

“False Visions or Real Peace?”

Ezekiel 13:1-10, 21b-23

John 20:19-31

Easter is a joy, a delight, a bright beacon in our holy season. But this year we had to do Easter differently. And none of us wanted to, right? I mean, deep down, we wanted to be with one another, to share our brunch, to hide the eggs and watch the kids hunt for them – all together as a family. We wanted to feel the energy of the anthem, the choir bringing the word of the Gospel to life so that it would move through us and fill us with the spirit of the season. We wanted to worship together, to celebrate the resurrection, in person, and hold each other close. And it was really hard not to. It was hard, but we made that hard choice together because we believe that following Christ means not harming or endangering others.

We all made that sacrifice – the dramatic majority of churches did, too – but some didn't. A survey from late March conducted by LifeWay found that 3% of churches claimed that they would worship in person no matter what.<sup>i</sup> While most were making sacrifices for the well-being of our neighbors, some pastors insisted that they and their congregation needed to worship in person and no one could tell them otherwise.

One pastor in Houston expressed his earnest intentions, saying, “if it's a crisis, the church should be able to dispel fear and panic and not join in with the fear and panic. We can't really make a difference in our world just online.”<sup>ii</sup> Another pastor in Louisiana had about 500 people in Easter worship and defiantly proclaimed, “Satan and a virus will not stop us.” “My hope is not in a vaccine for a virus, but all my hope is in Jesus.” “God will shield us from all harm and sickness.” “We are not afraid. We are called by God to stand against the Antichrist creeping into America's borders.”<sup>iii</sup> All this to say – we have to worship in person. No matter the danger we pose to others, we have to worship in person.

We want things to go back to normal – we want to worship together and get everyone back to work and remove the heavy weight of this illness from the essential workers and medical professionals and each one living in fear and frustration and loss. We want “normal” so badly, that we’re tempted to listen to the voice that says “Peace, peace” when there is no peace. We don’t want a new normal – we just want things to be okay. So we want to believe pastors who says we can’t make a difference unless we’re in person. We want to believe that, as the faithful followers of Christ, we are shielded from all harm, all illness, all misfortune. We want to believe that if we are bold and pray the right way and trust in his perfect power that no evil will ever befall us.

But we have to remember that not everyone who says “thus says the Lord” is hearing a word from God. The Bible tells us that. Not everyone who promises the peace that we want is truly preaching peace. Ezekiel tells us they, “prophesy out of their own imagination” – out of their own hearts. And because they speak falsely, they lead people astray. And so the righteous are disheartened and the wicked are bolstered in their wicked way. I don’t think these pastors mean harm nor the people attending these services. I don’t think they have sinister intentions. But true faith must reckon with reality here and now. True faith cannot live in the fantasy of our dearest hopes and dreams. To be a real prophet, after all, you have to see something. You cannot have your eyes shut to what is really happening.

True faith does not whitewash the wall and walk away – it finds a way to go to the frontlines and make a difference, to repair the wall, lend a helping hand, discern what is good and offer it in love. This morning, we are commemorating the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Oklahoma City Bombing. On that day, most of us were filled with shock and awe, fear and outrage. We wondered how could this happen – how can we be safe?

I talked to my physical therapist, Megan, about it this week. She was living in Oklahoma City at the time and she was twelve years old. She felt the shockwave of the blast and the terror that invaded her own community. She told me that, in the aftermath, her parents got the family together, they got some supplies, and they brought water to the police and firefighters and other rescue workers on the scene. Her family's response to suffering was love and helping and hope. And because her parents brought them downtown that day, she saw all the people who had come to help, to support in any way they could, and she got to be a part of that.

The widespread generosity and heartfelt aid was so inspiring to rescue workers and journalists that came from out of town, that they started to call it "the Oklahoma Standard." The gold standard for how to respond to disaster was the Oklahoma standard. And here we see God working – that despite the horror that was inflicted, one of the enduring memories of that day and the days that followed was how the community stood up in kindness and faith and service.<sup>iv</sup>

In the face of that tragedy, people weren't strangers to one another. They stepped up as neighbors. That is real peace – that is what the peace of Christ inspires us to. It is neither acts of violence nor a blindness to science and facts. The peace of Christ teaches us to look and listen, to learn what is good and beneficial, and to live that calling. On that day, many were called to show up – in their jobs, through their gifts of relief, in their earnest prayers.

Today, we're facing a different kind of problem – you can't fight a virus like an enemy. Today, showing up means stepping out in faith. We take statements like "we've never done it that way" and we throw them out the window. We look to the promises of Christ and say – wherever we praise God, that is worship. Whenever we pray, it brings glory to God. Whatever measures we take that look to the safety of our communities and our world, our loved ones and strangers – that is our service, that is our blessing. Some have skills and professions that they

offer, putting themselves directly in harm's way to make a difference. Others do nitty gritty work that is not glamorous, but it sustains their neighbors. Even staying home and social distancing, day by day, is a way to show up in faith and strength. How could they tell us that we can't make a difference unless we do things as we've always done them?

We see that there is evil and sin and suffering in the world. We do not imagine that it will never effect us. But we believe that God is greater than the greatest evil. We believe that the peace of Christ gives us the courage to act in the world as it is. When bad things happen, it is not because we are faithless. When bad things happen, we lift each other up in faith and we draw on the peace of Christ – we follow the “Oklahoma Standard” once more.

Nothing, nothing, nothing can keep Christ out – no barricaded door, no global pandemic, no panic or false vision. What we have is a savior who comes to us just like he appeared to the disciples time and again. We need to remember that when Jesus rose, his wounds weren't mended. He still had the mark of the nails in his hands. He still had the wound in his side. The resurrected Christ is wounded because we are wounded, because the world is still wounded. But his love and his peace are no less powerful. Indeed, his love is more powerful because it comes to us in tragedy and in victory.

Jesus doesn't say hello when he shows up. He says “peace be with you” and he breathes out so that we might receive the Holy Spirit. Even when we're afraid and doubting like Thomas was – still Jesus says, “peace be with you.” He invites us to feel his wounds and know – just as Christ experienced pain and sadness, so will we. But these tragedies will not take us down. See, in his peace and love and grace, we will rise to our calling. We will rise with him and we will be saved. That is no false vision.

And so, may we open our hearts each day for the real peace of Christ even as we struggle and worry. May we be filled with the Spirit of grace and truth so that we, too, might proclaim, “My Lord and my God!” May we find the inspiration and the courage to serve with eyes wide open, to the glory of God’s holy name. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> <https://lifewayresearch.com/2020/04/02/most-churches-have-stopped-gathering-few-plan-to-meet-on-easter/>

<sup>ii</sup> <https://slate.com/news-and-politics/2020/04/some-churches-open-easter-sunday-coronavirus.html>

<sup>iii</sup> <https://slate.com/news-and-politics/2020/04/some-churches-open-easter-sunday-coronavirus.html>  
[https://www.theadvocate.com/baton\\_rouge/news/coronavirus/article\\_1e961796-7db1-11ea-9de2-1b2797a68238.html](https://www.theadvocate.com/baton_rouge/news/coronavirus/article_1e961796-7db1-11ea-9de2-1b2797a68238.html)

<sup>iv</sup> <https://oklahomastandard.com/about>