

“The Elephant called Hope” Sermon on Easter Sunday, April 4, 2021

Dear church, dear community!

Let me address the elephant in the room (or in the park) first: every Easter brings us the same boring, predictable, a thousand times preached message: hope. Every Easter is based on the same story that Christians have told for over 2,000 years, served with plenty of alleluia's. Only the details vary, depending on which of the four gospels are read. And so it can be tempting to listen to the story of Jesus' resurrection and fall asleep, fall asleep just as the Lord is about to rise and stretch and get pumped for life. And that would be a shame, wouldn't it?

Hope, as predictable as it may be, especially coming out of the mouth of a clergy person, - hope, when infused into our lives, when poured into our hearts, is anything but boring. It's exhilarating, energizing, stimulating. It's the kind of energy we can always use more of. It gets us through stuff. It's a powerful force in the Easter narratives and it can be powerful in our lives as well. But where does it come from? Where is hope manufactured? It does not necessarily come from what we see in our world, which is often not so encouraging, let's be honest. And it does not necessarily come from inside of us either. Hope is a spiritual power, the same power that woke up Jesus on Easter morning.

Let us never forget that - especially not this year. After all the things we have been through: a pandemic which is unprecedented in our life-times and unheard of even among the oldest people in our community. A plague, claiming lives all over the world, sometimes young people in their prime... Here in Montgomery County, just over 1,000 people died of Covid 19 in 2020. And just about one year ago, during the first major wave, when local hospitals were overwhelmed and Covid floors filled beyond capacity, a nurse wrote me this chilling note: *“My anxiety is through the roof. I can't sleep because I either wake up in a panic thinking about work or I have nightmares... Just this weekend I sat with an elderly man as he died of Covid. I can't get the sound of his last breath out of my head.”* It just shows you, we went through a lot this past year, especially our nurses, doctors and medical professionals. *And we thank them for their faithful service to our community!* So, given everything we endured in the last 12 months, let us never forget to drink from the cup of hope offered to us on Easter morning.

This past year, when I asked people in our church the typical question, 'How are you doing?' many assured me that they are fine, but some were honest enough to

say, "Oh, we've had our days." That's as far as people from St. Peter's will go: "Oh, we've had our days." Well, haven't we all had our days over these last 13 months? Days when you wondered if you could finally see your family again, hug your grandchildren, hang out with friends without this annoying mouthpiece called a mask? Days, when someone in your family came home and had Covid and you asked, "What now?" Days, when you attended a funeral in a rather small group, people keeping their distance even at the most intimate of rituals, the burial of a loved one. We have all had our days, let's be honest. But through all of it we have kept the faith that is expressed at the conclusion of every single gospel - Matthew, Mark, Luke and John - spoken to scared people at a scary time: He has risen! There is hope.

On that Easter morning, pretty early, (some say so early that the devil hadn't had a chance to get out of bed) three ladies went to the place where Jesus was buried in a large, fancy tomb, donated by a rich devotee named Joseph of Arimathea. Mark even mentions the women's names, he wanted to make sure the heroines of the first hour were properly acknowledged: Salome, Mary the mother of the Apostle James and Mary Magdalene. They brought spices for the preparation of the body and the burial ritual. They had no particular expectations. And to be honest, those are often the moments when God breaks into our lives. When our natural optimism is squished, when our expectations are low, when we drag ourselves to our daily tasks. Then suddenly, a stone is moved, our life re-claimed. That is, if we notice the man in the white clothes, if we keep our eyes and ears open for the one we call ever so awkwardly "God."

I have often felt that the empty tomb of the Easter stories is a metaphor for all the dead places we hang out at, all the places that suck the energy out of us. Perhaps some of you don't know what I mean and that's fine; but others know all too well what I mean. Let me give you some generic examples. Some people live in the past and refuse to claim their life in the here and now. Others run from one dependency to another; they seem to follow a natural instinct toward misery. Some people keep going back to the places and the people who have hurt them. All of that is like staying in an empty tomb with the scent of decay filling the air. Easter encourages us to rise, rise with Jesus out of those empty tombs of life and claim life with a sense of hope. Jesus is breathing among us, walking ahead of us, wanting us to be awake, wanting us to be well and whole. Can you sense Christ breathing among us? I wish all of you a very blessed Easter, a blessed year and lots of strength and, yes, HOPE every day. **Amen.**