

*A sermon for Easter Day 2020
given at the Cathedral Church of St. Paul, Boston, Massachusetts
by the Right Rev. Alan M. Gates, Bishop*

What's Real

In these days of Sheltering-in-Place and Working-at-Home, a recent Twitter post told the following tale:

My 5yo stormed out of my [home] office when i told him i had to do a meeting. He was very mad that i couldn't look at his crafts like i did yesterday. I tried to explain that it was Monday and i had to work, and he yelled "Monday isn't real" on the way out. I'm still just sitting here. [Ethics Gradient @grahamvsworld]

"Monday isn't real!" How I sympathize with that little boy. A lot of things don't seem real right now. In fact, there's some part of me which, despite our best efforts – flowers and hymns and joyful acclamations – there's some part of me that feels like yelling with that anxious and disappointed little guy: Easter isn't real!

At least, this year it doesn't feel altogether real.

Good Friday – now, Good Friday is real enough! A virus convulsing the world. Deaths already surpassing a million. Victims dying alone, quarantined from their loved ones. Economic free fall. Nest eggs devastated. Jobs lost. Income lost. Family security lost. It's the Holy Week story all over again: Crowd mentality surfacing. Scape goats suffering. Leadership faltering. Anxiously we huddle behind closed doors – shouting, perhaps, with that little guy: Easter isn't real!

I have confessed in some prior reflection that I do not like roller coasters. I don't like hanging upside down. I don't like it when the track plunges so fast that organs which belong in my chest cavity are suddenly in my throat. I know that the padded bar which holds me snugly at the waist is supposed to enable me to wave my hands above my head with glee – but I just clutch the thing with the proverbial white knuckles. I do not like it because I am not in control. And it turns out that the uncontrollable amusement park ride, which I successfully avoid, is an apt metaphor for the uncontrollability of life, which I cannot avoid at all.

We look around, and we cannot avoid this truth: Despite our best efforts, and sometimes our successful illusions to the contrary, we are utterly, completely, wholly dependent upon the grace of God. At no time have I more fully understood: Control isn't real!

Whenever I confront this reality – that my notions of control are an illusion – I return to Philip Simmons. Philip Simmons was a professor of English at Lake Forest College. In 1993 he learned that he had ALS, Lou Gherig's disease. He died in 2002. In the intervening years he wrote a book called *Learning to Fall: The Blessings of an Imperfect Life*, which has become a touchstone text for me. Let me read you a bit:

“Who among us gets to dictate the terms of his or her good fortune? ... Our greatest blessings, along with our greatest burdens, seem to fall upon us unbidden.”ⁱ

“The example of Jesus, [like] the experience of mud season [in New England], reminds me of a harsher truth: to be reborn, we must first die. ... Dying, like mud, can take many forms, but every death, in the sense I mean, is a letting go. We let go of ambition, of pride, of ego. We let go of relationships, of perfect health, of loved ones who go before us to their own deaths. We let go of insisting that the world be a certain way. Letting go of any of these things can seem the failure of every design.... But in letting them go, we may also let go fear, let go our white-knuckled grip on a life that never seems to meet our expectations, let go our anguished hold on smaller selves our spirits have outgrown. We may feel at times that we have let go of life itself, only to find ourselves in a new one, freer, roomier, more joyful than we could have imagined.”ⁱⁱ

In his life and in his death, Philip Simmons suggested that falling, with grace, was the necessary prelude to rising, by grace. So if you and I are feeling these days as though we are in free fall, let us claim it as the suffering prelude to some new rising in grace.

Every year the suggested Scripture lessons for Easter roll around. For thirty-three years I think I have never before chosen the Jeremiah option we heard this morning. Peter’s grand testimony to resurrection from the Book of Acts always seemed so much better. So much more Easter. But this time Jeremiah spoke to me. The prophet spoke volumes.

Thus says the Lord:

The people who survived the sword

found grace in the wilderness;

when Israel sought for rest,

the Lord appeared to him from far away, [saying,]

I have loved you with an everlasting love;

therefore I have continued my faithfulness to you.

Again I will build you, and you shall be built, ...

Again you shall take your tambourines,

and go forth in the dance of the merry-makers.

Again you shall plant vineyards, ...

For there shall be a day when sentinels will call [saying]

‘Come, let us go up to Zion, to the Lord our God.’ [Jeremiah 31:1-6]

Not for the first time, and not for the last, an oracle speaks the word of God into a dark and troubled time. Not for the first time, and not for the last, a prophet of the Lord says to an anxious people: You will survive. You will build again. You will plant again. You will dance again. Perhaps I never picked Jeremiah for Easter Day because I never so much yearned to hear this promise of restoration.

And even while that restoration is yet a future promise – there was something else buried in Jeremiah’s word. Did you hear it? *The people who survived the sword found grace in the wilderness.* “Grace in the wilderness.”

The ancient Hebrews found grace in the wilderness when they were led through their terror by a daytime pillar of cloud, and a nighttime pillar of fire. God’s people found grace in the wilderness when, every morning, they awoke to freshly fallen manna, food enough for that one day. Those in Babylonian Exile found grace in the wilderness when they strengthened one another with familiar songs, when they heard the unexpected summons of King Cyrus. Wilderness experiences of grace were real to the faithful of every age. They are real, it turns out, to us. In these most troublous of times, we catch our own glimpses of grace in the wilderness.

From this Cathedral’s MANNA ministry, to St. Stephen’s in the South End, to ProGente Connections in Framingham and Marlborough, to parishes in Somerset, New Bedford, and South Yarmouth, in every corner of our diocese congregations are finding ways to provide food and support for the most vulnerable in their midst. With the careful measures that express love for volunteers as well, they are living their own wilderness faith with compassion. This grace is real.

Last Sunday morning I received a message from Dean Amy McCreath with a Mixcord file – six members of this Cathedral Schola singing remotely from one another but in perfect unison, a beautiful chant. *“Calm to the waves, calm to the wind, Jesus whispers, ‘Peace, be still’ ...”* The file arrived just moments after I had received word of the death of a faithful priest in our diocese. In the wilderness of my sorrow, it was balm. This grace is real.

In New Hampshire our diocesan camp, the Barbara C. Harris Center, has been called upon by both municipal emergency officials, and by the nearby Monadnock Community Hospital, to provide assistance. The gym has become a staging site for emergency food supplies. And the lodgings at our camp are available to first responders and hospital workers who, having been exposed to the coronavirus, need a safe haven in which to remain apart from their families. Shelter in the pandemic wilderness. This grace is real.

And every little glimpse of grace that you are seeing in the midst of these dark days – that is real, too.

Dear friends: The Resurrection – discovered by those faithful women at the tomb, and proclaimed to me and to you in the great Gospel of this day – that Resurrection is God’s eternal answer to all that had been denied in the sorrows of Holy Week, and all that grieves us still.

The Easter proclamation is this: Peter’s failures were real, as are ours – but forgiveness, too, is real, and *forgiveness will prevail.* The women’s despair was real, as is ours – but hope, too, is real, and *hope will prevail.* The disciples’ fear was real, as is yours and mine – but love, too, is real – and love casts out fear, and *love will prevail.* Jesus’s death on the Cross was real, as is the death of so many in these painful days, as is the shadow of death around our world, as will be our own death – yours and mine. But Resurrection, too, is real. And *new life will prevail.*

“Monday isn’t real!” shouted the anxious and bewildered little guy. And we know just how he feels. But Good Friday is real. And Easter is real. And Monday will be real. And grace is real; and hope is real; and love is real; and resurrected life is real. Such is the promise which we claim and proclaim this day.

“Hallelujah, anyhow!” as our dear departed Bishop Barbara would say to us today. Easter blessings to you, dear friends. Christ is risen! The Lord is risen, indeed. Alleluia!

ⁱ Philip Simmons, *Learning to Fall: The Blessings of an Imperfect Life* (NYC: Bantam Books, 2000), pp. 130-131.

ⁱⁱ *Ibid.*, pp. 86-87.