

Easter Sunday
The Rev. Ian Burch
St. Mark's Episcopal Church | Milwaukee, WI
April 4, 2021

I want to bring your mind back to a year ago. It was Easter Sunday. We were uncertain when we might be back in our parish together. Our Holy Week had been entirely online. We had few ideas about the novel coronavirus, how it spreads, and what precautions were reasonable to save lives. I don't want to project on to you what I was feeling. But I remember that Easter Sunday vividly. I remember thinking of how very thin our celebrations felt after the lush Easters we were accustomed to celebrating. The trumpet and organ. The singing. The hymns. The smoke and the flowers. Last Easter, as we prayed together on the computer, I was missing all of it. I remember turning the computer off and going downstairs. I had said the prayers of the church like I was supposed to. And I had even preached about the way that God could use even those difficult days as a vehicle for resurrection. I said the words that I was supposed to, but if you don't mind hearing my confession, I didn't feel them deep in my bones.

Maybe you felt scared like I did, or isolated like I did. We had no idea when it might end. In my head, I knew about the promises of life offered in the Gospel. But in my heart, I was feeling a deep sense of Good Friday even though it was supposed to be Easter morning.

Fast forward one year to this morning. This year has been a big emotional and spiritual blow to our church. In addition to the staggering number of deaths in the country, we, the people of St. Mark's, have endured loneliness, depression, anxiety, frustration. Some have experienced financial instability. Our youngest members have missed their friends and have had to adapt to strange rhythms at school. We have even had to mourn our dead in a socially distanced fashion, without the support of hugs and handshakes to help take the edge off of grief. This year has tested us, has made us reach deep for resources inside our souls. It has been really hard. When I turned off my computer last Easter, I didn't feel very much like singing Alleluia.

And then this year happened. And six days a week for an entire year, faithful people have come together online at 9 am to pray. And others have come on Wednesday and Saturday evening. And a huge majority of you have come to pray on Sunday mornings, even when the technology was buggy or the experience paled in comparison to an in-person Sunday morning. And you all trudged out in the cold and heat and rain to have your cars blessed and to bring food and clothes to people in need. You have donated money to rent assistance and have kept on another company in film clubs and happy hours. This church, in the midst of a terrible year, did not decide to close. Instead, it opened up daily opportunities to serve God and to serve one another. By Christmas, we were creatively following the nativity story in art while freezing our fingers off in a sanctuary. This is absolute lunacy in so many ways. But I also think it is resurrection. I think it is Easter.

Through the power of the God who strengthens and who has defied death today, the community rose up through this entire year and showed the world that death is not the greatest power there is. Instead, we showed that Christ is very much alive in our midst and that the powers and principalities out in the world cannot put out the Easter fire.

Watching this church this year has made me a believer. Or I should say, it has reminded me of the faith that I found so hard to access last Easter.

This year, I find myself looking at the empty tomb with Mary Magdalene — apostle to the apostles — and seeing it for the miracle that it is. And the power of this community has overwhelmed me. Behold what manner of love the Father has given unto us — in the words of a favorite scripture.

I spend a lot of time thinking about the church. We have a staffing conundrum that we have to figure out. We have a huge building conundrum that we have to figure out. We are a mainline church existing in a time when attendance at mainline churches is at the lowest it has been since they invented the measurement, and it is falling.

But you know what? None of that is worrying me right now. Because I have seen what God has done to raise this community from the dead this year. I have seen with my own two eyes the empty tomb. Death is not the answer, my friends. Nor is it the end. Hell is as empty as the tomb. And we are the spiritual beneficiaries of Jesus' work on the cross. God did not abandon the people then, and God will not abandon us now.

This church is a testimony to the power of God over the grave. There is nothing we cannot do because of the power we have as followers of the Risen Christ. Christ is Risen. Happy Easter. Alleluia. Amen.