



**SAINT THOMAS CHURCH FIFTH AVENUE**  
**in the City of New York**  
*The Reverend Canon Carl F. Turner, Rector*  
**[www.SaintThomasChurch.org](http://www.SaintThomasChurch.org)**

**April 11, 2021**  
*The Second Sunday of Easter*

*Festal Eucharist*  
*11am*

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A Sermon by  
The Reverend Matthew Moretz, Associate Rector  
*on*  
John 20:19-31  
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## **Happy Easter!**

“Easter.” Such a dense word for us, with no lack of layers worth excavating, especially during the season itself. Many of you will know that the word began as the name of a pagan fertility goddess venerated as Ēostre. Or Ostara, if you were from Germany. The devout English historian, the Venerable Bede, he wrote that there had been a significant cult of Ēostre in that green and pleasant land. But by the Venerable Bede’s time, the eighth century, all that was left of faith in Ēostre was the month that had been named after her. And that month was right around now. The very time that winter turns to spring, when all those eggs and bunnies and flowers that we have in our Easter decor, when those signs of fertility start appearing after all that dark and cold.

And her month was the very time when the Christians tended to celebrate the Paschal mystery, the Resurrection of Christ. Not just a day, but the Christians devoted a whole season for this, as well, right around the same time. The confluence of these celebratory seasons was no mistake, likely a plan on our part to sidle into a pre-existing practice, make it our own. And the name, Ēostre, that name stuck for us, and for the German Christians.

But in nearly every other European language, this season is not named some variation of Eastertide, but it goes by another name. Joyeuses Pâques! Buona Pasqua! ¡Felices Pascuas! They are all saying “Happy Paschaltide.” Or, another way to put it, “Happy Passover.” The time to say “Thanks be to God that we have been saved from slavery in Egypt!” In their Easter, our Christian sisters and brothers all retain, God bless them, the Jewish heritage that was central to Jesus’ life. In their name for this season, they keep rooted in the ancient celebration of the Exodus that became part and parcel of the meaning of Christ’s Passion and Resurrection.

Remember, Jesus was killed right after the Passover. He was murdered on a Jewish holiday. His last supper, the one where he taught us how to do Holy Communion, his last supper was a Passover meal, to celebrate the Pesach, the liberation of the Jews from slavery, paired with the liberation of humanity from death. The juxtaposition is breathtaking. The season of Easter would come to be the same length of the season of Passover. They are a matched set, so to speak. 50 days to celebrate our freedom from slavery, a living death, and 50 days to celebrate our freedom from death itself.

It takes a while to process such things, as it does with all things that matter. It can take us a while to process a birth, a death, a move, a disrupted year. Some events in our lives are so difficult to digest that they are like a great feast set before us. You can only eat so much in one sitting. And some tables like the Passover table and this table (point to our altar) here speak to such monumental events that if every person in the world ate from them, every day, the food would never run out.

One of the first morsels of the Resurrection is that the disciples met on Easter Sunday night. Need I remind you how dangerous this was? How much their minds would have been swirling. Their beloved Jesus had been brutalized and killed by their leaders. And one of their own trusted friends helped make it happen. And now it looks like someone vandalized Jesus' tomb, taking his body away. Was anywhere safe? Would another disciple be willing to betray their fellowship? Who would be next? The very act of their meeting together risked the Upper Room becoming another Garden of Gethsemane, another occasion of betrayal.

But they met anyway. Tethered by a common anguish, rooted in a common love. And, likely drawn ever closer by the testimony of Mary Magdalene, the one who had seen their Lord among the tombs. At first she thought it was the gardener, but no! He called out her name and it was Jesus! How could she have not recognized him? she said. But today, to every disciple, she was saying with amazement, "I have seen the Lord."

Before Jesus appears, it is already a sort of Easter gathering, given Mary's experience. And they do not scatter, despite their fear. They do not flee to Galilee, they gather together to consider what is next for them. This gathering is an expression of hope. And from that hopeful and fearful midst, Jesus appears again.

Joining them in that locked room, he scares them. He has to say "Peace be with you." He means them no harm. After they see his wounds, after they recognize him, they begin to rejoice. But Jesus has to say "Peace be with you." Perhaps they shouldn't be rejoicing just yet. "For as the Father has sent me" through the way of the Cross and out the other end alive, "now I send you." They may expect to have a cross of their own. For one of them it would come to be a club. In Saint Thomas' case, a spear. But Jesus has come to send them on a path like his. One that left him wounded, even in his wondrous return. But these wounds, and the suffering that he endured, were

signs of the lengths He was willing to go for them, and signs of the world's resistance to the work of the Holy Spirit. The very Spirit that Jesus gives the disciples that Easter night.

In this giving, He breathes upon them, this invisible force tousling their hair and drying their tears, giving them the Holy Spirit. They had struggled against demons and evil possession throughout their ministry, but this was a kind of good possession, an inspiration of the divine presence. He then pronounces that there are two paths before them. The old way, where the brokenness of life is retained, where the ledger of life stains us with permanent ink.

This old world is nothing new. But then, there is the new way. "Whose soever sins ye remit, they are remitted unto them." This is the immortal power of God that the disciples were given. And upon taking it up fully, this is what would have nearly all of them murdered. For they would touch upon the deepest nerve that the world has.

So much of society has an allergic and violent reaction to the Holy Spirit. Because so much of society, religions, states, corporations, clubs, families, these usually rely on the bad guys staying bad guys, debts being paid back, the poor and enslaved staying that way, and the tortured and the executed staying dead. But, the Holy Spirit, like the wind, moves where she wants, not where we want. The Holy Spirit forgives the bad guys. The Holy Spirit forgives debts, frees slaves, justifies the poor. And the Holy Spirit raises up the dead into a new kind of life that no one can stop. This was the power that was being channeled through the disciples, and the power that can channel through us. Our being possessed by the Holy Spirit is the true upshot of Easter, this is where things are going. Not just for us, but for the whole world.

Thanks to the Holy Spirit, the momentum of the Cross and the Resurrection is like wind against the sail of our soul. Thanks to the Holy Spirit no threat has ultimate power anymore. It doesn't really work anymore. For the disciples, thanks to the Holy Spirit within them, crosses, spears, clubs, and saws did not ultimately stop them. And in them, we see the power of every threat deflated and defanged in the light of Jesus' presence with them and us.

After the disciple's time, the sacred history of the saints continues, animated by the power of the Holy Spirit. For them, lions, fires, pogroms, executions, and all manner of tortures didn't really work. And now, what do we face in our time?

The challenges that we face may seem to be of a lower order, but they are not. Every challenge meets us right where we are, right at our very limit. Every temptation fits us like a glove. And the task before us is just as monumental as the disciples and the saints, if we have eyes to see.

For the sake of love, for the sake of mercy, for the sake of forgiving sins, for the sake of protecting the abused in our institutions, for the sake of ending slavery in its hidden forms, if we were really to pursue this to the hilt, if we were really to use the full weight of our lives to live into

these values, well, even in our time, we know what could happen. There lies before us the threat of losing friends or family, being stigmatized for caring about official pariahs, being fired or sued for speaking the truth of things in our institutions, being trolled or targeted for online abuse, being subject to years of unequal treatment or meaningless labor, or perhaps even being attacked or arrested, in some cases, when we defend those who have no defender, or when we forgive those who don't deserve it. When we love as God loves, and forgive as God forgives, so much of the world pushes back in myriad, creative ways that can crush good people.

But the disciples discovered, on Easter night, that God can't be stopped. What is crushed, doesn't stay crushed. In the Risen Christ, they saw that the movement of God is so fertile that any worldly threat can't stop it from being born. And that the powers of slavery and the threats of pain, disease, and death that the world meets out upon us and our friends, these powers fail in the face of the death-defying power of God to turn bad to good, to clean the slate, and to bring the dead to life.

What happened in the Upper Room that night was just the first spark of the Easter triumph over the powers that seem to claim our world. As the Father sent Jesus, and Jesus sent the disciples, now we too are sent. The breath that was in Christ is now in our lungs and on our lips. The peace that he gave them can now calm our fearful hearts and steel our resolve for what is next: our taking up our inheritance, a share in the Life that overcomes, and will overcome, disease, darkness, and death, Easter Life. Paschal Triumph.