

## **“AN EMPTY EASTER”**

***By Rev. Victor Kim***

***John 20:1-18***

(04-12-20) Easter

This is an Easter like no Easter that any of us have ever experienced. No time in modern history has there been a time like this when the vast majority of churches will be closed during the holiest day of the Christian year. I don't know what your Easter traditions are, but mine have included waking up early on Easter morning to venture out to a park that overlooks the city when I lived back in Calgary, or after I moved here to Richmond, going down to Steveston, to Garry Point, to gather with other Christians for the sunrise service at the water's edge. Then we would usually gather with family and when our kids were younger, there would be an Easter egg hunt, followed by an extended family dinner.

And of course, at the center of it all was the church service. Easter Sunday, along with Christmas Eve, are always the biggest congregations of the year for any church. As the minister I would look out at the congregation on Easter Sunday and there would be entire families sitting together, parents and grandparents with children I hadn't seen since last Easter. **There's always more at the Easter service. More people, more music, more fanfare, more life.** And there's that connection with life at Easter that goes **beyond** the just the religious or spiritual. Easter is so connected to spring, to the renewal of creation, to the lengthening of days, to the return of warmth and the fullness of so many aspects of life.

But this year, instead of fullness, there seems to be only emptiness. Empty. It's a word that's so apropos for this Easter. Empty churches, empty schools, empty restaurants, empty arenas, empty businesses and empty beaches. **It feels like so much**

**of what we know has been hollowed out**, emptied this Easter because of the coronavirus outbreak. Sure, we're still gathering as a church, we're on this thing called Zoom or Facebook or YouTube, some of us have had to finally make the jump to social media, forced by necessity after holding out for as long as possible. But it's not the same, is it? I know you're out there, listening, singing and praying with the few of us gathered here to put together this worship service, **but somehow it just doesn't seem the same. I know you know it too.**

I was hoping early on in the outbreak of the virus that if we closed the church for 2 or 3 weeks, then we could meet again, targeting Easter as our return date. And how great that would have been, to return to church on Easter! It was such a great idea that even the American president wanted to have churches full for Easter. Great minds think alike. Actually wait, strike that last statement. Some have even argued that we should delay Easter, celebrate Easter once the churches are cleared to gather again. Why not just celebrate Easter in June or July or August? It would be a resurrection of sorts, wouldn't it!

**But that would miss the point of Easter completely.** Yes, there is so much around us that is empty this Easter. But of all the emptiness of this year, there is only one emptiness that matters at Easter **and that's the empty tomb. The tomb is empty, Jesus is resurrected. Death has been overcome, darkness cannot hold back the light, love will win out over fear.** And just as it did that first Easter, **it will take place whether we are present to celebrate it or not.** Listen to the text from John's gospel account. Mary Magdalene and the others went to the tomb in the darkness before the dawn. I don't know exactly what they were thinking but I'm sure the last thing they were thinking was that they were going to witness a resurrection.

Mary went to the tomb because that's what you do when you've lost someone precious; you go to where their body is. You go to mourn, to lament, wishing it could have been different, that it didn't have to end this way. **And instead she finds a mystery, an empty tomb, the stone rolled away.** Jesus' body is missing. Peter and the other disciple, likely John, rush to the tomb and they too see the empty tomb. The text says that John believed, but what he believed we're not sure of, for as yet, says the text, they did not understand.

**You see, Easter will happen whether we understand it or not, whether we gather or not, whether we celebrate it or not.** It would be misguided to say that Easter isn't happening this year because of COVID-19, actually, it would be just plain wrong, **as if the reality of Easter depended on whether we are able to acknowledge it or not.** No one was there to acknowledge it that first Easter. No one expected it to happen. Instead Jesus' closest friends were holed up behind locked doors, practicing social distancing from the authorities that had just put their Lord and Master to death on a cross.

Easter happens because God wills it. **Our belief in it has no bearing on the resurrection, as if our disbelief would prevent Jesus from being raised from the dead.** The tomb is empty because God, in God's love for all of humanity, chose to raise the Son from the dead, chose to deny sin its force of finality, chose to love us even while we were still sinners. **In a way this Easter is more like the first Easter than all the other Easters we have celebrated.** Think of how we celebrate Easter. It's triumphant. We live on the other side of the resurrection. Jesus is alive, Christ is risen, he is risen indeed.

We walk into our churches on Easter Sunday dressed in our best, ready to sing our hearts out; even those who only grace the pews once year know that it's special.

**But this year it's different. This year is more like that first Easter. There's a sorrow and grief that hangs over us, over the world this Easter.** There's nothing triumphant about this Easter. **There's an uncertainty about this Easter that makes the truth of Easter that much more vital.**

Will the world return to the way it was once the pandemic subsides? Will people just go back to doing what they always did, in the way they always did it? I'm not so sure, actually, I hope not. If I were you, I'd think hard about investing in companies like Zoom and Gojo Industries, they're the ones who make Purell hand sanitizer. Maybe the pandemic will reach its peak in the next few weeks or months, or maybe it comes back in the fall or next year or year after year. We just don't know. Like Mary when she went to the tomb that first Easter, **we're in the dark about our futures as well.**

**But light is coming.** After the others left, Mary remained. She lingered. And as she stood there weeping, the dawn's light begins to pierce the darkness. She sees, but she still doesn't understand, she doesn't recognize, whether its angels, or even Jesus. But then Jesus calls her name and the fog lifts, the darkness flees, and the future seems so clear. All she wants is for things to be the way they were before. **But Jesus, even though he gives life, gives it now in ways that are new, in ways that won't be the same as before.**

There's a lot about this Easter season that is marked by emptiness. But the only emptiness that ultimately matters at Easter is the empty tomb. **Jesus is either alive or he isn't.**

**He's either been resurrected or it's a big lie, fake news. He's either the living Son of God or we are of all people most to be pitied.** It is this emptiness, the emptiness of the tomb, the claim that death cannot hold Jesus, that darkness cannot overcome the light, that fear cannot conquer hope and love; it is the empty tomb that gives perspective and significance to how we understand the emptiness of so much around us.

**How do we make any sense of the senselessness of the suffering and death caused by the coronavirus outbreak, but not only that, but by ongoing illnesses and disease that rob life?** How do we address the still all too real suffering of people oppressed by violence, by poverty, by addictions, by injustice, by abuse? Those things haven't gone away, though you'd never know it by listening to the news these days. There's still here, still real, still emptying out far too many lives. How do we cope with the pain of having to watch loved ones suffer in isolation, in confusion, in fear? How do we cope with our own sense of guilt, of shame, of powerlessness to do something for those we love so much? **The only way to address whatever threatens to empty our lives of hope and strength is the claim of the empty tomb. Jesus is alive, Christ is risen, he is risen indeed.**

It is the resurrection of Jesus that stands at the pivot point of our history and our existence. Either God became human in Jesus of Nazareth and was crucified, died and was buried, and on the third day he rose from the dead, he was resurrected, **or the emptiness has no remedy and we are left to our own devices.** But if the tomb is empty, if the Son has risen, then we know that in our suffering, in our pain, in our guilt and shame and in our sense of emptiness, **we are not alone.** Like Mary, we may want a quick solution, a way to return to the way things were, return to health, return to

vitality, return to security, return to stability, but like Mary that's not what the resurrected Jesus offers us. **Resurrection isn't about return, it's about newness, it's about imagination and possibility.** Resurrection promises us that though the path out of our emptiness may be more difficult and longer than we had hoped, **that we will not walk that path alone and that in the end what truly matters is a perspective that understands that our present lives are held within the eternal life that has been won for us through the resurrection of Jesus Christ.** With that assurance, we are encouraged to move from our emptiness to a new fullness of hope, of joy, of passion, of love.

Yes, there is an emptiness to this time, but there is also so much life. We see this life, this hope-filled life in the courage of all those who take on enormous risks to themselves, the front line care workers, the grocery store clerks, those who clean our facilities so that others can work safely, the drive thru workers who keep people fed, those banging on pots at 7 p.m. because they feel compelled to honour the brave, those who stay away from loved ones even though it is so painful, because they love them and because they care for the well-being of others, people whom they've never met or will ever meet, because they know that we are all in this together. All of these examples and more are signs of life in the midst of emptiness, of light in the midst of darkness, of love in the midst of fear. They are signs of resurrection, of newness.

I said that I hope that we don't just return to the way things were. One of the amazing things about our current crisis is that so many have taken action to curtail our own freedoms for the sake of others, for the sake of the most vulnerable in our midst. **Because the empty tomb moves us forwards and not backwards, I pray that even when our present crisis passes, that our concern and care for others may continue to**

**shape our interactions with one another in ways that are new to us instead of quickly returning to old habits of self-centeredness and selfish desire.**

Yes, it's an empty Easter, but Easter is about emptiness. Our churches are empty, but Easter is happening, just as it always does. **It's happening because the tomb is empty, because Jesus is alive, because Christ is risen, he is risen indeed.**

Thanks be to God,  
**Hallelujah!**

*Written by Rev. Victor Kim.  
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