

“Easter? It’s Up to You!”

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It is such a joy to be with you this morning on this Easter Sunday, to proclaim again that “Christ the Lord is risen and that he is risen indeed!” I’m so aware this morning that for many years I used to preach Easter sermons wherein I asked people to look back 2000 years ago and believe, really believe, that something happened on that first Easter morning to the body of Jesus. I assumed that if people could believe something really happened to him, that it would be enough for something to happen with them. I was so sincere! And I was so wrong.

I was wrong because I can’t prove what happened or didn’t happen to the body of Jesus two thousand years ago. And neither can you. And even if I could prove it, what would that accomplish? Would that automatically make you a better person? Would that stop a terrible war in Syria or put an end to fanatical violence in the name of God? I don’t think so. I’m convinced – this year more than ever – that Easter is up to you. It’s up to me. And it’s also up to communities of faith like First Congregational Church of Los Angeles.

Think for a minute about what you admire most about the life of Jesus. He was a person of profound compassion, bringing good news to the poor and healing to the brokenhearted. He reached out to everyone who had been wounded by life, including those who had been wounded by organized religion. He transcended ethnicity, race, religion, gender and status in society.

Instead of judgment, he brought understanding. Instead of revenge, he brought forgiveness. And in the face of power, he brought courage for justice and fairness and respect for all people. Most of all, he brought a profound sense of hope, believing that betrayal and violence do not have the last word. Nor do our personal disappointments and heartaches. As long as love beats inside the human heart, then a new humanity is possible. That’s the Easter message we celebrate today.

But I also think that it’s time for a little honesty. Jesus has already done his part. I mean, really, what more do we want Jesus to do? Our world is desperate for Easter, but we are the ones who must keep it alive. It’s our turn to release divine energy into the world. The African American poet, June Jordan, wrote many years ago: “We are the ones we have been waiting for.” I feel that way about our church this Easter.

In a few weeks we’ll celebrate the 150th anniversary of our congregation. All you have to do is drive up and down Wilshire Boulevard, and you’ll see church after church that has closed. But here we are – celebrating our 150th anniversary – and we’re thriving! Not merely surviving but thriving. We are the ones we have been waiting for, and that means it’s up to us to keep the spirit of Easter alive and animate the energy of God in this place.

Last year was a hard year for America, and this year hasn't been much easier. Regardless of your political persuasion, many of us are worried about our country, because we see things happening in America right now that we never thought possible. But we have a choice as a community of faith: We can either wring our hands with anxiety and give up and do nothing or we can give voice to a faith that is vibrant and honest and transformational. Easter is up to us.

One of our trustees came to me a few months ago with a possibility. He suggested that we need to speak up as a church. That our country needs a church with a progressive voice. A compassionate voice. A church that speaks up for the dignity of all God's children. And so he crafted a statement about who we are as a congregation. Never before in my ministerial career has a church member done such a profound thing. I sent his statement to our Board of Trustees. They unanimously approved it. I sent it to the Board of Deacons. They unanimously approved it.

It's a reminder that we can spend the next decade either trying to keep this battleship of a Cathedral chugging along or we can stand up and speak up and offer up to the city of Los Angeles a vision for what it means to live with a 21st century faith. And if we can do that, it will be Easter. Not one day but every day. Would you like to hear this statement? Would you like to hear this Easter Affirmation for our time and church? It goes like this . . .

- 1. We believe the gospel of Christ calls us to speak to our times, as it did to all our Christian ancestors.*
- 2. We affirm that God's love shines equally on all people, regardless of race, gender, sexual orientation, ethnic background, or religion.*
- 3. We affirm all creation is God's handiwork, and that we are called to respect, protect, and nurture it. Not exploit it.*
- 4. We embrace the diversity of our city and nation, and seek respect for women, immigrants, different nationalities, minority groups, the poor, and the disadvantaged in our society.*
- 5. We resist those who use hate, anger, and intimidation to divide us, and who use speech, disinformation, and actions to demean others.*
- 6. We resolve to make our church a safe place for all people of good will and to welcome them with dignity, respect, and compassion.*

7. We commit ourselves to make our church a vibrant place for ideas, a faith informed by reason, experience, scholarship, and scientific knowledge.

That's it. Simple. Straightforward. Powerful. I would like to ask the author of that statement, Roger Ipswitch, to stand, along with every deacon and trustee of this church today. Would you please stand . . . and I ask all of you . . . aren't you just a little bit proud of your church this Easter morning?

I was ten years old. I was at home with a friend, and we were horsing around in the family room. We were throwing a basketball back and forth. (I'm from Indiana, after all.) He passed it to me. I passed it to him. This went on and on, until I threw it and he missed it. On top the television was a vase. I'll never forget it. It was large. Clear glass with large streaks of orange running through the glass. It was heavy. I grew up seeing that vase every single day. It was beautiful. The ball hit it; it crashed to the floor. It didn't just break; it shattered! I have never seen so many shards of glass in my entire life.

My mother came home that day and I casually said, "I broke that vase in the family room today." I was so casual about it. And then something happened that I still remember with unblinking clarity. She went into the family room. Sat down in her chair. And she started to cry. She said that it had been a wedding gift. That it was very special to her. That it was very expensive. And then she said, still crying, she said, "I loved that vase."

You could have scooped me up with a spatula that night. That was 50 years ago. It was the first time in my life I became aware that everyone in this world carries something broken inside his or her soul. And I look out at this great church week after week, but I know something . . . I know that the only thing that can put us back together is love and mercy and compassion. That's the Easter message. I think it's up to us to keep it alive.

Someone told me the story recently about a man who was in a terrible accident and he was comatose for 30 years! He finally woke up and was amazed at all the changes in the world. The Internet. Technology. All the advances in medicine and science. He started reading book after book about all the changes in the world.

A few months later he had an appointment with his doctor and he said, "All these changes in the world are amazing!" The doctor said, "Yes, absolutely. So many wonderful things have happened in the world." And then the man said, "Of course, I still believe that the greatest miracle ever is the resurrection of Jesus Christ on Easter morning." That's when the doctor said, "I guess you haven't got to the part about the Cubs winning the World Series!"

Well, the Cubs notwithstanding, I agree with the man . . . nothing surpasses the message that Christ the Lord is Risen! Because it's really a message about love rising

again. But the truth of it, the relevance of it, the great heartbeat of it, well, that's up to us to keep alive. Friends, I love you all. Let's love one another. And to you and your family I say: Happy Easter!