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Empowered by Easter

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Isaiah 65:17-25; Luke 24:1-12

I can't ever remember being as ready for Easter as I am this year. Maybe I say that every year, but I imagine I'm not alone in that sentiment. It's been a long, hard winter, both in terms of the weather - and the atmosphere in our country, and around the world.

It's so good spring has finally arrived. Funny how we're surprised by it every time it rolls around, as if *this* were the year it might not *really* come. But life returns; *the green blade rises*. It's good to remember that as we contemplate the shadowy time in which we live.

But that's not the only, or even the primary reason I'm ready for Easter. We spent the season of Lent at Westminster this year thinking together about death. We gathered here, Sunday after Sunday, to have a conversation on the end of life. We invited guests from other traditions to teach us about how they deal with

death, in order that we might learn more about *our* way of facing the great mystery of what lies beyond this life.

It turns out that every one of those traditions – Islam, Judaism, Hinduism – embraces some form of life beyond this life.

By now probably most of you have heard now of the awful bombings in Sri Lanka, as Easter dawned, in Catholic churches. We don't yet know who the attackers were. I remember when the imam spoke here a few weeks ago I asked him about terrorists who do things in the name of Islam and call themselves martyrs, and he said, "No one gets up in the morning and says, 'Today I'm going to be a martyr.' Those who died in the mosques in New Zealand – *they* were the martyrs."

And those who died in the churches in Sri Lanka are martyrs today. We lift our prayers in support of their families and their congregations.

The imam also said to us that in the Qu'ran it says that not only Muslims, but also Christians and Jews, will be received by God into eternal life. Every tradition represented in our Lenten dialogues this year uses different language, but all point in the same direction and reach the same conclusion: when life on this earth ends, there is more to come.

Each tradition has its own way of speaking about what opens for us at the close of earthly life. And none of the traditions is concerned about limiting life beyond this life only to those of their own tradition. *Our* faith need not narrow itself in that way, either.

So after all that talk about death, I'm ready for today, and for *our* particular way of speaking about what happens when life is over. *Easter* is our word for it. *Resurrection* is the name we give it. The angels help explain it that morning long ago. "Why do you look for the living among the dead?" they ask the women at the tomb. "He is not here, but has risen."

It's a moment of empowerment for the women. *They* make the discovery. *They're* the first witnesses. *They* run to tell the others, empowered by Easter. And they run right into the patriarchal system of that time when the disciples refuse to believe what the women tell them. But those women go ahead and preach the first sermon of the church: *He is risen!*

It took women, barred from places of power, without authority and privilege, to see and believe. In life Jesus encouraged and embraced and trusted women; now in his life *after death* he does the same!

Easter empowers because it refuses to take no for an answer. It will not let death win. *Life wins* – and the women discover that at the empty tomb when the angels let them in on the resurrection secret. Hope is unleashed in that moment and will never again be bottled up, never again be out of reach to the human family.

Easter is good news for those on the underside of history, those accustomed to losing when it comes to life.

Isaiah, the ancient prophet of Israel, said it would be like this when the Messiah came – a re-setting of priorities: the hungry would be fed, the imprisoned visited, the sick healed, the naked clothed. The world would be turned topsy-turvy. “The wolf and the lamb shall feed together, the lion shall eat straw like the ox.”

That’s an Easter vision, and it’s all around us, hidden from view perhaps, but most often rising from the ashes of destruction and death.

Twenty-five years ago this month, just a few days after Easter 1994, the Rwandan genocide began. In three months nearly one million people were killed. Yet, today Rwanda stands as a model for the rest of the world. Rwandans have learned from the past and are committed to forge a future that will not repeat it.

Rwanda dealt with the pain and death of that time by insisting that perpetrators hear from victims and survivors.

Twenty years ago the government passed a law – drawing on ancient tribal practice – requiring citizens to participate in a joint work day once a month. It’s called *Umuganda*, and it means “coming together in common purpose to achieve an outcome.” It has much to commend it.

On the last Saturday of each month everything stops all across Rwanda for the national work day. Everyone between the ages of 18 and 65 who can work is required to show up. Stores are shuttered and schools closed. Streets are empty. And neighbors work together on public projects, or to help the most vulnerable in their communities.

The government has also set up Reconciliation Villages, new towns where perpetrators live side-by-side with victims. They speak openly of what they experienced or did during those terrible days a quarter century ago, and slowly learn to be neighbors who trust and rely on one another. Those once on the receiving end have been empowered in those settlements. They are Easter Villages, where life begins anew.

Umuganda and the Reconciliation Villages have not been perfect, but they have made a major difference in re-building Rwanda. Out of the destruction and death of genocide a nation finds new life. The human family has the capacity to rediscover light even in the deepest darkness.

Our nation could learn from Rwanda about how to live together more justly. Can you imagine a national day of shared service in our communities, every month? What would that do for us? Maybe we could begin to dismantle racism in new ways, or start to diminish the inequities among us. Can you imagine neighborhoods or even entire towns designed to be Reconciliation Villages? We might finally learn to live together in peace, with *justice for all*.

If Easter is going to have any lasting meaning for those of us who practice it, it will need to break out of the exclusive grip of our tradition. It will need to be more than merely our annual religious holiday. We will need to see Jesus, the *Son of Humankind*, as the gospels call him, as belonging to and loving the entire human family.

Easter is a celebration not only of the resurrection of Jesus but of the rising of the human spirit – for which every tradition and all people long.

That longing showed up in Paris this past week. When the cathedral of Notre Dame was burning, something larger than a beautiful building went up in flames. The heart of the nation. The soul of a people. A symbol of the life of France. Stability. Peace. It felt for moment as if all were lost.

But then a light slowly began to dawn. A friend of mine in Paris saw it. “In one of the most secular nations on earth,” he wrote, “People started spontaneously praying and singing together in the streets.”

We all saw it in the news reports: a sense of camaraderie welled up among strangers. Whether they were people of faith or not they united in their anguish, and in their hope. The fire stirred the human heart to remember things beyond our comprehension that bind us together and give us the strength to trust in new life, and in new possibilities of living together. Those are resurrection impulses, and they are empowered by Easter.

Two days after the fire in Paris, bells rang out in solidarity across France, indeed, around the world, including here in Minneapolis, but not yet at Westminster. Our church is in the midst of a campaign to add bells to the new tower to complete the design. Look for information on the table outside the sanctuary or on the website: <https://www.westminstermpls.org/stewardship/odof/bells-donation/>. If we reach our goal, the Westminster Bells will ring for Easter next year, reminding the community of our shared life together, our shared purpose in this city.

When a woman in Strasbourg heard that town's bells ringing in solidarity, she said, "I just arrived for the first ring of the bells and immediately there was an emotion. Incredible, indescribable, I can't explain it. It was beautiful and sad at the same time."

(<http://www.startribune.com/1-billion-raised-to-rebuild-paris-notre-dame-after-fire/508684872/>)

That may have been how the women felt that morning when they arrived at the tomb, ready to anoint the body. Suddenly they found themselves empowered to see everything in a new way. "Why do you look for the living among the dead?" the angels ask them. "He is not here, but has risen."

Having brought their grief, they suddenly found it mingling with joy. It was sad – and beautiful at the same time. Sorrow mixed together with love. The night chased away by the dawn. The green blade rising after a long winter.

Call it what you will, for us, as followers of Jesus, *that's Easter.*

Christ is risen! *He is risen indeed!*

Alleluia! Alleluia! Alleluia!

Amen.

Pastoral Prayer

David Shinn

O God, with faces touched by the light of a new day,
and hearts warmed by our prayers and praises,
we come before you to pray with the power of Easter,
we boldly pray for the needs of our world and our community.

Into the light of Easter morning,
we bring those places in our world
where war, violence, poverty and need
are the experiences of everyday life. Cameroon, Palestine, South
Sudan, and many nations facing challenges.
May the light of Christ shine upon them.

Into the light of Easter morning,
we bring the headline news of this weekend. For Sri Lanka after
the bomb explosion in churches and hotels. Frighten migrants
arrested at the boarder by armed militia, burning of historic
cathedral and historical black churches, and the 20th anniversary
of Columbine shooting,
we hold all in our hearts the pain
of those suffering violence, bereavement or conflict.
May the light of Christ shine upon them.

With the never ending love of God, even and especially in death,
we bring all who are grieving this day for the death of their loved
ones.

May your peace comfort their sorrow, your light lightens their grief.

May the light of Christ shine upon them.

Into the light of Easter morning
we raise those who are struggling with illness,
with despair over their lives, or with
the breakdown of relationships.

May the light of Christ shine upon them.

And into the light of Easter morning
we bring ourselves, the private struggles,
the heart's yearnings, the hidden dreams,
the unfulfilled potential.

May the light of Christ shine upon us.

Shine upon us with your love that death can't defeat.

Hope beyond the grave,

Joy above all tumults,

Reconciliation and conciliation over brokenness, and

Resistance and resilience stronger than despair with the power of
the Risen Christ.

With the resurrection impulses, we pray the prayer of Jesus, Our
Father...