

Easter Sunday, April 12, 2020
Resurrection in the Shadow of Death¹
Bishop Elaine JW Stanovsky
John 20: 1-18

My name is Elaine Stanovsky. I'm the United Methodist Bishop of the Alaska, Idaho, Oregon, Washington States. I am joining this worship service from the town of Roslyn, where coal was king, in the central Cascade mountains of Washington State. In this time of physical distancing, I greet you from my heart to your heart.

Wherever you are, whoever you are with, whoever you are separated from today, I'm so glad that you joined us to share music and prayers, and to remember again the Good News that...

...nothing can separate us from God's love in Christ Jesus our Lord: not death or life, not angels or rulers, not present things or future things, not powers or height or depth, or any other thing that is created.
Romans 8: 38-39

By showing up for worship you put yourself on the side of life at a time when a tiny virus is bringing individuals, the nation and the whole world to their knees.

In a moment, I'm going to ask you a question. It will be familiar, but with a little twist. It is not a test. You will know the answer. I want you to convince me with your answer. It may seem odd to shout your answer out at home, alone or with your spouse, so I have recruited my husband and able assistant, Clint, to help with your part. Are you ready?

Here's the question: **IS CHRIST RISEN?**

Answer: **Christ is risen, indeed!**

What difference does the resurrection of Jesus make when so many people are dying?

Imagine with me for a moment, our three young sons, making up a game using a toddler toy consisting of large plastic beads that you could click together and pop apart. Can you imagine?

The game was to hold up two beads and ask, *to-gether? Or to-part?* If they were clicked together the answer was: *to-gether*. But if they were popped apart, the answer was: *to-part*. But, soon, it didn't have to be beads. It could be anything. Let's take my hands...



[Hands clasped together] *To-gether?* or *To-part?* ***Together!***

[Hands unclasped] *To-gether?* or *To-part?* ***To-part!***

Today, on Easter Sunday we come, asking the same question about life and community: *To-gether?* or *to-part?* As we are keeping distance and refraining from worship or a picnic or a team sport, are we *to-gether* or *to-part?* With God? With Jesus? With each other?

Clearly, this morning we are not huddled on a chilly hillside to watch the sunrise together and singing Alleluia! And we are not in a sanctuary full of Easter Lilies. No, instead, you are here, worshipping as you look at a screen or listen on the telephone. Are we *to-gether* or *to-part?* Well, all the **hard** evidence says we are *to-part*, in the sense that we are not physically together. But we have gone to great lengths to be *together* by whatever means we can find.

So, here we are. And, even as I record this message in room in a house I share only with Clint and Mollie-the-dog, you are with me. I carry you in my heart today, as I have all week preparing this message. The other people you see in this worship service, have been with us from all the places across four states where they taped their parts. You are bringing us *to-gether* by joining remotely from your *to-part* places. It's not as good as being able to see each other, hear each other's voices and share a hand shake or a hug, but it's a lot better than being simply *to-part*.

The **hard** evidence says that we are *to-part*, but the testimony of our **hearts** says we are *together*: by choice, by affection, out of hope and longing.

How does the *to-gether* and *to-part* game help us think about what difference the resurrection of Jesus makes when people are dying? When Jesus suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, was buried, and descended to the dead (The Apostles Creed), he was *to-part*. Listen to Matthew's description:

Then Jesus cried again with a loud voice and breathed his last. At that moment the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. The earth shook, and the rocks were split.

Matthew 27: 50-51

The gospel writer gives us **hard** evidence that Jesus was *to-part*. Those who were there could not doubt that Jesus had died. They watched it. They heard the nails driven. They felt the weight of his dead body. They saw the guards seal the entrance of the tomb with a mighty stone. No doubt about it. Jesus was dead. **TO-PART!**

And yet, the disciples' **hearts** still beat with the intensity of his presence, his teaching, his defiance, his compassion. He had shown them life. Given them hope they had never had. Freed them from fear and hatred of strangers and foreigners, hoarding, a me-first attitude. He had taught them to love.

The Bible says that "Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen" (Hebrews 11: 1). Faith was forming in Mary and Simon Peter after Jesus

died. They knew, without a shadow of doubt that they had been changed forever by his love. That they would carry his message with them forever.

Mary didn't expect to find Jesus alive when she went to the tomb early that morning. She went because she knew that something of Jesus' Way of Life lived on in her. She went out of love, and as a witness to the life he had let loose in the world. She went with the knowledge of what she knew in her **heart**.

And when she found Jesus alive, what did he say to her? "Don't hold on to me. I have not yet gone up to the Father." **DON'T HOLD ON TO ME??** Did he really say that? What did he mean? Don't you find it amazing that Jesus spoke so directly to the very unusual circumstance that we find ourselves in? He might as well have said, "Keep your distance. You don't need to touch me to know what you know – that I am alive, that I love you, that we are *to-gether*. Nothing can separate us."

Mary, and then Simon Peter and the other disciples came to know and to understand in a way that is deeper than the **hard** evidence, that whatever it was about Jesus that drew them to him, that drew crowds to him and that threatened the "powers that be" did not die on the cross. It was still alive in each of them, and it was the light that shines in the darkness and is not overcome (John 1: 5).

The disciples **discovered the resurrection in the shadow of Jesus's death**.

The story of the resurrection of Jesus is God shouting to all God's beloved creatures: **DEATH DOES NOT WIN! LIFE IS STRONGER THAN DEATH.**

We do not live to ourselves, and we do not die to ourselves. If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's.
Romans 14: 7-8

What difference does the resurrection of Jesus make when people are dying? It shows us that in addition to the **hard** evidence, we have **heart** evidence: the catch of our breath, tears that well up, the way a view of majestic mountains or wide, gracious plains stop us in our tracks, or a sudden impulse to generosity. All are evidence that we are *to-gether* with one another in God's broad and beautiful creation.

As the world groans in travail, I offer you the good news of Jesus Christ. Our lives come from the spirit God breathed into the world at creation; from the love born to the world in Jesus Christ and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit that connects us to one another at a depth no disease, distance, not even death can even touch.

This story of LIFE, passed from person to person through the ages, takes root in us. It calls, connects, and mends us *to-gether*, even when the **hard** evidence has left us *to-part* and alone.

God bless you, witnesses to life. Menders of the tears/tears. God bless you, cultivators of love, of community. We are Easter people!

Call: **CHRIST IS RISEN!**

Response: **Christ is risen, indeed!**

Call: **To-gether or to-part?**

Response: ***TO-GETHER!***

Nothing can separate us from each other or from the love of God in Jesus Christ!

OFFERING

I want to say thank you to all the people – pastors and lay people – who are faithful to the Church during this time of crisis.

It's people sharing what they have that make it possible for the church to care for its members and the whole community. It's tough, though, when the church is closed for weeks and people are used to giving their offerings in church. So, I have three ways for you to make sure the church remains strong in this trying time.

FIRST Today, please give as you are able to support the ministries of your local United Methodist congregation or whatever church you call home. Check the church website or Facebook page for instructions. Or just put a check in the mail.

SECOND: You might also want to give a special Easter gift to the Greater Northwest Area-wide "Fund for Families." Local churches partner with community groups to offer targeted financial help to neighbors on the margins who are most vulnerable to the economic impacts of COVID-19. **Text the code "GNWFFF" to 44-321 to give now. On your computer? Visit: <http://bit.ly/gnwfff>**

FINALLY: Looking ahead, if you expect to receive a CARES Act stimulus check that you don't really need, because your income is secure. I hope you'll let us help you pass it along to someone who needs it more than you do. Watch during the weeks ahead to learn how to participate in "Pass the stimulus Along."

Thank you for your generosity! You and I can be Christ alive, caring for people TODAY! Alleluia!

BENEDICTION AND CHARGE

We are scattered across great distances on this Easter, so I invite everyone to participate in this blessing. Stretch your hands out with palms outward in a gesture of blessing to that we understand that each of us is blessed and each of us is a blessing.

Know always that the hands, the arms, the heart of God will hold you in love, in peace, and in the joy of the Resurrection. Alleluia.

¹ With gratitude to long-time friend and colleague, Rev. Carol Davies, who reminded me last week of *to-gether* and *to-part* from a sermon I preached many years ago at the Oregon-Idaho Annual Conference session in Nampa, Idaho.