

## **“This Is the Night” Easter Hope in The Midst of a Pandemic**

These are unusual days that we find ourselves in lately, dear ones. As you read this, I wonder how this pandemic is treating you and your heart. Are you lonely? Tired? Bored? Exhausted? Grieving events, plans, or milestones that can no longer happen as expected? Worried for yourself or your loved ones?

If you answered yes to any or all of those questions, you are not alone. As we prepare for Easter and the coming death and resurrection of our Savior, things will look different for us this year. We will not gather in the same way, we will not sit in the sanctuary together, we will not see the same people or feel the same feelings as usual. We will sit in our houses and we will grieve what we do not have.

In doing that, we will be united with the experience of Jesus’ disciples, who spent the very first Easter the same way—locked in their house, grieving what they no longer had.

And yet, Jesus will still be resurrected. New life will still pour forth, Easter will find a way to happen. If three days dead in the grave couldn’t stop God from ushering forth new hope and healing, our social distancing and isolation certainly can’t stop God. Resurrection is not fragile. Easter doesn’t depend on trumpets, lilies, and new dresses, dear ones. The very first Easter took place with no fanfare.

We will be invited this year to participate in Holy Week worship in new ways—by phone or by computer, we will have the opportunity to worship on Palm Sunday, Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, and Easter Sunday. We will join the prayer of Christians across the globe, the prayer of the saints and the heavenly hosts, and our community will be nourished by the promise of hope and new life where we once thought that only death was possible.

We will also be invited to a new worship experience entirely, this year: the Easter Vigil, on the evening of Holy Saturday. We haven’t done this together before, but I consider the Easter Vigil to be the greatest night of the whole year for us Christians. The Vigil is on the Saturday wedged in between Good Friday and Easter Sunday, and it’s the night when everything in our tradition comes together. Filled with awesome imagery and interactive worship experiences, joy, hope, and some incredible storytelling, this night captures what Lent and Easter are both all about—looking in the darkness for hope and signs of God’s presence with us, muddling through the stories of faith together, and ending up at the baptismal font wrapped in God’s promise of abiding love.

As we begin the night we will (while gathered by phone or computer, of course) light a “new fire” that reminds us of God’s abiding presence with our ancestors throughout the ages. We remember how God came to Moses in a burning bush in the middle of the desert, how God led the Israelites from slavery to freedom in a pillar of fire and cloud, how in the midst of a fiery furnace God saves Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego from the evils of empire. I like to think about how after Jesus’ death and resurrection the fire of the Holy Spirit descended upon the disciples at Pentecost, empowering them to share God’s good news of life and hope with all the

world. Fire was there when the church was born. Fire is there on the altar every week when we worship. The fire that we light together that night will light the Paschal candle, the one we light during Easter, baptisms, and funerals to remember the promise of resurrection. As we will enter a dark sanctuary (and reflect on the darkness and brokenness of this world), the light of Christ's promised resurrection will light our paths.

After this we gather for the great stories of our faith, hearing and remembering God's activity in creation, in the flood, with the Israelites in exile. On this night as we hear the words and experiences of our ancestors, we are connected with all those who have gone before us in the faith—all those who have hoped and prayed for the promise of resurrection.

At the end of this we end up at the baptismal font, and remember God's promises—having been baptized into Christ's death, we are also baptized into Christ's resurrection. We belong to God and to one another, and nothing can change that. We will celebrate the hope and joy that those promises give us—we will give thanks that God knits us together even as we are physically distant from one another.

Join us on Holy Saturday and throughout all of Holy Week as we walk through the mystery of God's love together, finding new hope and joy in Christ's presence among us—even as we reside in our own homes.

In Christ's perfect love that casts out fear,  
*Pastor Marissa*