

For Christians, COVID-19 darkness illuminates Easter blessing of eternal life



Emmanuel Lutheran Church Pastor Tricia Lowe prepares for Easter services in Prescott Valley. (ELC/Courtesy)



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On this Easter, known by Christians around the world as Resurrection Sunday, many churches will welcome back their flock to celebrate the eternal promise of the savior Jesus Christ.

Amid the dark despair COVID-19 has brought to the world over the last year, Christian believers continue to be encouraged and comforted by the human life and sacrifice of Christ who conquered evil and death.

Easter is the celebration that follows the gloom of Good Friday when Christ was crucified and his body sealed in a tomb only to three days later rise from the dead before ascending to Heaven.

“People, I think, I’m hoping and praying, are going to be open to hear what the real message of Easter is really about,” declared Senior Pastor Bob Terrell of Emmanuel Pines Community Church, a new congregation of the Free Methodist Church of northern Arizona that meets at the Emmanuel Pines Camp in Prescott.

“Whenever Heaven goes to the trouble to give a message to Earth, the subject is always the same; the subject is the Savior,” said Terrell who will offer two live worship services on Easter; an 8 a.m. outdoor service followed by breakfast and a 9:45 a.m. in the chapel.

The chapel service will be livestreamed and recorded on the church Facebook page.

“And I hope people will hear that for what it really means this Easter. In the same token, when Heaven goes to the trouble to send a message to Earth, the call is very clear. The call is always for commitment.”

With many churches closed for a bulk of the year to at least in-person worship, Terrell said he hopes Easter is a time when people reclaim their “commitment” to church

worship, “whatever that looks like for them.”

“Too often, Easter is reduced to Easter egg hunts and Peter Cottontail, but the consequences of Easter are always extreme, and the consequences of Easter are always eternal.”

COVID-19 has shuttered sanctuary doors, and forced congregational communities to become comfortable with “couch church” but Pastor Tricia Lowe of Emmanuel Lutheran Church in Prescott Valley said she does not believe for a moment this virus has robbed Christianity of its faithful.

“We are Easter people,” Lowe said of her congregation that will gather for a 1 p.m. outdoor BYOC (Bring Your Own Chair) service in the parking lot followed by an Easter egg hunt. The service will also be recorded for view on YouTube. “We have the confidence that we can face death because Christ went there first. Christ conquered death so we don’t have to be afraid.”

Lowe then quoted God’s promise told in the 23rd Psalm.

“The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want ... Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me ... Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the day of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.” KJV

At Prescott United Methodist Church in Prescott, Senior Pastor Dan Hurlbert said in-person services are still limited to about 25% of capacity – about 100 people offered reservations for each of their three services at 5 p.m. Saturday, 9 a.m. and 10:30 a.m. on Sunday.

Those unable to attend live worship, though, can livestream the services that are recorded and available for people at their leisure, he said.

From a year ago Easter when the church was still figuring out how to move from live worship to online worship, Hurlbert said he now is reflecting on the blessings that have come through the need to incorporate technology into weekly worship. He suspects there may be some people more willing to listen to a spirit-filled service in their living room than they would be to physically enter a sanctuary.

“We started (online worship) with a cellphone attached to a selfie stick duct taped to

a tripod – bright pink duct tape,” Hurlbert said. “And now we have a multi-camera, high-definition, remote control streaming set-up.”

He suggests these new iterations of worship are analogous to the Easter story.

Jesus was up on the cross and down in the grave and then rose up again on Easter morning, he said.

During COVID-19, Hurlbert said the Easter story has played out for him as a time of reflection, and appreciation for simple pleasures oft taken for granted.

“I got married mid-pandemic,” Hurlbert said of wife Marci, the general manager at the new Hilton Garden Inn. “In the midst of difficult, there are still things to celebrate.

“The classic message is, ‘It’s Friday, but Sunday’s coming; it feels like the tomb but new life is right around the corner.’”

To Lowe, the COVID-19 season is an extended Lent, a solemn time of reflection, prayer and preparation for what now is the arrival of vaccines and return to a “new” normal that “helps us remember to be Easter people.”

“We are people of the Resurrection,” Lowe said. “So we’re ready for Easter.”

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