

St. Martin-in-the-Fields Episcopal Church

Keller, Texas

Sermon for Easter Day ~ April 4, 2021

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Questions of life and death have bombarded us in recent weeks. Hard questions. Persistent questions. Complex moral, political, and theological questions. Questions, which, for most Americans, do not have simple, absolute, clear answers. What we have is a blender into which many different ingredients are being thrown and we're not at all sure what the outcome will be. Some examples...

COVID-19: According to the CDC, there have been 30,500,000 cases leading to over 553,000 deaths in the United States in just a little over a year. Vaccines are being injected into arms at an amazing rate of over 3 million per day and 162,000,000 have been administered. Yet people are letting their guards down prematurely and cases are rising.

Homelessness: The Tarrant County Coalition for the Homeless reports that there are 3,598s people living in shelters or on the streets in our county. We do a lot to help with our partners in mission such as the Union Gospel Mission, Presbyterian Night Shelter, and 4Saints Food Pantry. But what is to happen to those we can't help, including homeless children and youth in the coming year?

Terrorism: Terrorists continue to sow violence and fear around the world. Three security agencies of our own government have warned that domestic terrorism poses an elevated threat to the homeland. How do we make sense of this and how do we address the root causes?

Gun Violence: There have been violent incidents involving firearms this year, resulting in 10,791 deaths and 8,279 injuries. Of those who were killed or injured, 72 were children and 264 were teenagers. 120 of the incidents were mass shootings. This validated data was as of yesterday, April 3. How can we prevent gun violence?

War: An estimated 13 million of Syria's people need humanitarian assistance and more than half of the population remains displaced from their homes - including 6.6 million refugees living in neighboring countries and another 6.7 million internally displaced inside Syria. Women and children comprise more than two thirds of those displaced. Our nation's border has been closed to them. Where will they go? Will they ever be allowed to return to their homeland? Authorities are watching conflicts in Afghanistan, Armenia, Yemen, Sudan, Venezuela, Somalia, Iran, and Turkey, to name a few places.

Racism: Today is the 53rd Anniversary of the assassination of The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. On that day he was in Memphis advocating for sanitation workers, for racial equality, and for economic change. I suppose we've come a long way since then, but from the headlines, we still have a long, long way to go.

Religious Extremism, Discriminatory Legislation, Political Polarization, Climate Change, Access to Healthcare, Human Trafficking, Immigration Bans, Russian Influence in our Presidential Election, the list goes on. Some days, we find ourselves feeling overwhelmed, angry, frustrated, afraid, hopeless, or all of the above.

And, then, we have wrestled with questions of life and death involving Jesus of Nazareth. Somehow, miraculously, in spite of his followers, the message has been passed on to us that to fulfill God's promise of salvation, he suffered, was crucified, died, was buried, and on the third day he rose victorious over death. All this, we are told, is for our sake, because in God's opinion, life is precious. That is the unique, God's eye, Easter perspective that has been handed on to us. It is perspective formed by a message that has profound moral, political, and theological implications in the face of all our questions.

Life is precious! That is the message of Easter. It is not so much an *answer* as it is a *witness* to a reality, a viewpoint, and a conclusion that can only be fully attained by faith. It begins when we take the moral and intellectual risk of trusting a God who creates life and assigns preciousness to life beyond what we can imagine. Such trust allows us to embrace the hope-filled message of resurrection on the basis that life is too precious to God for death to have the last word. Job asked, “If a person dies, will he live again?” We can sense a need for Job to resolve that question in a way that allows his hope to conquer his despair. When he does resolve it in the laboratory of his soul, he says, “As for me, I know that my redeemer lives and that at the last he will stand upon the earth. After my awaking, he will raise me up; and in my body I shall see God. I myself shall see, and my eyes behold him who is my friend and not a stranger.” It is the perspective of Easter People that our homeless neighbors, victims of terrorism, war, gun violence, and we ourselves will see that same friend in the continuation of life beyond the mystery of death. And that friend, the Risen Christ, calls us Easter People to bring that perspective, that Easter faith, to heal hurting neighbors nearby and far away, here and now.

The psalmist said, “Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of his saints.” Presumably, that means the Lord knows more about death than we know. It is a matter of perspective; God is looking at life and death from another point of view, from the other side, as it were. When we live in him, we live his life – that is the meaning of eternal life. Seeing things through God’s eyes, from God’s point of view, makes such a difference in our Easter faith and such a difference in the world. Think of what such faith and hopefulness has done and still can do for the life we share with God’s children on this planet, in this nation, and in this city.

I recently received an email from a friend in which he succinctly sums this up: “I suggest to all that if society took the importance of their neighbor as equally important as the memory of this signature holiday, the world would be a significantly better community.”

Life is precious! The Creator has provided limitless resources and placed them at the disposal of those who are willing to risk squandering them to make the point that life is precious by taking life-affirming, death-defying action to partner with God in the ongoing process of creation and its redemption. Jesus showed us how and his crucifixion is a stark reminder of what can happen when you confront the forces of inertia and the forces of darkness and hopelessness.

But that’s not all! The empty tomb affirms that life is precious. God won’t let death have the last word. We cast that news into the blender to contribute hope and affirmation of the preciousness of life from the Easter perspective. The Incarnate God showed us personally in the Paschal mystery, in the cross and the empty tomb, just how precious life is. In death life is changed, not ended, for those willing to see it from his perspective and trust him to cherish and protect us, to reveal himself to us now and in the end as our friend. We need that perspective.

That’s why we celebrate Easter and why we persist in finding ways to gather week-by-week extending the celebration into eternity. Every Sunday is a little Easter and a time for Easter People to strengthen one another and renew hope so we can go back to the blender with our unique God’s eye Easter perspective. Our hope and the hope of the world is in the Risen Christ. It is a hope that can still change the world, but it also is a hope that transcends this world, this life.

For, as St. Paul wrote to the Church in Corinth,

“If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied. But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died. For since death came through a human being, the resurrection of the dead has also come through a human being; for as all die in Adam, so all will be made alive in Christ. But each in his own order: Christ the first fruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ. Then comes the end, when he hands over the kingdom to God the Father, after he has destroyed every ruler and every authority and power. For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death” I Cor. 15:19-26.