again, you shall take your tambourines, and go forth in the dance of merrymakers.... Again, you shall plant vineyards.” The promise is that the wilderness time will not be forever and that the grace we experience within it will come to full flower in days yet to come.

There will come a time when we gather together again, when we come from our

homes, when we meet together in church to worship, sing, pray and eat. There will come a time when we play music and go forth in the dance of the merry-makers, however you may do that in your place of worship. The wilderness does not last forever. We will again sing together "Christ the Lord is risen today, alleluia!"

That is also the message of Easter. 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 him. They abandon him. There is death and darkness and the silence of a tomb.

And then.... And then.... The voice of an angel. "Do not be afraid; I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. He is not here; for he has been raised." In the words of Paul, "death has been swallowed up in victory" (I Corinthians 15:54). Christ the Lord is risen today. We may not be able to sing the song together, but that cannot prevent Easter's arrival. 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.

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. Even now we can 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 even now. Know that Christ is risen even if we celebrate Easter this year in the shadow of a virus. Know that even now there is grace to be experienced. Know even now you can share the grace of the risen Christ with others with a note, a phone call, a prayer, a contribution, any small act of kindness. Know that in every act of kindness and grace we proclaim a risen Christ, for in loving we proclaim that in the end love wins. It is a proclamation we make even now.

Christ is risen, risen indeed. Even now. Easter blessings to you.

Grace and Peace,

David A Baul

We are praying you are well and safe at home!

We invite you to join us in this 28-Day Prayer Calendar. Please call and let your local church know of your well-being. This Easter Message from Bishop Bard has been produced by the Michigan Conference and sent on behalf of your local church who also wish to share in this special day with you. May God Bless you and keep you safe!

28 DAY PRAYER CALENDAR

DAY	FOCUS	BOOK	CHAPTER/ VERSE	QUOTE
Day 1	Sickness	James	5:14	Let the elders anoint and pray for those who are sick
Day 2	Death	John	14	A place is prepared for us. . . do not be troubled
Day 3	Families	Isaiah	35:4	Be strong, do not fear
Day 4	Nurses	Isaiah	40:28-31	God will bear you up, you will run and not be weary
Day 5	Doctors	Jeremiah	1:8	Do not be afraid, I am with you and will rescue you
Day 6	Caregivers	Jeremiah	29:11-13	Plans for you, a hope and a future
Day 7	Isolated	Romans	5:1-3	Suffering, perseverance, character, & hope
Day 8	1st Responders	Galatians	5:22-23	Fruits of the Spirit; love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control
Day 9	Shopkeepers	Ephesians	4:32	Be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving
Day 10	Students	Philippians	1:3-6	God who began a good work in you will complete it
Day 11	Researchers	Philippians	3:12-14	Pressing toward the mark
Day 12	Parents	Philippians	4:12-13	We can do all things through Christ who strengthens us
Day 13	Children	Colossians	3:12-14	Be clothed with compassion, kindness, patience
Day 14	Pastors	Psalms	119:108	God's Word is a lamp to our feet, a light to our path
Day 15	Teachers	Proverbs	3:5-6	Trust in the Lord. . . let God direct your path
Day 16	Loneliness	Proverbs	12:25	Anxious heart weighs a person down; a kind word cheers us up
Day 17	Newlyweds	Psalms	37:4-5	Desires of your heart, commit ways to him
Day 18	Technicians	Matthew	11:28	Come those who are weary, I give rest, my burden is easy
Day 19	Gov. Leaders	Nehemiah	6:16	All did their part. . . it was done with the help of God
Day 20	Orphans	Deuteronomy	1:21	Do not fear or be dismayed
Day 21	Congregations	Psalms	46:1 & 10	God is our refuge and strength. . . Be still. . .
Day 22	Military	Joshua	1:5-6	God will not leave or forsake you, be strong and courageous
Day 23	Elderly	Psalms	91	God holds and protects you
Day 24	Anger	Philippians	4:8	Whatever is true, noble, right, pure, lovely, admirable
Day 25	Grandparents	Hebrews	12:1	Surrounded by a cloud of witnesses. . . run the race. . .
Day 26	Fear	Isaiah	41:10	Do not fear. . . I will uphold you
Day 27	New Life	Luke	24:6	He is not here. . . He risen
Day 28	Restoration	Psalms	23	God leads beside still waters. . . and restores our soul