Friends, grace and peace to you and to me from God, our Heavenly Father, and our Risen Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

As a child one of my favorite things about Easter was the additional family that came for the holiday. Typically, this was my brother, Jay, and my Uncle Tom who both live in Minneapolis. It always felt special as we didn’t get to see them that often. As I got older, I looked forward to the moments in the Narthex catching up with older friends who had gone to college and were home for Holy Week. I loved to hear about their classes and campuses and generally how their life was evolving. Soon I was off to college and I was on the receiving end of that same interest. People who I hadn’t seen all year were clamoring to talk with me and hear all about what was going on in my life and in my studies. And in those moments, in the ritual of being present in church and amongst my Lutheran brothers and sisters during Holy Week and Easter, I felt recognition. Those trips those four years home, in doing something that I had done many times before, I felt seen and heard in a way that I had never been before. I felt recognized for who I was and what I could do, and the ritual of “what we do at Easter” helped me to see that.

Friends, I have been thinking a lot about ritual lately. I’ve been thinking about rituals a lot because they are the only thing that I can hold onto firmly in these uncertain times. From where we started with the Covid-19 virus weeks ago, it was thought that it would blow over by this very time. And then things kept getting pushed back and pushed back until the reality of Easter for us this year is that we proclaim Christ risen indeed from our homes, maybe accompanied by a cup of coffee and our favorite pajamas….definitely not a ritual that I or any of us are used to. And I think the morning of that first Easter, Mary had a very similar experience to what we are feeling right now. You see Mary goes to the tomb where Jesus has been laid, to check in on the work of death. Mary begins her day checking to see what death has done throughout the night, who death has taken since the fateful afternoon atop the Hill at Golgotha, checking to see if the tomb occupied by the one she called “my Lord” is still solely occupied by Jesus. Actions and rituals that she would have been familiar with, would have seen family members do this for relatives, would have seen her community do this, maybe even seen her colleagues Mary and Martha do this for their brother Lazarus. Checking in on the work of death was a daily ritual…a ritual akin to how many of us have started our mornings these past few weeks. Checking in on the work of death, seeing the statistics of corona virus cases rise each day, seeing the death toll in our country increase, hearing about the impending shortages of medical and protective supplies in hospitals across our nation, listening to hear if someone noteworthy has succumbed to this pandemic. Checking in on the work of death has become our ritual, just like it was for Mary early that blessed Easter morn. So why, why would this morning be any different for Mary or for us?

Church…I brought up ritual because there is a comfort in rituals…rituals provide framework and stability when we are trying to find answers. That’s what Mary is doing trudging to the tomb on Easter morning…trying to find answers. Trying to come to grips with how her Lord, the Messiah, could have been killed by the very people he came to serve. Why those she called friends seem disinterested in carrying out the message that was entrusted to them, or where Christ’s body has gone now that the tomb stands empty. Mary clings to her ritual to find meaning amidst the chaos swirling around her…but she ends up being found herself. For though she doesn’t recognize Jesus, dismissing him as the Gardener, he recognizes her. “Woman,” he calls her, but Jesus doesn’t stop there. Her presence at the empty tomb is not to fulfill a prophecy or to ensure that this story gets told, she is there as someone known and loved by Christ…someone who needs to be called by name: Mary. And that personal address from the Resurrected Christ towards Mary means all the difference. Known, she knows. Seen, she can see. Loved, she loves… and then goes and tells what she has seen, known, and loved to a world desperately in need of Good News.

Friends that is what our rituals provide us with…recognition. Recognition of who we are, whose we are, and what we are called to do in this world as beloved Children of God. And I think all of us are lamenting our inability to live into our rituals this year; feeling that Easter doesn’t feel like Easter because we aren’t together, because we can’t smell bacon wafting into the sanctuary from our Easter breakfast, convinced that because we aren’t present Easter isn’t Easter. Friends, if ritual is about recognition, then this year we are given a chance to recognize all of who we are. We see ourselves occupying the shoes of the disciples, terrified and fearful about what is to come and what we are to do now. Huddled in our home just like the twelve, trying to safeguard ourselves from the outside world and the dangers of it. We see ourselves as Mary, checking in on the daily work of death, hoping that today death will stay away from us and those that we love. We see ourselves as sinners, questioning whether the tomb is really empty if we aren’t present to attest to it, as though God does not act without our watchful gaze on Him; and we see ourselves as saints for whom eternal life has been won by Christ’s assured Resurrection this day and every single day.

Rituals and recognition, Resurrection and reclusion…this is the reality of our Easter morn St. Philip’s. The reality for us this year, is that this incredible story of the length of God’s love hits home for us deeper and intimately than ever….deeper and intimately than ever because we are living it right now. The Good News of Easter is the Good News that I, we need more than ever because everything outside seems to cast doubt on our perspectives and beliefs about whether Easter is truly Easter this year. And as we live this story out physically and emotionally this year, God emphatically speaks into our fears and doubts with an undeniable truth…the tomb of Christ is empty. The tomb of Christ is empty because God declares it to be so. The tomb of Christ is empty so that you and I might be freed from the power of sin, death, and doubt and rise to newness of life with God. Rise to newness of life with the one who breathed life into us and whose Son’s death and resurrection ushers us into eternal life. Whose love for us knows no bounds, whose compassion for us is poured out in grace upon grace, and who truly knows and loves you and me. St. Philip’s…Easter isn’t about what we do together, it’s not made holy by our presence or our absence, it’s success or failure doesn’t rest upon our shoulders. Easter is about new life, relationship, reconciliation, between us and God…things that God does for us each and every day. It was for Mary outside of the tomb, the twelve looked in their rooms, and for all of us gathered together in spirit this morning. Friends, may this Easter help us recognize that Easter and its empty tomb exists so that we might be God’s forever and always, no matter where and no matter what. Amen.