In some moments it feels like just yesterday – and in other moments if feels like a hundred years ago – I am speaking of when we gathered on Christmas Eve! That night we were gathered here, in a packed church, anticipating listening to the familiar words of the birth narrative from the Gospel of Luke as we all held our candles in the darkened church sanctuary. Shoulder to shoulder – voices cracking, tears streaming, as we sang Silent Night boldly to proclaim our faith and bring light to any darkness that we were experiencing.

And now today on Easter Sunday – I stand with a few others in an empty church – voices cracking, tears again streaming, as this time the beautiful pipe organ and piano carry the tunes for all of us in our distance – and I can only hear two or three voices carrying the tune as we once more boldly, if not singly, proclaim our faith….

It does seem like a long time since Christmas this year……it is almost too long ago to remember with all the world has been through since then…..

Luke’s account of Jesus’ birth and Matthew’s accounting of Jesus’ resurrection provide for us identical words of reassurance which when read together, seem to wrap the entire Gospel narrative in those words: “Do not be afraid”…..they are words uttered from the angel Gabriel to Mary with the news she has found favor with the Lord…..and they are the words of the heavenly host echoed to the Shepherds in the field – Do not be afraid.

And now – when Mary Magdelene, and the other Mary find the tomb of Jesus empty and the earth shakes, presumably shuddering under the awesomeness of what has just happened, an angel reassures these two women – “Do not be afraid”….

It is said that these words or words like them are found all over the holy scriptures – “fear not” – do not be afraid.

Richard Lischer, a Duke Divinity School professor, has written a contemporary article in this month’s issue of Christian Century magazine – speaking of the waiting – and the fear – that we currently face in our world of the Corona Virus…..

He writes – “Our waiting has an intransitive feel – waiting for what? It speaks to our fears as we wait. “We are waiting for it to be over, for those who are sick to recover, for a magically resurrected economy, for school to start, for the malls to open, for baseball, for a paycheck once again, waiting to get to where we were, .....we are waiting for a solution to the inexplicable .....we are waiting for deliverance from our vulnerability to nature, and of course – from death itself
This waiting brings fear to each of us – and how our fears have changed since Christmas – our fears have moved from the personal on December 24 to the collective fear for the whole world on April 12 –

Nobody can say with certainty how the crisis will affect the world and the nation over the long term. But I think we can all agree what we are experiencing today will be a defining moment in our history.

Will this time draw us together or exacerbate the differences that were there before? Will we race to get back to normal when the crisis is over – or will we seek radical change in health care, government, and business?

We cannot answer those questions today – as we are literally in the eye of the hurricane as we speak – but all of these questions – speak to the depth of our fears…..

The current pandemic has ripped the illusion that we can fully understand and control the world in which we live. That which we took to be solid and dependable has now crumbled beneath our feet. Science can explain some things, but it cannot fully capture the mysteries of life.

Our intellect alone cannot deliver us from our fears….or deliver the answers that we seek…..

At Easter, God has gifted us with faith to reconcile the paradox that Christ has conquered death but suffering still remains….that we can trust even amid the unanswered questions of our universe.

It is faith which enables us to let go of our fear and anxiety to cling to the resurrection and the life everlasting. Faith is a gift that allows us to trust in God over any anxiety that we are facing….

It is a scary time right now….so much has change since what seemed to be the simplicity of Christmas Eve….but in the midst of our fears….we are asked today to cling to the Easter promise….even when we cannot fully understand or grasp it….

We are beloved children of God – and nothing in the world or the next will change that…..

Nothing…height, nor depth, nor anything in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord……

A pastor, Kasey Kerins, recently posted this on her Facebook Blog….

Maybe this year, we celebrate Easter differently.

Not with a big service. Not with the lights and the full band. Not with the newest songs about Jesus conquering the grave.

Not with a big party. Not with the ham, the egg hunt, the wine and the fellowship.

Not with the dresses. Not with the suits. Not with the perfect hair and the annual family photos.
Maybe this year, we celebrate Easter differently.

Maybe we gather with only the closest of family in our homes. We watch from afar. We wait. We pray. Some of us hide, hoping the faith outweighs the fear.

Maybe we hear from God, see God in the place we never thought we would on Easter Sunday: In our own homes.

Maybe, for once, we celebrate Easter differently. Maybe, we celebrate the Resurrection just as the Disciples did:

 Alone, in the silence, hoping the faith outweighs the fear.

On the darkness night of my ministerial life – I was driving to the hospital in Naperville at 1:30 a.m. on December 21, 2001 – literally the longest night of the year – knowing that one of my very beloved high school students had just been killed in a car accident at midnight – and I was now going to meet with her parents. Fear poured over me like never before – there were no answers that anyone could give in that moment.

I remember like it was yesterday – I got in the car that cold December evening – and as I started the car – the cd in the player began to play – it was a song from the Valparaiso Choir’s Advent Concert that we had just attended with our son three weeks before – it was a beautiful Carol that filled my car – “Tomorrow Will Be My Dancing Day....” – it is a short piece, not more than 2 minutes long – and I played it five times in my 10 minute drive to the hospital as tears poured down my face and dampened my shirt....

I believe those words served as an angel speaking to me that night in the midst of my terror and sadness in preparing to face her family. What I heard was this – “Dick – fear not.....for tomorrow will be Stacy’s ‘dancing day’.....there was a comfort and peace that washed over me in that moment that I will never, ever be able to explain – a powerful word from outside me pierced the tragedy of that moment to bring a glimmer of hope to the vast darkness that lay before that family....

So I close again reminding you of the powerful words of proclamation this Easter Day – translated into plain English from Kasey’s Pastor blog post....

Maybe, just maybe for once, we celebrate Easter differently this year. Maybe, we celebrate the Resurrection just as the first women did: Alone, in the silence, hoping that the mystery of faith outweighs any and all fears we have this day.

Amen.