

VISION FORWARD



COVID-19 STEALS NOTHING FROM EASTER

Never would we have imagined to be celebrating Easter online and not together face to face. It is not what we would want nor choose. And, yet, the COVID-19 pandemic neither minimizes nor takes away in the least from what Easter means. It steals nothing. In fact, it heightens and brightens all the more the good news that Easter proclaims.

Easter proclaims that Christ is risen and alive. That He rules and reigns over heaven and earth. That all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to Him. That He is making all things new. That His kingdom has no end. That His name has no equal. That His love knows no

bounds. That His mercy and grace triumph every single day.

Easter, the resurrection of Jesus, changed and changes our world. It changed and changes our destiny. It changed and changes our lives.

In the face of tribulation and suffering, Easter gives us hope, a rock solid hope, and joy, inexpressible and full of glory. This Easter we celebrate what we celebrate every Easter: Christ has conquered sin and death. He has made a way from earth to heaven, from heaven to earth. The kingdom of God has come. The life of the kingdom is the life of God Himself. And His life can become our life, by grace, both here and now; by His Spirit, both eternal and timely.

No, this earth is not heaven. And neither is it all good. Still, James encourages us to “Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kind, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness.” (James 1:2-3) James is not saying all of life is joy, but that all of life can be received with joy. Why? How? Because Christ is at work in us and in the world even through our various trials. Maybe even *especially* through our trials.

James says we “meet trials”. We “meet” along the way. Our “trials” are passing travelers along the path and journey of our life. We cross paths, but we each are headed in different directions. Christ is leading us home where “He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away.” (Revelation 21:4)

But, yes, for the time being we “meet” trials and tribulations. Like COVID-19. So this Easter we feel Easter more deeply in our bones and soul than perhaps ever before. This Easter the reality of what Christ has accomplished by His death and resurrection hits closer to home. This Easter we taste and see of the goodness of God in a more tangible and powerful way.

This Easter, then, I want us to celebrate, truly celebrate, JESUS. When faced with the imminent brutal facts of the cross, his suffering, his death, and his full separation from the Father, He said, “Now is my soul troubled. And what shall I say? ‘Father, save me from this hour’? But for this purpose I have come to this hour. Father, glorify your name.” (John 12:27-28)

Let these words sink in: “And what shall I say? ‘Father, save me from this hour’?”

I know we have all prayed that prayer in one way or another over these last few weeks. “Save me from this hour.” I want us to reflect on the fact that the matchless glory of Christ shined all the brighter *because* of His sufferings and trials.

While we don’t celebrate the suffering and trials we, our country, and the world are facing and “meeting along the way,” we do and we will

celebrate, rejoice in, and boast of the glory of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. In His glory we “see” and “meet” the face of God in our humanity. Jesus is worthy to be praised and proclaimed from “the rooftops” of our mass gatherings and from the “shelter-in-place” of our homes. COVID-19 has made Christ more precious to us now than ever before.

52 WORDS OF ENCOURAGEMENT

Some time ago I preached on the importance and necessity of encouragement in marriage. I mentioned I had written a list of 100 words of encouragement for Alissa. At the end of that sermon, I said I recognize that not everyone has someone in their life to encourage them. So I wrote a list of 52 words of encouragement in particular for those individuals.

During this time of social distancing and being apart, I was impressed upon to give each of you this list again. Some will read these words for the first time. Others who have forgotten will read them as if for the first time. As your pastor, I want you know that I love you and you are in my thoughts and prayers constantly. I want you to come out stronger at the end of all this. So, these words are for you:

- 1) God loves you with an everlasting love.
- 2) He sees you and never ignores you.
- 3) He knows you and never rejects you.
- 4) He hears you and never forgets you.
- 5) He cares for you and always provides for you.
- 6) He protects you and always fights for you.
- 7) He guides you and always watches over you.
- 8) He will never leave nor forsake you.
- 9) He forgives you. He wants to!
- 10) His kindness leads you to repentance.
- 11) He is for you and not against you.
- 12) As your pastor, I love you.
- 13) I pray for you.
- 14) I want God’s best for you.
- 15) When I think about God doing great things, I think about you: who He has called you to be and what He has called you to do. You are what moves me.
- 16) You were made, shaped, and formed by God. You aren’t a mess or accident of molecules. You are God’s creation.

- 17) God established the boundaries of your dwelling. You are not an afterthought. You are the eternal thought of God!
- 18) Anyone who is in Jesus is a new creation, with a new heart and new desires, with a new mind and new thoughts.
- 19) You have purpose, meaning, and value in God.
- 20) Jesus died for your sins, so that you might receive God's forgiveness and, having been forgiven, receive new life.
- 21) Because Jesus has changed things, things can change!
- 22) There is no end to new beginnings in Jesus Christ!
- 23) There is always hope in Jesus! He is alive!
- 24) There is always joy in Jesus! He is faithful!
- 25) There is always mercy in Jesus! He is patient!
- 26) There is always grace in Jesus! He is strong!
- 27) You can get through your trials: look to Jesus
- 28) You can get through your failures: look to Jesus
- 29) You can get through your discouragement: look to Jesus
- 30) You can get through your suffering: look to Jesus
- 31) You live in a new age because of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. You can experience His new, abundant, eternal life now.
- 32) The kingdom of God has come in Jesus. He rules and reigns over heaven and earth now.
- 33) You are invited into the undiminished, unbroken communion and communication of the Father, the Spirit, and the Son now. Here is life and joy forevermore!
- 34) Jesus is your helper. In Him you lack nothing.
- 35) The Holy Spirit is your Helper. In Him you have everything.
- 36) The Father is your helper. He has given you His one and only Son, Jesus Christ.
- 37) You are not your best thought and you are not your worst thought. You are God's thought.
- 38) Do not be afraid! Be strong and courageous. God is with you.
- 39) Do not give up! Wait on God, trust in God. He is good and does good. Always.
- 40) Pray often. And don't worry about how long you pray.
- 41) Read your Bible daily. And don't worry about how much you read.
- 42) Worship often, not because worship changes you, but because God does. The more you see His glory, the more you will be conformed into His image.
- 43) God doesn't want your obedience. He wants your heart. If He has your heart, He will have your obedience.
- 44) Encourage others. You will find yourself encouraged.
- 45) Love others. It will change you.
- 46) Forgive others. It will free you.
- 47) Make the best decision you can. Trust the results to God.
- 48) God is The Grand Artist. He makes no mistake, but from beginning to ending each stroke is perfect in depth and beauty, in detail and purpose.
- 49) Time is God's "unbounded now". He is the Beginning and the End. So don't worry about time. Rest in God.
- 50) The goal isn't to love other things less, but to love God more. The more you love God, the more everything in your life will find its proper place and order.
- 51) If you fail Jesus, Jesus will remain faithful to you.
- 52) Practice your future. You don't have to wait until Jesus returns to begin to live the abundant life He has in store for you. He lives within you now by the indwelling Holy Spirit.

APRIL PRAYER TARGETS

Grab your phone, set a 2 minute timer, and pray daily:

- 1) For our unity as a body to be stronger at the end of all this - for the bond of the Holy Spirit to keep us united to Christ and to one another
- 2) For our essential Frontline workers - for their wisdom, energy, strength, protection, and encouragement
- 3) For the gospel of Jesus Christ to be sown far and wide - that we might see a harvest IN OUR DAYS and that we might BE PREPARED as "workers for the harvest"