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**Apr 11**

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Title: Witness & Wonder

Scriptures: 1 John 1:1-2:2, John 20:19-31

Easter isn’t over. In fact, it’s just begun! I didn’t know that Eastertide was a thing until college. I was volunteering in children’s church the week after Easter Sunday one year when my friend Hailey, the children’s pastor, explained to the kids that Easter wasn’t over. That was news to me, too! Even still, I didn’t really understand why we took seven full weeks to celebrate Easter. I wasn’t complaining about all the joy that came with it - Easter egg hunts and alleluias and powerful, passionate hymns… but wasn’t the resurrection sort of a one-and-done thing? Wasn’t one Sunday a year enough Easter?

I think that biblical scholar Gail O’Day says it well, so I’ll use her words to explain what Eastertide really means, “Most Protestant Christians are not well attuned to Easter as a liturgical season; after Easter Sunday, Protestant church expectations return to something like business as usual. But nothing could be further from the case. The paschal mystery, the death and resurrection of Christ, is the centerpiece of the Christian faith, and the liturgical year devotes seven weeks to the Easter season, culminating in Pentecost. Importantly, the Sundays of this season are referred to not as Sundays after Easter, but as Sundays of Easter, Sundays fully shaped and embedded in the Easter gospel. For fifty days, the church lives into the reality of the resurrection, of what it means to be a community shaped by the dying and rising of Christ, by the expectation-shattering reality of life victorious over death.”

Attending this church, you’re probably used to some liturgical seasons like Advent and Lent. These are times set aside for a particular purpose and with a specific focus. Eastertide is the same. This is not what the liturgical calendar calls “Ordinary Time,” we are in a season of resurrection. Eastertide feels appropriately timed this year. Though we are in most ways not yet back to business as usual, something has changed in this pandemic. People are getting vaccinated, businesses are reopening, and states are easing protocols. Our numbers are still high, but I can feel a change in the air, even through the mask I still have to wear. This is a resurrection season.

Eastertide is also during the transition from winter to spring. The dead plants in my butterfly garden are starting to sprout back up from the ground. What was dead is rising again. And we can see it - the brightness of blooms where before there was only dirt and snow. We can smell it, that sweet stink that permeates the air and makes our allergies flare-up. We can hear it - the chirping of birds outside our windows. We can feel it - the chill in the air departing, making way for the warmth required for new things to grow. This is a resurrection season.

But I wonder, could the disciples feel it the way I do? Did the change ignite their senses? I don’t think so, at least not at first. When we get to our scripture for today, we find the disciples locked away behind closed doors - seeking security and familiarity in a time when their lives were at risk. But even there, in their hidey-hole meeting space, new life breaks through. They had heard the news from Mary, but who would believe such a tale? Not until Jesus is there, appearing in their midst, do they know the truth. Jesus is risen. And he says, “Peace be with you,” in that way that Jesus does. The marks of death are still on his body - they recognize him by his wounds as much as his words. But he is not just there to give them proof of his resurrection - he is there to give them a new role in this new world. “As the Father has sent me, so I send you,” he says. And then he does something that would not fly in these pandemic times... he breathes on them. But this breath isn’t carrying a virus, it holds a blessing and a charge. “Receive the Holy Spirit,” he says. “If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.” There is power in this breath, in these words. You have a job to do, he says. This is a resurrection season.

But poor Thomas. He wasn’t there. He didn’t witness the wonder of the risen Christ. And because of that, he gets a bad reputation. “Doubting Thomas,” we call him. All he wanted was what everyone else had already received - wouldn’t you want it too? To see him for yourself? Embodied and alive! Thomas gets his wish. Jesus comes, as he did before, mysteriously materializing through doors shut tight. And he says it again, “Peace be with you.” And Jesus offers up what we chastise Thomas for desiring - his risen, injured body. And that act of offering was enough. Thomas doesn’t need to feel, for he has seen. His God, his teacher, his friend has returned to him. Despite what we may read into the text, Jesus doesn’t scold Thomas for his unbelief. He allows him to be a witness. And then he offers a blessing for all who won’t get the same experience, yet will still find some faith in the stories soon to be told. For stories must and will be told - this is a resurrection season.

I have to say, I am a bit jealous of the disciples. The scripture goes on to say that they were witnesses of a great many things left unwritten. This story is for our benefit, that we, too, may believe in the wonder of a God embodied in human form - wounded and bearing the marks of death - yet alive and in our midst. And I wonder, what new life is breaking in now, in this season? What good news can permeate the walls and locked doors we’ve put between ourselves? What blessing can reach us where we’re hiding? Because, whether or not we admit it, we are afraid. And I don’t just mean fear of COVID. So many of us have found our safe places - the beliefs and opinions that we lock up tight for fear that someone might try to change our minds. The silos of our one-sided news feed, the assurance that we are the ones who have it right. These places feel safe because they are familiar in a time where everything feels unprecedented. But how can we be witnesses to wonder if we’re too busy shoring up our defenses? How can we build bridges when we’ve used all our resources building walls? Luckily, Jesus isn’t afraid of walls. Jesus isn’t afraid of locked doors. Jesus doesn’t bother knocking - good news just comes right in. And this gives us an opportunity. Don’t you see it? Don’t you feel it? Don’t you know? Something has changed! This is a resurrection season!

Jesus meets us where we are, but he also calls us out of our locked rooms. We can’t stay where we’re comfortable. We have a job to do! We’ve been given a great gift, just as Jesus gave Thomas and the other disciples. We have been given hope. And Jesus won’t let us just be disciples, Jesus doesn’t merely want us to follow. He wants us to lead. “As the Father has sent me, so I send you,” he says. His disciples become his apostles. And Jesus empowers them with the Holy Spirit, he gives them authority. Because Jesus won’t be in flesh on Earth forever. Jesus is still with us, but we are his hands and feet. So we are sent, out of our safe places and into the messy, uncomfortable world outside our doors. Because the world needs what we have to give - hope, peace, joy, and love. The promise of new life coming back over and over into our wounded, broken lives. And that new life truly is new - it changes things. Jesus didn’t come back as he was before death - he still bears his scars. He came back changed by what the world did to him. But the awful wounds of death were transformed into a living testimony - death was conquered and love prevailed. And that is the good news that we are called to tell. That it gets better. That even in our current state of division and isolation, there is potential for something new and so much more beautiful.

We are called to be witnesses to the good news. Because the truth we have to share is powerful enough to break down dividing walls and rebuild them into bridges. The truth we have to share is powerful enough to bring people from disconnection into community. The truth we have to share is powerful enough to bring food to the hungry, justice to the oppressed, freedom to the prisoner, and love to the lonely. The Easter truth is that Christ is risen. Death has been overcome. We are forgiven and loved.

Just as the disciples are called to be apostles, we too are called to be witnesses to the gospel truth. We have encountered wonder, and we are sent out to tell about it. This is what we will spend our Eastertide focusing on: witness and wonder. Because this is a resurrection season and we are a resurrection people. Christ is risen. Alleluia! Amen.

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