

## **Easter Message by Bishop Love**

(April 12, 2020)

**Alleluia! Christ is risen! The Lord is risen indeed. Alleluia!**

There is no greater news in all the world, than that which we proclaim this Easter Sunday – that Jesus Christ has risen from the dead, conquering the power of sin and death – paving the way for all who believe in Him to inherit eternal life.

Easter has always been a very special time for me. When I was a kid growing up in East Texas, my family and I would often spend Easter with my Dad's aunt, my Great Aunt Didder. Her real name was Maggie Lee, but all the family knew her as Didder. A devout Methodist, she was one of the kindest and most loving, Christ-like people I have ever known. Having never married, she lived by herself in Terrell, Texas, just outside town on a few acres of land, the remnants of the old family farm.

On Easter Sunday, my family and I would often go to the early Easter service at our home church of St. Dunstan's in Mineola and then drive to Terrell to spend the rest of the day with Didder. It was a wonderful time. We had Easter Egg Hunts in her yard. She had a white picket fence and flower beds everywhere that made for great hiding places for the eggs.

Afterwards, my sisters and I spent a lot of time out on her front porch swing. I can still hear it creaking as we swung higher and higher to see who could jump out the farthest. Often times in the afternoon, we would head down to the old pond in the cow pasture to go crawdad fishing. Didder would give us little strips of bacon that we would tie on a string and throw out into the water to catch the crawdads. We never ate them, but we had a great time trying to catch them.

One of the highlights of our time together was the Sunday meal. Didder wasn't particularly noted for her cooking, however the one thing she was known for was her fried chicken. It was always dripping in grease, but it tasted delicious. We would sit around the table visiting long after the meal was finished. Those were special times.

Perhaps today, some of you are reminiscing about Easters gone by with family and friends at a relative's home, or the glorious Easter celebration in your home parish. Tragically this Easter, due to the coronavirus pandemic, we aren't able to go in person to be with family and loved ones, nor are we able to go to our home Church to celebrate Easter with family and friends; listening to the Choir sing; kneeling in our favorite pew, quietly saying our prayers; hearing the Gospel read and preached; and best of all going up to receive Holy Communion, touching and tasting the consecrated bread and wine -- the blessed body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Who would ever have thought that the day would come when Church buildings around the world would be locked, sitting empty on Easter Sunday of all days? Tragically, often times it is not until something is gone or taken away from us, that we come to realize how truly important and special it is.

Mary Magdalene, along with Peter and John and the other disciples of Jesus, could relate very much to that sense of emptiness, that sense of loss, that overwhelming sense of sorrow and confusion that many of us are feeling right now as we witness the world being turned upside down all around us. They experienced the same thing, but even more so as they witnessed firsthand the brutal death of Jesus on the cross. The One they had loved and believed in, the One they had dedicated their lives to follow, the One in whom all their hopes and dreams lay, was taken from them and they couldn't do anything to stop it.

In today's Gospel passage from John, we are told that Mary Magdalene got up early before dawn that first Easter Sunday and went to the tomb where Jesus had been buried three days earlier. She and the other women (who aren't named in John's Gospel account), went to the tomb hoping to properly prepare Jesus' body for burial, having been unable to do so earlier due to the Sabbath. This was to be their final act of love for the One they loved so much.

When Mary arrived at the tomb, she discovered that the stone was rolled away and the tomb was empty. Jesus' body wasn't there. Not only had she lost Him through death, but now she would be denied that final expression of love on her part. Filled with grief and sorrow and confusion, all that she could think of was that someone must have stolen Jesus' body. Not knowing what else to do, Mary ran to tell Peter and the others about the empty tomb.

Upon hearing this news, Peter and John jumped up and ran to the tomb. John arrived first. He peered in the tomb from outside, but was unwilling to go in. Peter, in his normal bold manner, upon arriving at the tomb, went right in. John then followed. They discovered it was just as Mary had told them – the burial cloths were there, but Jesus' body was gone.

After seeing this for himself, the Scriptures tells us that John "saw and believed." What is not real clear, is exactly what John "believed." In seeing the empty tomb, was John finally able to believe what Jesus had been trying to tell him and the other disciples, about how He must die, but then on the third day rise from the dead? Or did he simply believe that the tomb was empty as Mary Magdalene had told them?

Whatever he "believed" in that moment, apparently he kept it to himself, at least for the time being. He and Peter left the empty tomb and went back to where they were staying, or more accurately, where they were hiding (for fear of the Jewish authorities), and tried to make sense of all that they had witnessed. Apparently, they did little if anything to try to comfort Mary, but rather left her weeping outside the tomb. Do you ever find yourself not knowing what to say to someone during times of trouble or sorrow, or tragedy, such as the times we are living in now?

Fortunately, while we don't always know what to say or do, the Lord does. He won't abandon us in our confusion or time of sorrow or loss. He loves us and promises to be with us always, whatever the situation, just as He was with Mary.

Finding her weeping outside the tomb, Jesus spoke to Mary saying, "Woman, why are you crying? Who is it you are looking for?" Lost in her own sorrow and grief, she failed to recognize Him. Thinking he must be the gardener, she said, "Sir, if you have carried Him away, tell me where you have put Him, and I will get Him." (John 20:15)

Once again, Jesus spoke to her, but this time He called her by name – “Mary” In that special sacred moment when Jesus called Mary’s name, her eyes and heart and mind were opened and she recognized Him. The One she had seen die on the cross three days earlier, was now standing alive in front of her, having conquered the power of sin and death. She was not alone, she had not been abandoned -- Jesus was there with her.

What burdens are tearing at your heart and mind this Easter Sunday? What fear or sorrow or loss, what seemingly impossible situation are you struggling with right now? What brings tears to your eyes and a heaviness to your heart? Jesus wants to help.

- Perhaps you have lost, or fear losing your job or business as a result of the coronavirus pandemic and don’t know how you are going to pay the bills or make ends meet;
- Perhaps you have just seen your hard earned retirement account that had been doing well in the stock market plunge in value these past few weeks, robbing you of the income you need now, or that sense of security and peace of mind you had thinking your retirement years would be taken care of;
- Perhaps you have gone to the store only to find the shelves empty of the food and supplies you need for yourself and your family;
- Perhaps you are worried about your children now that the schools and colleges are closed;
- Perhaps you are fearful for your own health or that of a loved one, afraid that you or they might catch the coronavirus, or have already done so and are now fighting for your/their life;
- Perhaps you are one of the healthcare workers that are exhausted and overwhelmed by the seemingly endless number of sick and dying people entrusted to your care;
- Perhaps you are mourning the death of a friend or loved one and are grieved that you are not allowed to go and show your final respects at their funeral due to social distancing rules;
- Perhaps you are feeling an overwhelming sense of loneliness and isolation or lack of freedom locked up in your home unable to go to church or work or school or just get out for some fresh air.
- Or, perhaps the burden you are struggling with is something you have been carrying for a long time and has nothing to do with the current issues facing the world.

All of these and countless other things that could have been mentioned are very real concerns. They can easily overwhelm us and rob us of all sense of joy and hope if we try to carry these burdens by ourselves.

While Jesus never promised that we wouldn’t suffer pain or sorrow or loss, He did promise that He would be with us always as we go through whatever the world might throw at us, giving us that which we need most, even in the darkest and most painful moments.

Jesus is with you now, wherever you might be, whatever you are going through. Listen as He calls your name and speaks to your heart and soul and mind. My precious child, *“Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn*

*from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.” (Matthew 11:28-29).*

Dear Friends, the coronavirus is indeed serious and must be dealt with. The Lord will help us get through this time of illness and economic uncertainty, if we turn to Him.

With that said however, there is a far greater enemy at hand – one that threatens not only our physical health and financial security, but our very souls. God didn't create us simply for life in this world, but rather He created us to be with Him for all eternity. Ultimately, we are all going to die, if not from the coronavirus than from something else. Long before the coronavirus entered the world in a distant city in China, people all over the world were dying every day from accidents, violence, disease, or simply from old age when their physical bodies wore out.

My great aunt Didder died on Wednesday, August 14, 1974. It was my 17<sup>th</sup> birthday. She had a massive stroke while attending the Wednesday Evening Church Service. Honestly, I can't think of a better way to die, than while worshipping God, surrounded by fellow brothers and sisters in Christ.

Earlier that day, before she died, Didder mailed my birthday card (post marked 14 Aug.1974). I still have that card along with the five dollar check inside. I keep it tucked away in her Bible that she gave me. Her very last written words to me at the bottom of the card was “I love you!” I will never forget Didder and all those special Easter Sundays and the other times we spent together. God's love radiated from her in a special way that has touched my life forever.

A few moments ago, I spoke of an enemy far greater than the coronavirus that has come into the world. If left unchecked, it would kill every human being beginning with Adam all the way through to the very last person born into this world.

All of humanity has been contaminated with this deadly enemy which will not only rob us of our physical lives, but far more importantly, our spiritual lives. If left unchecked, it will separate us from God and destroy our very soul. The enemy I speak of is sin.

The Good News is, that unlike all the doctors and scientists that are feverishly working around the clock to try to come up with a vaccine or medicine to battle the coronavirus, God, in His love for us, has already provided an antidote to save us from sin. He did so over 2000 years ago when He sent His Son, our Lord Jesus Christ into the world, taking our humanity upon Himself. Jesus became one of us, in order that He might save us.

When Jesus went to the cross on Calvary on Good Friday, He offered Himself as the one full perfect sufficient sacrifice for the sins of all the world, for your sins, for my sins, for the sins of every human being that has, or ever will walk the face of the earth. In an act of total, unconditional, all sacrificial love, Jesus stretched out His arms of love on the hard wood of the cross, shedding His blood in order to provide the only antidote effective against sin.

Jesus died in order that we might live and have life abundantly, not only in this world, but more importantly in the life to come when we pass from this world to the next. On this most

special and holy day – Easter Sunday, we celebrate our Lord’s glorious resurrection, through which He demonstrated His VICTORY over the power of sin and death.

Christians throughout the world today, even though we may be physically separated from one another and our Church buildings, cry out with one voice – **“Alleluia! Christ is risen! The Lord is risen indeed. Alleluia!”**

Through His death and glorious resurrection, our Lord Jesus Christ has sent a message to the world – a message of Hope, a message of Peace, a message of Love. Jesus is the antidote to our greatest enemy. He asks us to believe in Him, to trust Him, to follow Him, and to share our faith with others. In so doing, we will have life and life abundantly in this world and in the life to come in His heavenly kingdom for all eternity. AMEN! Happy Easter!

In Christ’s love,

**+Bill**

Bishop of Albany