

“DEATH COULD NOT KEEP ITS PREY”

Never will there be a good time to swamp hospitals with critically ill patients and to hold thousands of funerals. But the timing of the coronavirus epidemic seems right now to be especially bad because here in the United States it appears to have reached its peak during holy week.

For several Sundays now our churches have been empty—doors locked, lights off—while those who are desperate for hymns and homilies have resorted to online worship. If nothing else, streaming sermons and services on Zoom or YouTube at least has made the sidelined pastors and music ministers feel like they have risen to the occasion. But, as I write these words, Palm Sunday is just a day away and, in a normal year, all of us in traditional Christian churches would be gearing up for Good Friday and Easter.

Not this year.

Until virus fears put a lid on all public Christian gatherings, I don't think I realized how important holy days like Easter had become to me. Eight decades ago I was born into a sect that still clung to Puritan disapproval of all church holidays. After all, our religious ancestors were convinced, all such “holy days” (holidays) were papist, not biblical. So the churches I grew up in carefully preached Acts 2:38 or Genesis 12 (anything except Jesus' birth and death) on Christmas and Easter.

I tell you this, not to criticize my heritage, but to help you understand why these holy days became so special to me when we finally outgrew those hangups. On all the sixty Easters when I was in the pulpit, I loved preaching about our Lord's empty tomb and joining other believers in singing the great hymns that celebrate his resurrection. But this year, thanks to the virus pandemic, we won't get to do that.

On any Sunday when we can't worship, I miss it. But getting shut out on Easter leaves a hole in my heart. In this way I am like the apostle Paul. Every day, but especially on Easter, “I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection” (Philippians 3:10). In a time when the virus outbreak fills so many hearts with the fear of death, what Christian truth could bless us more?