

Easter Sunday 2021: "And Peter (And Us), Too"  
Mark 16:1-8  
April 4, 2021  
Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Manasquan, NJ

Early last week I was working on my sermon for Maundy Thursday. Easter Sunday was feeling pretty far away when I found an e-mail with "Easter video" as the subject line. It was from Ned and the message read, "The video of 'Jesus Christ Is Risen Today' is finally done. I'll set it to post to the HT Facebook and YouTube pages Easter afternoon. In the meantime, keep your eyes open on the 3<sup>rd</sup> verse. You'll see some familiar faces!"

I don't like to rush the season by breaking into Easter candy early or breaking out into premature alleluia's, but of course I was curious. I told myself I needed a break anyway, so I clicked on the link. What a gift! Ned and three members of our pandemic choir are among the 1,784 people who make up a virtual choir and orchestra performing "Jesus Christ Is Risen Today," the glorious Easter hymn to which we gathered earlier. Sponsored by the Association of Lutheran Church Musicians, the video stitches together individual frames of participants into a giant, living patchwork quilt! We see folks playing organs, flutes, oboes, French horns, cellos, tubas, violins, trombones, trumpets.... We see singers standing by stained glass or in front of rank upon rank of organ pipes. We see others standing in their living room or performing in their work space. Our presiding bishop, Elizabeth Eaton, is playing the flute in her Chicago office!

Our four HT choir friends share the screen for a minute just with each other, so they're nice and big. As the hymn builds to a big finish, more and more photo frames are included, and the views become smaller and smaller until we end up with what's almost abstract, pixelated art. The more often I watched it, the tearier I got. How can we hear or

sing the great Easter hymns and not remember the loved ones who once stood beside us in worship and sang those hymns with us? How can we not feel a little sad, but also really glad, at the thought of our loved ones “at the Lamb’s high feast”??

There’s a big age range in the video, with young adults through older adults on camera, but I also couldn’t help but notice one little fellow who looks like he couldn’t be much more than 8 or 9. He has on a giant set of earphones and is singing his heart out. Other singers have headsets or are standing in front of mikes. Technology in service of worship! The internet bringing us spiritually together when we have to be physically apart! As I view the video, I feel like my praise soaring high on the wings of others’ song and music. At the end of the video there’s a beautiful dedication:

*A gift from the Association of Lutheran Church Musicians  
to the whole people of God  
celebrating Easter  
in the era of the pandemic.*

What a reminder! “We’re in this together, people!” Through faith we are family, not just with the 4 people we personally know in the video, but also with the other 1,780 brothers and sisters in Christ who invested precious time and talent to gladden our celebration of the Resurrection, to remind us that, in Mother Teresa’s words, we should never let anything so fill us with sorrow that we forget the joy of Christ risen! Not COVID, not civil unrest, not climate change, not economic hardship, not divorce, not disease, not even death.

We’ve heard the earliest, the strangest of the Easter Gospels this morning. There are two endings to St. Mark’s Gospel, and we just listened to the first, the one that scholars tell us is the original. It’s weird because the risen Lord doesn’t appear in person, and the angel expects the women to take his word for it that Jesus has been raised. The angel charges the

women to go and tell the men the news, but instead *“they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.”* (Mark 16:8c) Period. (There are more verses that follow that sentence, added to the Gospel later. Hopefully I’ve made you curious and you’ll go home and look in your Bible or check on-line for what **the other verses** say!)

Obviously at some point the women broke their radio silence, because we **know** that they didn’t say anything to anyone. We have a record of the message they were meant to carry: *“...go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you.”* (Mark 16:7) The popular Christian author Max Lucado, in his book *Cast of Characters: Common People in the Hands of an Uncommon God*, shines a light on just two words there. He points out that there is great hope for us in those two words. They are *“and Peter.”* Other than Judas, the betrayer, who was no longer on the radar, Peter, the denier, must have felt like the biggest screw-up. In the high priest’s courtyard a servant girl had pegged him as one of Jesus’ associates, *“But he denied it, saying, ‘I do not know or understand what you are talking about.’”* (Mark 14:68) The cock crows the first time.

*And the servant-girl, on seeing him, began again to say to the bystanders, “This man is one of them.” But again he denied it. Then after a little while the bystanders again said to Peter, “Certainly you are one of them; for you are a Galilean.” But he began to curse, and he swore an oath, “I do not know this man you are talking about.” At that moment the cock crowed for the second time. Then Peter remembered that Jesus had said to him, “Before the cock crows twice, you will deny me three times.” And **he broke down and wept.*** (Mark 14:69-72)

In the Apostles’ Creed we remember how Jesus “descended to the dead,” a reference to His mysterious “harrowing of hell” between death and resurrection. Jesus was in literal hell and Peter was in figurative hell between Friday and Sunday. Maybe we can identify with some of Peter’s remorse. He had let **fear** cause him to abandon his friend, to **deny** a

very important relationship. How could Peter live with himself, how could he hope for forgiveness from Someone who was no longer there?? When the pressure was on, he caved. Instead of rising to the occasion of his friend's need, he had sunk into a cesspool of self-preservation. Tempted to lie, he **did**. Then he **repeated** the lie **twice**. He didn't pray for strength. He fell to weakness. He acted out of his worst instincts and he was ashamed of himself and despairing of his future.

Now we understand the significance, the power, the grace in those two words, "**and Peter**": "...[G]o, tell his disciples **and Peter** that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you." Peter may have abandoned the Lord, but the Lord has not abandoned Peter. Forgiveness is available to Peter. A renewed and deepened relationship with the Lord is possible for Peter. Peter needed to hear that. Peter needed "the engraved invitation"! Peter needed to be singled out, not as Teacher's pet, but as the forgiven sinner – like us.

There are more antiheroes than heroes in the story of our Lord's Passion. We've already mentioned Judas and Peter. There's also a shadowy, odd figure who isn't given a name and doesn't usually get much attention. He shows up during the arrest in the Garden of Gethsemane. The fellow is following close behind Jesus, maybe wanting to help in some way, but not really dressed for the occasion. St. Mark says he was "*wearing nothing but a linen cloth. [The temple soldiers] caught hold of him, but he left the linen cloth and ran off naked.*" (Mark 14:51) Awkward.... What was **that** guy feeling between Friday and Sunday??

We **all** have reasons to feel guilty, ashamed, embarrassed, for our many, daily failures in love. But today (and every Sunday, every "little Easter"!) we celebrate the Savior who forgives us. The angel's message wasn't meant just for the disciples, and Peter; it is for

each one of us [add your own name here!]. We are freed from our sin, relieved of our guilt, cleansed of our shame, by our Lord Jesus. Because of our baptismal sharing in His death and resurrection, the Holy Spirit enables us to die to sin and rise to new life every single day. Picture us each in our separate “frames,” then all pieced together in a virtual video of those for whom Christ died and rose. We make up quite a “cast of characters.” It’s a collage of pure grace. “Alleluia! Christ is risen!” “Christ is risen indeed! Alleluia!”

Pastor Mary Virginia Farnham