

Easter Sermon in the Days of COVID-19
April 12, 2020 – Church of Reconciliation
The Rev. Judith L. Rhodes

An Easter Message in a COVID-19 Pandemic

Dear Friends and fellow Reconcilers, if you are anything like me, I needed sacred rhythm of Holy Week this year more than ever. The quiet, steady, drum-beat of journeying with Jesus. More than perhaps ever before, I needed to know the story in the very depths of my heart. I needed to sit at the table with Jesus and be fed. I needed to have my feet washed by the One whose very witness compels me to do the same. I needed to hear the voices cry “Crucify him!” I needed to see Jesus standing resolute in his mission of salvation for all, moving painfully even to his death on the cross. I needed to listen to Mary’s agony as she endured the death of her son. I needed to hear Jesus’ words to his mother and to the beloved disciple, “Son behold your mother, Mother behold your son.” I needed to read the Genesis text celebrating creation as the Divine pronounces everything, everyone, all Creation, very good! I needed to take to my bones, Ezekiel’s story of the dry, dead, dusty bones and believe once again, that they rise with sinews, and flesh, and come to life once again. I needed to see the first fire of Easter even in the candle flames on my own table and to shout the first alleluias of Easter Eve... in order to get to this Easter morning, this Easter celebration of Christ’s glorious resurrection! You see, I needed to walk all the way with Jesus this Holy Week, in order to just simply keep walking.

What did you need this week? How did you name your need, your pain, your fear? What stories offered you the reassurance of your faith in Jesus Christ in order to keep walking the walk with Jesus?

I needed to walk with Jesus this week so that I remember and trust how he is always walking with me, with you, with those who are suffering, with those who are serving, with those whose names are known only to their Creator. This year in order to get to the empty tomb with any semblance of faith I had to obey Jesus’ commandment... “Do this, DO THIS, in remembrance of me.”

What I also did this week was to return to the words of old friends, long-time mentors, companions in faith in order to remember what their witness has meant to me and continues to mean.

One of those extraordinary persons was The Rt. Rev. Barbara Clementine Harris, who was the first woman elected and ordained to the Episcopacy in the entire Anglican Communion and who served the Episcopal Diocese of Massachusetts, my original home diocese. I took a very “little” book full of very “mighty” words off my shelf at home. The tiny volume is titled, “*Parting Words: A Farewell Discourse.*” It was published in 2003 as a collection of sermons. And as I still grieve her death in March of this year, I thank God for the mighty voice and prophetic witness of her life.

In a sermon delivered the Sunday following 9/11, Barbara preached these words to a group of those being confirmed and received into the Episcopal Church:

As we reflect on what happened last Tuesday- ...we may be tempted to question why so many innocent lives and symbols of our way of life could be destroyed... And what are we to make of the unfortunate ramifications of that tragic disaster? I am not sure there are either pat or satisfactory answers... We should have an even deeper question on our hearts this

day that is: What is the source of our inner strength in times like these? What enables and empowers us to make sense of our own lives and to make the rest of our lives worth living? ...

For me, at least, a part of that answer comes from the eleventh chapter of John's gospel when Jesus says to Martha, "I am resurrection and I am life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who believes in me, will never die." ... As Christians, we are prisoners of hope. We are Easter people. We are Easter people living in a Good Friday world."

My friends, those are words to live by... yesterday, today, tomorrow, and every day... And in these days, those are the only words that really matter. Those are the only words that expresses the Easter truth of the empty tomb. As Christians we are prisoners of hope! As those who are feeling like prisoners in our own homes, let us be prisoners of Hope. Let us pray in the days ahead, that we commit to labor on behalf of those who have no homes, those who are literally imprisoned unjustly and held prisoners in systems without access to adequate shelter, food, health care, education. In Barbara's own words, *"We can believe that we can fashion new lives committed to love, to peace, to justice, and to liberation for all God's people."*

My friends and fellow Reconcilers, yes, we are all inconvenienced and affected by COVID-19 and the tragic consequences of this disease. But what is happening is that this disease has also unmasked some cruel, immoral systems of inequality and injustice that benefit only some... and harm so many others.

I think the message of the Easter tomb this year gives rise to a passion for justice, a passion for mercy, a passion for peace, a passion for Love. A passion to believe that in order to follow Jesus we must live and die like Jesus, if we are to rise with him. Only then will we truly be faithful Alleluia people living in a Good Friday world. Amen.