

When I first started to think about this Easter sermon a few weeks ago, there was much talk about whether churches would be open on Easter Sunday. You may remember the discussion about and the hope that we'd have packed churches for Easter. Well, here we are. It's Easter day. The door behind me is closed, because we can't get in. On this Easter day, we have no brass, no magnificent flowers, no timpani.

But what's important today isn't whether or not churches are open, the fact that they're closed. What's most important today is that the tomb of Jesus was most definitely not closed on that first Easter morning. See how our gospel reading begins.

"Early on in the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb. The stone had been rolled away, and the tomb was open."

We can celebrate Easter without an open church, but we can't celebrate Easter ... we could never celebrate Easter without an open tomb. The tomb was open because the grave could not contain Jesus. Death was defeated, and Jesus won a victory over evil. Suffering, and pain, pandemic could have the last word. Hallelujah! Christ is risen. The Lord is risen indeed. Hallelujah.

I know there'll be some people thinking, "Why is he preaching outside? Why doesn't he find somewhere quieter?" I'll tell you why. Of course, I realize that I could have found some quiet corner in which to preach. In fact, I started out inside. But then I soon realized that I didn't want to preach an Easter message in a hushed tone. I wanted to be outside bellowing over all the distractions.

I'm very conscious that we live in a time with lots of background noise at the moment. We're living with an ongoing commentary on the pandemic. How many people have got it? How many people have died? Where it's spreading. Every day, we're asked to take more precautions. The economic forecasts get more and more dire. We're surrounded by the constant noise of fear and panic.

But today we celebrate a message that needs to be heard above all that background noise. I want the medium today to be the message. I want to be outside preaching loudly, as I want to be heard speaking over all the distractions and all the hubbub. You might not hear every word. One of the big trucks that goes past from time to time might drown me out, but I hope you get the gist of what I'm saying. The Lord is risen. Death will not have the final word. Suffering and evil will not prevail. I hope that today in this service, you can hear that message coming to you loud and clear above all the background noise. Let me read again the verse with which our gospel reading begins.

"Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb." The resurrection took place while it was still dark. The resurrection happened in the dark, and we celebrate that resurrection today in a very dark period in our history. That's a perfectly appropriate place in which to celebrate the mystery of the resurrection. In fact, there is no better place to celebrate Easter. We don't need to wait until everything's hunky-dory. Until everything's sorted out and in order.

We celebrate in the darkness, because that's when the Easter message is most needed. That's when we most need to hear this message of new life, and new hope, and a new

promise. While it is still dark now, we remember today that because of the events of that first Easter morning, a brighter yet more glorious day is coming. And there's one more detail, one more opening that I'd like to draw your attention to in this gospel reading. It comes towards the end of the reading.

It says, "John the disciple reached the tomb first. He went in, and he saw and believed for as yet he did not understand." It's a rather strange turn of phrase. He believed without understanding. He saw the tomb was open, the body gone, but he couldn't comprehend the significance of what he was seeing. Yet he believed. It's not clear from the text exactly what it is he believed in. Did he believe the body was stolen? Did he believe that God had acted to work a miracle? Did he trust that God had vanquished death?

We don't know. We're not told. We only know he saw and believed. He gave himself over without cynicism or despair to whatever messy faith was possible in the moment. "And then he left the door of his heart open for faith to deepen." John opened his heart to the wonder of the situation. He was open to being filled with a new resurrection life.

Let me read an amazing verse that St. Paul wrote in the Book of Romans. He writes this: "If the spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will give life so your mortal bodies also through his spirit that dwells in you." That's a truly amazing verse. The spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in us. Our hearts can be open to receive the spirit and the gift of new resurrection life.

This is a strange and confusing time, just like the first Easter, which I'd have thought the

disciples would also have said was rather strange and confusing. So, we're in good company there. We're not in the church. We can't take communion as is our custom. But the reality of the resurrection is still the same. We can still receive the gift of Jesus, and we can still receive the gift of the spirit of the risen Jesus into our hearts.

In fact, later in the service, Rebecca will lead us in a prayer of spiritual communion, and she'll invite us to pray these words: "Jesus, we receive you into our hearts, O risen Lord, and ask you to dwell in us in the fullness of your strength so that we may serve all our days."

What makes our Easter celebrations complete isn't being in church. It's not the brass. It's not the flowers. It's not the timpani. It's not the church being open. It's our hearts being open to receive Jesus and his resurrection life. Let's remember this Easter, Easter 2020, as the Easter day when we were most open. The door of the church may have been closed, but we celebrated the Easter, the open tomb, by opening our hearts to the risen Lord. Hallelujah! Christ is risen.

The Lord is risen indeed. Hallelujah!