

In about two weeks time, we have gone from life as usual to uncertainty and fear. COVID-19 rates increase dramatically each day. About half the world's children are currently not in school because their schools are closed for the foreseeable future. No groups larger than 100 are allowed to gather, although, depending on the source, you shouldn't be in groups of even 10. Restaurants are closed for dining in. The world is learning how to work from home, but if you have kids, you're trying to keep up instruction, keep them entertained, and do you work all at the same time. Massive layoffs are occurring all over the country as the new restrictions mean companies can't pay their employees or supply chains are so disrupted companies can't run normally. Our economy is entering its second recession in 12 years. Going to the grocery store for basics is a fool's errand. While hospitals are filling up, with current projections saying that North Carolina's hospitals will exceed capacity by March 18, there are still people who believe the risks of the coronavirus are overblown and that we've overreacted. Some even peddle the absurd notion that the virus is connected to some kind of conspiracy, stoking yet even more division among a nation and world that struggles as it is. These are all things we couldn't imagine happening even a couple of months ago, but here we are. If you're left wondering where the hope is, you're not alone.

It's fitting, then, that what was planned for today, before any of us knew that there was such a thing as the coronavirus or COVID-19, was assurance of resurrection. I can't think of a message that's more relevant or hopeful for these dark times than the promise that because Christ was raised to new life, we, too, will be raised. In Luke's gospel we heard the account of Jesus' third appearance to his disciples. The first was at the tomb itself, when the women that supported his ministry saw that the tomb was empty and he appeared to them there. They believed immediately and went and told the 11 remaining disciples, but they thought it was "nonsense" (Luke 24:11). Peter, though, was concerned enough that he ran to the tomb, and seeing that it was empty, was curious as to what could have happened. The second was later that same day when two of the disciples walked along the Emmaus Road and Jesus came up beside them, engaged them in conversation, and they didn't recognize him as they told him the story about what was happening. In what is often part of the communion liturgy that I use, it wasn't until Jesus sat down to eat with them and broke bread that they finally recognized him. Those two disciples then went and met the others to tell them about what they'd experienced. That's where Jesus began to speak in our reading from today. At first the disciples were scared, and can you blame them? They were witnesses to Jesus' horrific death, but then there he was, standing in front of them and saying "peace." Of course they were terrified. To show them he wasn't an apparition he showed them his hands and feet, and then to take the point farther, he asked for some food and ate it in front of them. Ghosts

apparently don't eat, so this proved it for them. He then reiterated to them what he had already said, and what they had been too dense to get, that he was to die and rise again on the third day. Not only would he die, but it would be necessary to go out and preach forgiveness (see last week) and a change in heart in his name. Since they had witnessed it all, it was to start with them, but not until they received the Holy Spirit on Pentecost. They weren't going to be left alone, God would be with them, empowering them, leading them, by the Holy Spirit.

If you followed along carefully, you might have noticed that there isn't anything there about our resurrection, it was just Jesus' and what comes after. I could quote Romans 6, "Therefore, we were buried together with him through baptism into his death, so that just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too can walk in newness of life. If we were united together in a death like his, we will also be united together in a resurrection like his." It's assurance of our own resurrection after our death, but that's not the focus I want us to have. It's hopeful and good to hear, but in a time like this, our understanding of resurrection should be greater. Yes, we have hope of resurrection after our death, but we also get to experience resurrection before. We're offered new life in Christ not just later, but now, too. The disciples, as Jesus ate with them the day after his resurrection, were told that they were receiving what the Father promised, which is to say their own resurrection. The knowledge of what would come later would then fuel how they lived in the present, radically changing their outlook and circumstances for the better. For this to really hit home we should fully understand the circumstances in which they lived. Doing anything that could be conceived by anyone in power, whether they be religious leaders who didn't take kindly to those who questioned their authority or military leaders connected to Rome who held an iron grip on their territories, was not just unwise or dangerous, but deadly. People were executed by Rome just to keep the population scared into submission, there was no fair system of adjudication. As we know from Acts, even religious leaders got in on the persecution as they stoned anyone who dissented from their ways. It was a perilous time, and would remain so for generations. If you ever want to be inspired, read about the lives of the early Christians who suffered under this persecution and fear and yet never lost faith. Their testimony is all the proof we need that God kept God's promise. If that weren't true then they'd have simply perished in obscurity, falling in line like Rome and corrupt religious leaders wanted. Instead, they persisted. They ran secret churches in people's homes, developed liturgy, and held onto their faith despite the risks. And the movement grew. People saw that those that followed what was then called "the way" weren't living in fear like everyone else. They were taking care of one another, making sure the suffering were comforted, the hungry were fed, the naked clothed, the prisoner visited. They didn't peddle threats of "do this or be punished," but offered hope for those that were hopeless. They invited people into their homes to join in that hope by offering them forgiveness and love. It was so

effective that it eventually became too much of a movement for Rome to ignore, and was finally made legal when Constantine realized that it would be more helpful to embrace rather than keep persecuting. I remind you of this history because it shows us, during our own time of fear and doubt, what it means to live into resurrection. The ancestors of our faith trusted in the promise and allowed their faith, and God's Spirit, to guide them. While they weren't necessarily met with safety, they did find hope and love. They created a life for themselves that was more than the fear and dread of their previous existence, and they moved forward.

We, too, can have more than the fear that surrounds us. Our faith has promised us new life, a kind of resurrection in the here and now. No matter what's happening around us, we should rely on that promise and live into it. To believe in resurrection means we allow ourselves to build our reality based on God's promise of grace and love. Intrinsic in that promise is that wherever we are, God will meet us and lead us. That should give us the strength we'll need to face fear with confident hope. If you, like many, struggle to see God during a difficult time, listen to the advice of Mr. Rogers: look for the helpers. Anywhere there are people helping, you can be assured that God is guiding them and working through them. We then have to actively counteract the fear-based actions of those around us with that faithful hope. One of the chief ways we can do this is that we trust in the abundance of God's world. We can't allow irrationality to grip us, hoarding resources for ourselves while others struggle; hoarding is a response to scarcity, not abundance. Even when the rest of the world hoards in fear, we can trust that, if we rely on one another as we're called to do, we'll have enough. For those of us that aren't in danger of losing our jobs or who have plenty to eat, it can mean helping those that have lost work and can suddenly no longer afford rent and groceries by donating to nonprofits who are able to step in and help or by dropping off a load of groceries at someone's doorstep. For those of us who are healthy, it can mean donating blood at a time when there's suddenly an enormous shortage because of so many canceled blood drives. It can be as simple as calling those around us to make sure they have all they need in case an order, now seemingly more and more likely, comes down that says we can't leave our homes for a number of weeks. It means acting in the best interest of the community instead of focusing only on ourselves. When we lead our lives with that love we knew first because God loved us, we will be proclaiming resurrection with our whole selves. But that's not all. While illness spreads far and wide, believing in resurrection also means that we trust that this isn't the end. We've found ourselves missing so many things, from movie theaters, to concerts, to restaurants and much, much more, and the economy is losing ground with incredible speed. Instead of allowing ourselves to wallow in the things that we suddenly lack, or feel total despair at the state of our economic future, we can trust that we'll be ready to build them back when we beat this thing. And we will beat the coronavirus, and whatever pandemic comes after because we can be sure that there will be one. We'll beat it because God has promised

us life. If we remain focused on that which God calls us, to love as we have been loved and to let that love guide us, we'll come back stronger than before. It's happened time and time again, throughout the stories of scripture, throughout the history of this country, and throughout our own lives. We know that what God has said is true, now is the time to trust in it and let it lead our lives. Now is the time for resurrection. Thanks be to God.