



GREETINGS FROM THE GROVE

April 2020

WHAT'S HAPPENING IN APRIL?

Easter Morning Drive-In Service!

Nothing about this year is normal. It has been difficult for us to be apart, but all that ends on Easter. We have checked with the Rockingham Co. Sheriff's Dept. and we are cleared to have a drive in service to celebrate Easter together. The service will begin at **10:00 AM** and you can park in the back parking lot at the church. Everyone will have to stay in their cars for the entire service, but still it will be good to gather together and celebrate the resurrection of our Lord and savior. It may take a few minutes to get everyone's cars fit in just right, so if you are able shoot to get there a little early.

No More Mail for Lee, Temporarily

Please suspend any care packages or letters you have for Lee for the time being. His base is trying to reduce mail.

FROM THE MIND OF THE PASTOR

— REV. NATHANAEL PUTNAM —



Coronavirus, the End Times, and Easter

“Lord, take me now.” Have any of you felt this way lately? On every level, state, nation, globally, things have fallen apart. Coronavirus is scary. The economy’s total failure is terrifying. That not one single country seems to be able to do any better gives very little hope. The world we’ve grown accustomed to has come to a screeching halt. There are legitimate things to worry about: Will I stay healthy and not die a painful death from this disease? Will I have any money to live on through this? Will I get my job back after it’s over? There are silly things to worry about: What am I going to do with all the sports canceling their seasons? There are in the middle things to worry about: Where am I going to find more toilet paper? People are going to remember all this for a long, long time.

In times like this the tendency has always been to seek escape. That can be burying ourselves in conspiracy theories or outright denial of what’s happening around us. It can be getting lost in the sea of entertainment media. In the church I think it’s the immediate turning of all focus to the rapture and the end of time. “The Bible says a time of trials and disasters and wars will signal the end. If this isn’t the end I don’t know what is.” It isn’t wrong to want Jesus to come back. It’s actually one of the oldest prayers of the church – Maranatha, come, Lord, come. I believe the Church should take Jesus’ return more seriously than it does. But praying for Jesus’ return is different than escaping into end-times apocalypse mode.

The last time our world saw a really widespread pandemic was the Spanish Influenza in the late nineteen-teens. It’s far away in time now. One of my great grandfathers had it and survived, but I never met him. His daughter, my grandmother, who is an avid genealogist and historian, doesn’t even know any details about it. We can debate if Spanish Flu or Coronavirus is more deadly, etc., but think about that pandemic in context: Spanish Flu became so widespread in part because it hit at the end of WWI. Men were fighting in cramped spaces all over Europe and the virus got its start there in the trenches. Returning soldiers helped spread it all over the world. The horrors of WWI followed by the horrors of a plague. Then the horrors of the Great Depression and WWII.

It is true: Toilet paper is hard to come by right now, and some grocery stores are having trouble keeping their shelves stocked. But really we’ve got it pretty easy compared to our predecessors of only three or four generations. The first truly global conflict, a global epidemic, the crash of the world economy? Those really do sound like signs of the times. But they weren’t.

This situation is made harder for me personally because it is happening over Easter. The liberal side of our country is having a field day with “ignorant Christians who think they need to go to church on Easter.” I am so sad that we cannot really celebrate together this year with food and fellowship. Easter should be the best party on the face of the planet. It feels like Easter will be overshadowed and I have no power to change it.

But thanks be to God that Easter's effectiveness doesn't depend on us! Thanks be to God that we receive the gifts of Easter whether we come to church and do the rituals together or not! And what are the gifts of Easter? Well, they have a lot to do with the end of time.

Because Jesus willingly offered himself as the perfect sacrifice for our sins on Good Friday, God did the unthinkable on Easter morning and raised Jesus from the dead. I don't know how you feel about the logic or plausibility of this move in the story, but we should all know that it doesn't come from out in left field. For hundreds of years before Jesus, God's people had been piecing together a picture of God's vision for the future. God had given glimpses here and there in the prophets. Here's what they had: God would at some point send a king who would put an end to the old way of things. That king would rule over the whole world as God's true representative and usher in a new age. Those who had faithfully obeyed the LORD, but who had died before the arrival of this king, would be raised to new life and live in this new kingdom. All of this was, of course, highly speculative and improbable. It was "hail Mary" for a downtrodden people. But then Jesus happened.

When the disciples found the empty tomb and then stood in the presence of their resurrected master they new two things: First, the old stories were not speculative or conjectural. The promises were true. Second, the old order of things had come to an end and the new creation had begun. Throughout the new testament epistles Jesus is referred to as the first of the new creation. That first Easter morning signaled the end of time.

The first generation of believers, who had known Jesus in person, close both in time and geography to him, waited eagerly for Jesus to return and finish his work. He was going to come back and judge the world, abolish death, and invite all of his followers to join him in the new creation. But he didn't return. Generation, generation, generation, and still no return. It caused a major crises in the church (the fancy term is the "delay of the Parousia"). What was Jesus doing if he wasn't preparing us for the end of time?

We will all stand before our maker one day, so in one sense we are all preparing for the end, but what those early generations discovered is that Jesus wasn't so concerned with getting us ready for the end of time as he was equipping us to live in the time we inhabit now. God asks his people to do some horrible things. We have to share our things with other people. That stinks. We have to get along with people who don't want to get along with us. That is demeaning. We have to deny some of our appetites that are destructive. That is frustrating. **WHY SHOULD ANYONE DO ANY OF THESE THINGS?** Especially if we're just going to die! God's answer is Jesus. Jesus was obedient in all the unpleasant things God asks us to do and, as a result, Jesus became the second Adam, the beginning of a new creation. When we see Jesus, what he suffered and what he's become, we know we can do it too.

Religion follows the path of least resistance. I don't think those who've said it were wrong, "religion is the opiate of the masses." People just want to feel better about life and they will cling to *anything* that scratches the itch. Religion assures us that the end is coming and, if we can just hang on, we will escape all the hard, uncomfortable, unenviable, unbearable parts of real life. Jesus will take care of it all for us.

But Jesus explodes these ideas. Jesus says, "take up your cross and follow me." Live with intention and integrity in obedience to our God. Do not shy away from times that push us to the limits of our faith. Learn to walk in complete trust one day at a time. Forget about the end – only the Father knows the day and hour set aside for that. Live in the time you are given! And know beyond any doubt that whenever the end comes, the Father will be faithful. Easter is your proof!

So, here is my challenge and my hope for you this 2020 Easter. It takes all of my courage, but I still pray, "Maranatha, come back Jesus, come back." I wish with all my being that he would and I'm afraid because I don't know what I'll do if he doesn't. And he probably won't. I don't want to deal with pandemics or economic melt downs. I don't want to deal with fear and uncertainty. I want Jesus to come evacuate me from it all. But if he doesn't, I want to learn to be faithful through it all. I want to walk through the hard times as Jesus did. Easter

assures me of two things. The end has already begun. And there is nothing that the world can throw at me that will keep me from receiving the same place in the new creation as Jesus has if I am obedient as he was. If life crushes me long before the end of time, it's okay. If coronavirus or debt collectors get me, it's ok. If one of our enemies invades and we lose our status as the greatest nation on earth and I live under foreign rule, it's ok. None of these disqualify me from resurrection power. Easter does not give us permission to escape the present; it gives us courage to engage with the present, to be light and salt, in the sure knowledge of God's future. Our God is faithful with unfathomable power and imagination to those who obey him in their everyday lives. Cling to this with all of your being.

2020 is proving to be a history making year. Our children and grandchildren will all have to learn about the great pandemic and how it destroyed the world's fragile political and economic systems. I pray that Easter 2020 also goes down in history for you – not because it was the year we didn't have Easter because of coronavirus, but because it was the one when we finally learned about God's economy. When we stopped being afraid to live, stopped asking for apocalypse, and decided to be obedient now. The end of the old ways has already begun. The future is certain. Let's start living!