

**Easter Sunday
April 4, 2021**

**In the name of the God of all Creation,
The God alive in each of us as God was alive in Jesus,
And the power of God known in the Spirit.
Amen.**

**Alleluia! Christ is Risen!
Christ is risen indeed! Alleluia!**

What a year we have had ... the pandemic, growing awareness of systemic racism in our communities, a contentious presidential election, and an insurrection at our nation's capital. This was made all the more difficult because we did not have access to this sacred space ... this faith community ... as a spiritual anchor.

This sacred space of St. Cyprian's has been here for 121 years. It was consecrated on April 6, 1900. This house of prayer was built by people who were sons and daughters of slaves. It was occupied by faithful people of color during the height of the Jim Crow era. Our spiritual ancestors in this place lived through the Spanish Flu pandemic of 1918 and 1919, and the Civil Rights protest of the 1960s were on the streets of this neighborhood. St. Cyprian's was a spiritual anchor for those who came before us in this place, and it strengthened the people of this church as they faced many of the same struggles we faced in 2020.

During these past twelve decades these walls received the prayers and praises of the generations of faithful that preceded us. This sacred space is filled with God's Spirit, and the spirit of resilient people for over a century. So, as we re-gather in this sanctuary for the first time in over a year, I believe we need to recognize the Spirit that surrounds us, and then to pray our way back into our spiritual home. I invite you to take just a few moments in silence to let the Spirit surround you on this Easter morning. I will end the silence with a prayer adapted from the Book of Common Prayer for the Consecration of a church.

Everliving Spirit, watchful and caring, our source and our end: All that we are and all that we have is yours. Accept us now, as we [once again] dedicate this space to which we come to praise your Name, to ask for your forgiveness, to know your healing power, to hear your Word, and to be nourished by [a holy meal in the name of your Son]. Be present always to guide and to judge, to illumine and to bless your people.

Lord Jesus Christ, [be with us now as we] make this a ... house of prayer. Be always near us when we seek you in this place. Draw us to you, when we come alone and when we come with others, to find comfort and wisdom, to be supported and strengthened, to rejoice and give thanks. May it be here, Lord Christ, that we are made one with you and with one another, so that our lives are sustained and sanctified for your service. ... Open our eyes, our ears, and our hearts, that we may grow closer to you through joy and through suffering. Be with us in the

fullness of your power as ... we grow in grace through the years, when we turn to you in sickness or special need, and, at the last, when we are committed into our Father's hands. In the name of all that is holy. Amen.

This is Easter morning.

Alleluia! Christ is risen!
Christ is risen indeed! Alleluia!

Those are shouts of joy ... excitement ... celebration. However, the story this morning ends with Mark saying the women "fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them, and they were afraid." Other translations of those Greek words use "trembling and bewildered." And the story is consistent in all four gospels ... the women go to the tomb early in the morning ... they find it empty ... and they are "afraid." We shout "Alleluia!" yet the women were living with "terror and amazement," they were "trembling and bewildered," and certainly fearful.

Esau McCaulley, a professor of New Testament at Wheaton College says, "Mark's ending points to a truth that often gets lost in the celebration: Easter is a frightening prospect. For the women, the only thing more terrifying than a world with Jesus dead was one in which he was alive."

McCaulley goes on, "The women did not go to the tomb looking for hope. They were searching for a place to grieve. They wanted to be left alone in despair. The terrifying prospect of Easter is that God called these women to return to the same world that crucified Jesus with a very dangerous gift: hope in the power of God, the unending reservoir of forgiveness and an abundance of love. It would make them seem like fools. Who could believe such a thing?"

I believe that is the kind of Resurrection we face today. This past year has been full of events that have evoke fear, anger, despair, and grief. It broke my heart to hear to those stories of COVID-19 patients dying alone. I felt impotent and angry when I watched just a few moments of the video of George Floyd's death ... and the video lasted almost ten minutes. I don't think I am alone in the months of anxiety I felt as a false narrative was proclaimed about a "stolen" election, and then the horror as a violent mob invaded our nation's capital. "Terror and amazement" ... "trembling and bewilderment" ... fear. I know that I shared at least some of the feelings those women had that first Easter morning.

However, we ... like the women ... did not let those emotions overwhelm us. Although Mark says the women said "nothing to anyone," obviously they told the story ... because within the story is hope. We, like the women, were not going to let death ... and ultimately the fear of death ... have the final word ... we were not going to let it have power over us.

Contained in the story of our fear and anxiety over our past year is also the story of a new found empathy and compassion for persons we most often took for granted ... the check-out lady at Publix ... the janitor at the nursing home ... the wait-staff at our favorite restaurant ... the

migrant farm-workers in Hastings who harvested the food we eat ... the postal worker who delivered our mail. Remember the stories of crowds of people applauding the healthcare workers ... doctors, nurses, custodians ... as they left work as their shift changed at a hospital in New York? I'm sure you heard about the neighbors on balconies playing instruments and singing together. Yes, we were helpless in the midst of the worst of the pandemic, so we thanked those who at least were doing something, and we shared what little we had with complete strangers.

Contained in the story of the outrage over the death of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor was the rise of Black Live Matter and a new awareness of the consequences of systemic racism in our nation's history. Contained in the story of brutal violence against people of color was a shift from a movement supported by just those victimized by the discrimination, but a shift to a crusade that included people of all races. What had been an effort predominately by those who had been victimized ... people of color ... now included people who had historically been the victimizers ... us white folk.

Okay, not everyone everywhere experienced this shift, but some of us did. We at St. Cyprian's continued to feed the hungry ... and we upped the ante when the need was greater. We have come into a greater awareness of the fact that we are a predominately white congregation occupying a sacred space we inherited from a Black community ... one that was formed because Jim Crow would not let them worship at the white church downtown. You formed a Racial Justice Initiative to address the inequities caused by systemic racism right in this neighborhood. A shift happened ... something changed in our life together ... we saw ourselves and the world around us in a new way.

So what does all this have to do with Easter, the Resurrection, and the fearful women? We will, no doubt, remember all the bad things that happened to us during this past year. But there were a lot of good things that happened, and we are being called to not just remember them, but to embody them, and that can be fearful enterprise.

In Jesus' lifetime he showed people what it meant to love God, and to love God's creation. Jesus loved God not by participating in the rituals of his religion, but by living his life as if God were alive in him. He did that by treating every other human being ... regardless of their ritual purity or lack thereof, or their class in the society, or any other distinction that made them "other" ... Jesus treat every other human being the way he would like to be treated ... with respect and dignity and worth and as a child made in God's image.

Once again, in the words of Esau McCaulley, "The work that Jesus left his followers to do includes showing compassion and forgiveness and contending for a just society. It involves the ever-present offer for all to begin again. The weight of this work fills me with a terrifying fear, especially in light of all those who have done great evil in his name. Who is worthy of such a task? Like the women, the scope of it leaves me too often with a stunned silence."

We have all talked about the “new normal” ... what life will be like when this pandemic is over ... if it is ever over. Well, we have experienced some of that “new normal” in the empathy and compassion and loving-kindness and identity with our fellow human beings in our neighborhood, our nation, and around the world. That is at least one aspect of what Jesus called the Kingdom of God.

It would be easy to go back to the old normal ... the status quo. It is familiar. We know the landscape. But we are called to live into this “new normal” ... to take seriously what Jesus took seriously. That is our hope. And that is our fear because it is no easy task. Yes, we can rejoice ... we can rejoice in the new life of the Resurrection ... the Resurrection of Jesus and in the new life that is promised for us.

We ... at their best ... are the fools who dare believe in God’s power to call dead things to life. That is the testimony of the Church. The testimony of the Church is that in times of deep crisis we somehow become more than our collective ability. We become a source of hope that did not originate in ourselves.

There are those in the world around us who never left their “normal.” We are returning to a world of hatred, cruelty, division and a thirst for power that was never quarantined. If we are not trembling and bewildered we are avoiding the new life offered us in the Resurrection.

Our work now is to celebrate the Resurrection ... the new life given us ... the hope for the repair of the world around us ... and the same time pay attention to the trembling and bewilderment it will cause. We are a Resurrection people ... but it is no small task. The terrifying prospect of Easter is that God is calling us to return to the same world that crucified Jesus ... return to our world with a very dangerous gift: hope in the power of God, the unending reservoir of forgiveness and an abundance of love. Yes, it may make us seem like fools. But in the midst of our “terror and amazement” we celebrate the Resurrection.

Alleluia! Christ is risen.
Christ is risen indeed! Alleluia!

Amen.