



Diocese of Eastern Newfoundland and Labrador

THE ANGLICAN CHURCH OF CANADA

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Bishop's Easter Pastoral Letter

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Easter always seems to come as a surprise to me. When Ash Wednesday begins, this Day is far off. Yet, like the shock of the Empty Tomb, Easter springs upon me with a jolt of suddenness.

Maybe it's because I'm a procrastinator. When Lent began, there always seemed to be enough time to get ready for Easter, but, to be honest, I am never ready.

My wife is the opposite of me. She is not a procrastinator. When she has a deadline, her project is researched weeks in advance and fully completed well before the due date. I wish I could be like that.

Jill asked me on the evening before Easter, "*Have you finished your Easter sermon yet?*"

I felt that panic, like returning to university when I had a term paper due the next Day. "It's Easter already! I'm not ready! What am I going to preach?" After 21 years of marriage, my wife still shakes her head and says, "*Sam, I don't know how you do it.*" And she still loves me, so I can't be all that bad.

I take comfort in my procrastination that no one was ready for the first Easter morning either. Indeed, in the Gospel of John, we read when Mary Magdalene discovered that the stone was unexpectedly removed from Jesus' tomb and his body was missing, there was a lot of panic and rushing and running. Even though Jesus had been preparing and telling his disciples that this Day would come, they still needed more time to prepare for its reality. The closest disciples still needed to understand what Jesus was talking about when he spoke of eternal life.

What do you think of when you think of eternal life? Is it something that awaits you after this life ends, like a reward? Or is it something that happens sooner, like a promise?

I believe that eternal life is not something we can procrastinate about. It is evident in John's Gospel that Eternal Life does not begin in some future tense but already exists and always has. Resurrection is not something we must wait for because resurrection is something we live for. Jesus' life, death, and resurrection show us that eternal life is not something we put off or procrastinate on; instead, it is something we take on and grow into the moment we welcome him as our Risen Lord and Saviour.

It's fitting we are that there will be Baptisms this Easter in most churches. Our Baptism is the beginning of our journey of eternal life. Our baptismal vows help keep us "in check" with how we grow into eternal life one step at a time. While they help keep us in check, they are not a "checklist" in the sense of ticking all the boxes. We are not perfect, and we mess up, but making these vows in the community of the Church means we are all responsible for each other as members of God's Family. Eternal life cannot be lived in isolation if we claim to be brothers, sisters, and relatives in Christ.

In Baptism, we see death and resurrection - our dying to sin and rising to eternal life. This begins with repentance - a turning away from evil and refusing not to be part of it. In baptism, God offers us life forever, but humanity so often, through sin, chooses otherwise. Evil and death have been so evident these past few months and years. God offers peace, yet humanity chooses war and terror. God pours out love; we dish out anger and bitterness. Good Friday was the pinnacle of darkness when evil appeared to have won, and the Light was extinguished. Yet, we know this was never the case.

Easter is a call to repentance. A call away from the darkness into eternal light and life. We always need Easter because there will always be a Good Friday. And this repentance is necessary because the darkness is ever lurking around the corner of our hearts. We don't say we are sorry, hoping to be loved by God; we are sorry because we are loved. Or, as Episcopal Bishop Jake Owensby so eloquently put it, "*When we repent, we admit that the sorrows, the losses, the wounds, the betrayals, and the regrets of our past have made us into someone we don't want to be anymore. We die to that self and entrust ourselves to Jesus. From those shattered places in our lives, Christ brings new life; to put it another way: repentance is the beginning of our resurrection. Right here on planet Earth.*" (Owensby, Jake: *A Resurrection-Shaped Life*. 2018)

Easter is God's healing of our brokenness and separation from God and each other. Baptism is not some inoculation from sin and suffering - it's not like taking a pain reliever to numb the hurt. The Risen Jesus still bore the wounds of his crucifixion in His Resurrection body. We are mortal, and we will continue to mess up and face death. Nor is Christianity some form of escapism from the problems of the world. Stop striving to find the perfect Church because it will always disappoint as long as we are part of it.

Easter is more than a Day; it is a Way. A Way to live eternal life here and now. A Way to see how hurts are not numbed but healed by the power of love. It is a way that offers hope in knowing that God so loved the world - the good, the bad, and the ugliness of it - that God is daily making it - and us - into something honest, beautiful, and real.

Or, to quote Bishop Jake Owensby, "*God loves us because God loves us. Period.*"

I am thankful to the Rev. Roberta Woodman, a retired Priest of our Diocese, for reminding me of the classic children's book, *The Velveteen Rabbit*. You may have read it to your children or grandchildren many years ago or recently. It tells the story of a stuffed rabbit's desire to become real through its owner's love. It's a simple message to strive for realness in every aspect of life, even in times of pain.

"What is REAL?" asked the Rabbit one day when they were lying side by side near the nursery fender before Nana came to tidy the room. "Does it mean having things that buzz inside you and a stick-out handle?"

"Real isn't how you are made," said the Skin Horse. "It's a thing that happens to you. When a child loves you for a long, long time, not just to play with, but REALLY loves you, then you become Real."

"Does it hurt?" asked the Rabbit.

"Sometimes," said the Skin Horse, for he was always truthful. "When you are Real, you don't mind being hurt."

"Does it happen all at once, like being wound up," he asked, "or bit by bit?"

"It doesn't happen all at once," said the Skin Horse. "You become. It takes a long time. That's why it doesn't happen often to people who break easily or have sharp edges, or who have to be carefully kept. Generally, by the time you are Real, most of your hair has been loved off, and your eyes drop out, and you get loose in the joints and very shabby. But these things don't matter at all because once you are Real you can't be ugly, except to people who don't understand." (Williams, Margery. The Velveteen Rabbit. London, England: Egmont Books.)



Living eternal life now is not something we should procrastinate about. It is always available for all who wish to live in and through it. It's a love shown in the suddenness of an empty tomb. It's a way revealed Day by Day in the transforming power of those who follow the Risen Lord. It's a life that helps make us real through the love of our God.

A Happy Easter to you, and the blessings of eternal life be ours, always.

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