

**Sunday, April 12, 2020 – Easter Sunday**  
**“Together Again – Distanced No More”**

Matthew 28: 1-10

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Story Interrupted

Grace, mercy and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, Amen.

Alleluia, Christ is risen!

I can't actually hear your response but I know you're responding. He is risen indeed, Alleluia. This is usually the most verbally demonstrative our Lutheran congregation gets, we don't often hear a lot of out loud responses or gestures in our sanctuary, but "He is risen indeed," especially on Easter Sunday itself, is an exception. I can't actually hear you, but that bold, loud response is heard loud and clear in the heavenly throne room as we celebrate Jesus' victory this morning.

Loud is appropriate today, as Mary Magdalene and the other Mary head to Jesus' tomb at dawn. Loud sounds and sudden sights startle and flood the senses – an earthquake rumbles the earth. The massive stone seal rolls off the front of the tomb. The angel of the Lord appears from Heaven, clothes blinding white like lightning. Those guarding the tomb – soldiers, manly men, are immobilized by terror. And why? Because of the natural electrochemical response humans have to unexpected stimuli? Yes, that's a part of it. Because the news of the events of Good Friday being undone is lighting upon sinners' ears for the first time? Yes, that too. And more: God has accomplished what He long since promised to do. God has set in motion a seismic shift, heralded by earthquake, in how He will deal with His people. God has destroyed the power of sin, death and satan. God's promises are always true – and that's what hope means – looking forward to a promise that is already yours and is definitely going to happen but hasn't happened yet – not even death can separate you from loved ones who die in Christ! Death can distance us no more – we will be together again with Him and with each other. Alleluia, Christ is risen! Loud and proud – YES!

That's good news that bears repeating in every circumstance but has special meaning on this particular Easter – for many of us, the first Easter in our lives that we were not physically present in a church sanctuary. I know, because so many have shared and been so gracious in words of thanks for these services being available online, something normal in your pre-COVID

experience to look forward to, that you're glad to be worshipping, but you're grieving, too. We're grieving the month past and all the attendant losses and changes it has brought. We're grieving the future plans already scrapped and preparing to let go of for this summer. We're grieving the loss of the inability to be physically present to gather with each other to hear (unmediated by screens) our choir, handbells, brass and praise band accompaniment. We're grieving the loss of a sense of safety, some of us traumatized by the simple act of going to the grocery store, while handshakes and hugs are met with deep suspicion and revulsion. We're grieving the Easter fellowship of a shared breakfast and an Easter egg hunt for our children and our family dinners. This Easter is unlike other Easters we've had before. Our collective sorrows as a community bring us closer than ever before to the lived experience of the Marys walking to the tomb, all of us through the common current circumstances in our lives deeply knowing the agony and pain that sin, disease, death, sorrow and grief entail.

And not just for our collective sorrows, but for our personal sorrows. Some, more than others, are deeply impacted financially by this crisis. The stress of filing for unemployment, the uncertainty about the future brings a special level of stress.

And then there's sickness and death. Loved ones in long term care facilities and hospitals are off limits to visitors – a lonely and fearful thing for the sick and agonizing and helpless feeling for their spouses and children. Even pastors need to do pastoral care for hospitalizations and homebound people by phone.

This is a deeply personal thing for me today. My grandma died on Thursday morning after a brief stint in hospice care. She spent the last four weeks of her life sequestered from people that she already knew in a skilled care nursing setting, especially once COVID was found in her home a couple weeks ago. My mom, a mere 20 minute drive away was unable to sit by her mom's beside, hold her hand or stroke her hair as she died. The phone was all we could do. I know others of you out there have endured the same thing over the next month, and others of you will before this is over. And then too, we can't gather together to support and care for each other over a funeral service. I can't jump on a plane this afternoon to be with my Mom, as I would do any other Easter Sunday without a thought if not for this virus and our stay at home orders.

That's why the good news by the angel of the Lord and the loud proclamation of "Alleluia, Christ is Risen!" is so important. Jesus comes for your grief of today, your pain of today, your suffering of today.

The women at the tomb depart quickly with both fear and great joy. That's understandable, isn't it? After all the earth shattering events the news that Jesus is risen and death has been undone seems too good to possibly be true. They follow the angel's instructions to go meet the disciples in Jerusalem and tell them what they've seen – and then the moment.

We won't have a moment like they had. As this social distancing dynamic drags on, I'm sure you've thought of what it's going to be like for things to go back to normal. For one thing, it'll be a new normal, not the same as what we left. It still seems a long way off, we may not be halfway through this yet. And for us, until there won't be one clear "bam" moment, it'll come in stages. Certain types of things will open up first. People at greater risk will likely still be encouraged to stay home as much as possible. And whenever we "go back" to work, or school, or church, much less small gatherings like birthday parties or large social gatherings like concerts and sporting events we'll keep standing six feet or more apart for a time, wearing our masks and so on.

Not so for the women at the tomb, greatly distanced from Jesus through His gruesome death. They're grieving. For them, there's a moment when everything horrible is undone in an instant. They've heard the news, and it's good, but now, all that distance melts away with this: "And behold, Jesus met them and said, "Greetings!" And they came up and took hold of his feet and worshiped him." It's really him! The nail marks are a dead giveaway – death gave up its grip and Jesus lives! They were together again with their Lord! Jesus would soon be together again with His disciples, too! Alleluia, Christ is risen!

The good news of Easter is that even when we are alone, we are together again. Painful as it was to know that my Grandma died with none of her loved ones in the room or able to see her those last few weeks, I also know that she was baptized into Jesus' death and raised with Him as well. That means words like David's in Psalm 23:4 bring great comfort: "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for Thou art with me – Thy rod and Thy staff, they comfort me." For all of our inadequacies to be there with her, the resurrected

Jesus walked with her through the valley of the shadow of death, the resurrected Jesus prepared a place for her, the resurrected Jesus' body is comprised both of those triumphant in heaven and those living on earth, and in the resurrected Jesus, we will be together again.

Distanced, no more.

To all your griefs, losses and pains in this exceptionally difficult, painful time in our lives – know this – we are never alone. The resurrected Jesus is with us. Our hope – God's certain promise that will come true – is that we will be together again, one way or another. Not even the distance of death will keep us apart. And that is EXACTLY what Easter is all about. Alleluia, Christ is risen! In Jesus' name, Amen.