



Grace Lutheran Church, State College, PA

Rev. Scott E. Schul

Easter Sunday: April 12, 2020

Sermon Title: "The Easter We Needed"

Gospel Text: Matthew 28:1-10

Alleluia! Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! *This* is the joyous proclamation we make together *every* Easter. It is one of the few things that has remained the *same* this year: the year of the coronavirus pandemic, the year that has upended and overturned nearly everything we know, every tradition we hold dear, and every assumption we have ever made; the year when something as simple as a handshake has become a danger to our health; the year in which church, school, and even dreams have been postponed. *This is not the Easter we wanted.*

It's a challenge to celebrate this year when we find ourselves alone or with a small number of family members, confined behind locked doors, trying to make sense of a jumble of emotions that range from fearful to resentful, to deeply sad. *Yes, this is not the Easter we wanted.*

It's inevitable today that our minds turn to memories of Easters-past. We long for so many things that we thought would be unbreakable, unchanging, and here forever, without exception, on each and every Easter Sunday we would celebrate in this life. What traditions are on that list for you? What things are you missing this Easter Sunday?

I remember the Easters of my youth, and the way everyone – even the kids – would be dressed up in fancy clothes for worship. Men would wear their suits; women wore new dresses and Easter bonnets, and even the most reluctant of church goers was persuaded to get out of bed, get cleaned up, and get to church on Easter.

After church, the celebration continued at home. I always looked forward to my Easter basket. It contained the usual things like jellybeans, but my basket was extra special because it contained two things I fervently loved: peanut butter chocolate eggs and baseball cards. I guess in many ways I haven't changed all that much from my ten-year-old self! As the day progressed, it was time for the big extended family dinner. My grandparents were there, and the table was full of Easter favorites like ham, scalloped potatoes, and the best pies in all of McKean County. It won't be the same this year for me *or* for you. *This is not the Easter we wanted.*

These days, my fondest Easter memories are centered mostly on worship here at Grace. I miss the *flowers*. The annual Easter floral display around our altar overwhelms the senses with visual beauty and the aroma of fragrant spring blooms. I miss the *music* – soaring choral anthems, bombastic brass quartets, and hundreds of voices united in songs about the risen, victorious Christ. More than anything else, I miss the *people*. I miss seeing each and every one of you. You're all precious to Jesus and you're all precious to me. Your faces always brighten

my day, but especially at Easter, as I see you in our gloriously white, bright sanctuary, you *glow*. Easter awakens us from our Lenten winter. It's not the same without all of you here. *This is not the Easter we wanted.*

But as I've longed for an old fashioned Easter, I've come to the realization that if this is not the Easter we *wanted*, it is the Easter we *needed*. Here's why. When I honestly reflect on all the things I'm missing from past Easters, I must grudgingly admit that most are adornments, trappings, and traditions. That's doesn't mean they're *bad* – they are undeniably *wonderful*. But think of it this way. If your fondest memory from your wedding day is the *band* or the *cake* and *not* your spouse, then you were focused on something *good* rather than something *essential*.

God's special call to us this particular Easter is to focus our hearts on the *one thing* that is essential. It's not the music, the flowers, the dresses, or the candy but a *person* – Jesus Christ – who endured the betrayal of Maundy Thursday and the beatings and execution of Good Friday because he wanted to prove beyond a shadow of a doubt that there was *nothing* in this world that could separate him *from* us, and nothing in this world he would not do or endure *for* us. Yes, Easter 2020 may not be the Easter we *wanted*, but it is the Easter we *needed*: an Easter centered on Jesus Christ and an Easter overflowing with the timeless message that Jesus loves you and has not forgotten you. He is using the hardships of this present day to draw you closer. And he is calling all of us from our tombs of despair and self-centeredness into a new creation of love, mercy, and grace.

This Easter – *the Easter we needed* – bears a striking resemblance to that very first Easter, as recorded in Matthew's Gospel. Just think about it. On that very first Easter, almost all of Jesus's followers were just like us: alone or with a small number of family members, confined behind locked doors, trying to make sense of a jumble of emotions that ranged from fearful to resentful, to deeply sad. What were the things they were missing? Perhaps they missed the joyful communal meals and all the conversations and songs and dreams they shared. Maybe they missed the many relationships that had formed as they followed Jesus back and forth between Galilee and Jerusalem. And how could they not miss those literal mountaintop experiences with Jesus where they learned, grew, and were transformed? Who could blame them if they thought it was all over – the experiences, the relationships, and even the movement itself – as dead as the carpenter's son who once led it.

Maybe there's a part of you that likewise feels a little dead. After all, this is not the Easter we *wanted*. But it is the Easter we *needed*. Because today we are reminded by Matthew's Gospel that Jesus doesn't depend upon blaring brass, a big dinner, or hundreds of flowers to come to us; he comes to us in the quiet of our everyday activities, just like he did to the two Mary's on that first Easter day. Where will you meet Jesus today?

I love how the two Mary's reacted after hearing the good news of Jesus's rising from the dead: *fear and great joy*. It's not what you'd expect, is it? But it's such an authentic and human reaction to change – even good change. Because a Jesus who has risen from the dead was surely not the Easter they *ever expected*. But it was the Easter they *needed*, the Easter the *world* needed, and the Easter we desperately need today.

That first Easter contained just three small things. They're easy to miss but worth noting because they are the same three things Easter 2020 offers us. First, when the two Mary's saw the risen Jesus, they responded with praise and worship. Second, Jesus assured them that they need not be afraid. The third and final thing that first Easter celebration entailed was a call – a call from Jesus to the two Mary's to tell the others that Christ had conquered sin, death, and the devil. He had risen!

And so, my friends, I'm sorry that our church service isn't like the one's we've so enjoyed in the past. I'm sorry that we're apart, and that even our gatherings in our homes will be filled with less food and less celebration than in years past. But maybe with those things set aside for a year, we have a little more room for Jesus. And maybe that frees us to embrace those same three things that formed the foundation for the first Easter: (1) we can praise and worship Jesus; (2) we hear his assurance that we need not be afraid; and (3) in our own way, with our own unique set of gifts, we can each spread the word that Jesus rose from the dead just so he could save us and love us.

*If each of us were to embrace those three simple things, this would be the best Easter ever. It might not be the Easter we *wanted*, but it surely would be the Easter we *needed*. Alleluia! Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! Amen.*