

Alleluia! Christ is Alive

A sermon for the Episcopal Church in Maine, preached by the bishop, the Right Reverend Thomas James Brown, for Easter Day, 12 April 2020, and delivered via video to the sixty year-round faith communities, eighteen summer chapels, four Jubilee centers, and Camp Bishopswood.

In the mid-1990s, during seminary, my field education parish was near Stanford University, a church called St. Bede. The former secretary of state, George Schultz, was a parishioner. I don't know if it's true, but the people at St. Bede's ate out on a story about him, so over the years, like all good tales, it became true. Evidently one Easter Day Mr. Schultz arrived at St. Bede's and the usher, a woman named Jinx Royden, said, "Alleluia! The Lord is Risen!"—to which Secretary Schultz said, "Happy Easter." And with that Jinx said, "We don't say 'Happy Easter'—we say 'The Lord is Risen indeed. Alleluia! Now, shall we try this again? Alleluia! The Lord is Risen!'" Mr. Schultz got the message, and supposedly replied indulgently, "the Lord is Risen indeed. Alleluia."

In the past 25 years of preaching on Easter Day I confess to taking a page from Jinx Royden's book by teaching and joshing folk to respond "The Lord is risen indeed, Alleluia." It was a typical way to start the sermon...I'd get into the pulpit and say, "you know it's coming..."—and then I'd shout, "Alleluia. Christ is Risen"—to which after a few years of this the congregation would reply "The Lord is risen indeed! Alleluia." I'm sure my antics drove people crazy, even as Secretary Schultz at St. Bede's probably didn't want Jinx Royden to take him to school that Easter Day so many years ago.

This year, maybe more than any other Easter in our lifetimes we hunger for a truthful proclamation that Jesus has triumphed over death and given us life.

Discovering the promise that Jesus lives, and that he lives right now is a source of daily grace and hope. Certainly this Easter we need to see that God has rolled away the stone because we're not finding it as we look into each other's faces singing "Jesus Christ is Risen today" or around our dining tables with friends and extended family, or in an Easter egg hunts, or anything else that's familiar and tells us it's the Queen of Feasts. Yet like every Easter today we see the risen Christ. He's there with all patients, doctors, nurses, and staff in our hospitals, the people working in grocery stores...suddenly Christ is alive. Together we see millions of people rummaging through the hall closet to pull out the sewing machine and learning to make face masks, and then drop them off at local hospitals, or to neighbors...doing this to share a burden, to shield those who are on the front lines. Suddenly Christ is alive.

We see Jesus Christ Risen from the dead also in what has been. Consider the times you've gone out of your way to show love, to listen without judgment when a friend speaks a truth that's hard for her to share, or for you to hear. Or, when you've been on the receiving end of a kindness immediately revealing another's utter lack of self-concern.

People and moments, now and in the past, whose way helps you discover the print of the nails on their hands. When we begin there, my friends, we see Jesus Christ risen from the dead.

And, let's proclaim what is also true: Christ is alive in the graces of Easter 2020. Think about it. We are choosing to sacrifice what's comfortable, predictable, and let's be honest, profitable, to stop the spread of a virus. That's stunning! We are staying home to slow the spread, shutting everything down, keeping alive the most vulnerable among us...Jesus risen from the dead, and raising us with him to new life. We cannot cling to him because he leads us onward, so we say good riddance to the old life of doing only what's good for ourselves, and we sing "welcome happy morning" to the new and glorious way of caring for the whole world. Alleluia Christ is Risen!