

**“He Is *Still* Risen”**

Matthew 28:1-10

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Mason, Michigan

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Easter Sunday

How do we celebrate Easter when there’s a pandemic going on? How do we celebrate when we can’t gather for worship, when more than 100,000 people have died from the disease, when 17 million Americans have lost their jobs, when 1.7 billion students have been impacted by school closures, when innumerable stores and businesses are shut down, when there is an extreme shortage of much-needed medical equipment and supplies, when prejudice, racism, and xenophobia are all on the rise, when there are concerns about potential disruptions to the food supply and the possibility of a significant increase in global poverty, when we’re afraid to go to the grocery store, when we’re not allowed to have friends over for dinner ... and the list goes on ... *how do we celebrate Easter*, at a time like this?

Well. If you’re expecting a sermon that is going to give easy answers, a sermon that is going to promise that life is going to get back to normal very soon, a sermon that is going to deny the significant, long-lasting ramifications of all of this, you’ve come to the wrong place. I do intend to give you *hope* today, but it’s not going to be a *cheap* hope, it’s not going to be a *false* hope. It’s going to be *real* hope.

And, in truth, I don’t have one sermon to give you today. I have five mini-sermons!

Mini-sermon number 1: *Beware false prophets*. Do you remember those old Vicks Formula 44 commercials, the ones that began with an actor from *General Hospital* saying, “I’m not a doctor, but I play one on TV”? Those ads were very persuasive; they made you feel like you really *were* listening to a doctor, giving expert medical advice. It was a clever marketing technique, trying to get you to buy a specific product. For a simple cough, that was probably fine. But in our current environment, we are dealing with a new virus strain – that’s why it’s called *novel* coronavirus; the word “novel” means “new” – and there are still many unanswered questions about this virus, including where, exactly, it originated; how, exactly, it is transmitted; what proportion of infections are able to be diagnosed; and, of course, the biggie: how *best* to deal with it. There are a lot of people giving opinions about this virus and its treatment. Some of those people know what they’re talking about. Some of them don’t. Some of them are very good at saying things that people *want* to hear – regardless of whether it’s *accurate*. That is *exactly* what the false prophets in the Bible did. They told people things that made them *feel good* – instead of telling the people *God’s truth*. The Bible consistently, repeatedly, warns the people of God: *do not listen to the false prophets!* In our situation today, there are people who may *sound* like a doctor – but they’re *not* a doctor. Make sure you are getting your medical information from the medical experts ... not from people who aren’t doctors but who play one on TV. It’s not doing *anybody* any good when people who aren’t qualified are giving out medical opinions and advice *as if they were*.

Mini-sermon number 2: *What might God be calling you to do in all this?* The current crisis is impacting different groups of people in very different ways. All of us are having to deal with a lot of inconveniences right now, but some people are wondering what just happened to their retirement savings and how this will impact the rest of their lives ... some people are wondering when they will be able to get back to school, or work ... some people are suddenly finding themselves unemployed, or furloughed ... some people are having to work in high-risk environments where there is a very real concern for infection ... some people have been having to put in a lot of extra hours at work ... and some people are finding themselves with a lot of extra time on their hands. It is certainly the case that everyone has been inconvenienced, but it's also the case that different segments of our society are being impacted in very different ways. I can't even imagine what it would be like to be on staff at one of the major hospitals in New York City or Detroit. I also can't imagine what it would be like to suddenly have a lot of extra time on my hands. I've been troubled by the fact that some of the people who suddenly have a lot of free time aren't really doing much that's *productive* in any significant way. We've got a *war* going on – a war against an invisible enemy that has invaded our homeland, the very communities in which we live. There are people literally *risking their lives*, day after day ... while others are treating this as if it were some kind of extended vacation. That doesn't feel *right*, or fair. I need you to hear me on this. If you're one of those people with a lot of extra time on your hands right now, if you're healthy and not in one of the "high risk" categories, *we need you*. We need your support, we need your assistance, we need your *time*. The Red Cross is looking for blood donations. Meals on Wheels is looking for assistance delivering hot lunches to people who can't prepare their own food. The Lansing area schools are looking for help with food distribution and delivery. The Salvation Army is looking for truck loaders and food stockers. The Capital Area United Way is maintaining a website of volunteer opportunities right here in our area, ways that *you* can make a difference, a positive impact, on your community, *right* here, *right* now. There are basic human needs right here in our area that *aren't being met* in this scary time. If you've got time on your hands, *you could make a big difference*. Obviously you will want to inquire about personal safety – I'm not asking you to put your life on the line – but the reality is, *your community needs you*. Ingham County needs you; the State of Michigan needs you; our country needs you; the *world* needs you. If you've got some time on your hands, *what might God be inviting you to do with it*, that will *positively* impact the world in this time of great need, that can help us to *win this war*, or at least *mitigate its impact on people who are vulnerable and in need?*

Mini-sermon number 3: *Take a Sabbath*. If you're one of those people whose workload has increased, if you're feeling a tremendous amount of stress at your workplace, if you're in a high-risk environment, *make sure you are taking adequate time to recharge*. I'll be honest, I haven't done enough of that these past few weeks, and I've gotten short-tempered, grumpy, and difficult to be around. (Ask my family!) I realized this week that I hadn't been doing enough to refill my tank. I turned off my email Friday, and it's *still* off, and that's been *good* for me. It's going to mean that when I do turn it back on, I will have more energy, more stamina, more peace of mind, and I'll be better able to deal with what's there. God told us to take one day out of seven to just *rest*. That *includes* when we're in a state of emergency. You're not going to do anybody any good if you completely wear yourself ragged. You need to be getting enough rest and spiritual nourishment so that you will be able to give *fully* when you're doing what the world needs you to do. Even Jesus took a Sabbath; he walked away from the crowds that were swarming all around him, he headed off to a deserted place periodically to recharge. He didn't wait until the job was all done. When you're on the front lines, the job is *never* all done. You have to *make a point* of taking a Sabbath. You have to *be intentional* – or it just won't happen.

Mini-sermon number 4: *Remember your history*. History in general, and biblical history in particular. What we're experiencing right now may feel unprecedented ... but, really, it's not. Periodically, across the whole course of human history, we go through some stretches that are *really tough*. In the Bible, we read about times of famine, times of war, times of persecution, times of siege, times of exile. In our country's history, we've weathered two world wars and a civil war. Every now and then there are some extended periods when life is *dramatically* different than normal. We are living in one of those times. We all hope this is going to end quickly. But the reality – the painful reality – is that it could take *a year or more* before there's a vaccine. The curve may be starting to flatten in some places – *but there's still a curve*. It's not like this disease is just magically going to go away overnight. Nor is the impact on the economy, or the disruption to our lives. There are going to continue to be new cases of the coronavirus for *quite some time to come*. There are going to continue to be thousands upon thousands of more deaths. I'm not saying this to be pessimistic. I'm saying this to be *realistic*. This siege that we're under is going to go on for a while. Hopefully in another week or so things should start to improve – *but that doesn't mean things are going to be "good."* Nor does it mean that we're going to suddenly be able to return to "normal life" when May 1 rolls around. *We need to be preparing ourselves – mentally, emotionally, and spirituality – for the long haul*. I have no idea how long it's going to be until we can have a "normal" worship service in our sanctuary again, or how long until we can make a "normal" trip to the grocery store. It's certainly not going to be this month. It's probably not going to be next month. Maybe by June? Honestly ... I doubt it. *This whole situation isn't going to just suddenly go away*. Which means, *we all have to adapt*. This is our new reality, for the present. It's going to call for patience, for endurance, for stamina, for a whole lot of prayer. You know ... all the characteristics the New Testament was already telling us we needed to be developing. *God will give us the strength and the fortitude to get through this*, just like God has given his people strength and fortitude *countless* times in the past, when they have asked for it. In a way, we could come out stronger on the other side of this, with a deeper, richer prayer life, with more meaningful worship practices that we do at home. When the Jews spent 70 years in exile, they came out of that experience with a *stronger, more robust* faith and spirituality than they had going into it. The same could be true for us.

Finally: mini-sermon number 5: *Jesus Christ is still risen*. Nothing that has happened here on earth these past few months has changed that in any way. He *still* rose from the grave, that Easter morning long ago. He *still* ascended into the heavens, 40 days later. He *still* sits on the throne, *even now*, looking down upon us with love and compassion. Who knows what the angelic host is doing right now – I fully believe that they are fighting for our well-being just as hard as the medical staff in countless hospitals across the globe. Jesus is going to beat this – just like he's going to beat *every* disease, *every* illness, *even death itself* – but the ravages of the enemy are great. *We know* he's going to win; his final victory is one of the main points of the whole Bible; but right now there's still an epic battle going on.

And Jesus is *still* risen from the grave. That tomb is *still* empty, just as empty as it was that day when the women showed up. Nothing has changed that fundamental truth ... and nothing *ever* will.

Christ is risen! *He is risen indeed!*

Christ is risen! *He is risen indeed!*

Christ is risen! *He is risen indeed!*

Alleluia and amen!