

12 April 2020 (*Easter*)

Dear Friends of Elmwood,

I'm writing this on 'Holy Saturday', the day that falls between Good Friday and Easter. It's an empty day in the gospel story. Nothing happens. Jesus has died. His lifeless body is entombed. The disciples are practising 'social distancing' – not from each other but from the world. They huddle in hiding, fearing arrest, trying to pinpoint how and where things went so badly wrong. I imagine arguments broke out.

"We let Jesus down."

"No, Jesus let *us* down. I warned him this would happen!"

"How dare you say that?"

"I'm just telling it like it is."

Or maybe they sat in silence and sadness, the way people do after terrible trauma.

They couldn't have known what was to come. Neither do we. The Clerk of Session at a little rural Church I once served (a weathered farmer who kept the minutes with exquisite handwriting), used to tell me, again and again, "None of us knows the future." It was a hard-won truth he'd hammered out on the anvil of experience, having lived for decades with the vagaries of weather, blight, and crop prices, none of which he could control. All he could do was plough and plant and harvest at the appointed times. He did, year after year. He could not have done that without faith in the underlying generosity of nature; his trust that, despite many hardships, setbacks and outright failures, a deeper providence is at work in all things, and it's on the side of life.

We write our 'endings' too quickly. I confess that I can be particularly guilty of this. A streak of cynicism runs through me like a vein of white quartz through granite. Fearing the worst, I deliberately expect it, even welcome it if it comes, saying, "I *knew* it," with grim pleasure. Why? Maybe I'm arming myself against false hope. Maybe I'm steeling myself against tragedy's stealth, lest it strike us 'out of the blue', as this virus has done. But the larger tragedy, surely, would be to steel myself from being 'surprised by joy.'

The gospels were composed with an ending already in mind, not a death but a resurrection. Who could have known this on the first Holy Saturday? No one. No one knew what the future would be. Then it came, and it was on the side of life.

We're huddled behind closed door too, quelling our 'pandemic panic'. We do not know what the future holds, when or how our lives will return to normal, or what 'normal' will look like then. So, we wait, fanning the embers of hope.

Christian faith is not a technology. It's not a secret button we can push to manipulate God, or the world, to make the future we want. That way lie disappointment and cynicism. Christian faith is an underlying trust in the God we

cannot see or outguess, who appears in Jesus Christ, an embodied promise as deep and trustworthy as creation itself. That way lies hope.

Had we been able to gather for Easter tomorrow, we'd have been celebrating Holy Communion. But, like Israel in exile in Babylon, we're forbidden to celebrate. "How can we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land?" (Psalm 137:4). Instead, we'll worship together, but physically separate, with scripture and prayer. We can do this. God will feed us.

Maybe, also, in a spirit of doxology, we could rejoice with nature. Nature is enjoying a big break from us right now. Skies are clearing of smog, water is running clean again, and animal life is rebounding from human harassment. On Easter Day, we could quietly appreciate the trees outside our windows, whose buds are springing to life after a long winter's sleep. Let's cheer for them, and with them, and give thanks for them in our hearts.

To that end, here's an ancient benediction meant for use in the Jewish month of Nisan (March-April):

"Blessed be He who did not let His world lack anything,
Who created for it beautiful creatures, and these beautiful trees,
That men may see them and be filled with joy."

Forgive me for going on so long (what else is new?). I wish we could see each other. A happy and blessed Easter to you.

Yours in the faith,
Andrew