

# SAINT THOMAS CHURCH

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*Fifth Avenue · New York City*

**Sunday, April 07, 2024**  
The Second Sunday Of Easter

**Festal Eucharist**  
11:00 am

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A Sermon by

The Rev. Matthew Moretz, *Vicar and Chief Operating Officer*

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## **Easter Childhood**

When I was my son, Sam's age, I just loved Easter. It was a magical time when the Easter Bunny himself would visit our home in the night. This wasn't some person in a furry costume with a frozen smile. But the real deal. There was a rumor that he was somehow related to Peter Cottontail, or at least that they were good friends. And on bright, golden Easter mornings, my younger sister and I would eagerly search the house. Soon, we'd find a woven basket chock full of jelly beans, and eggs that opened up filled with Hershey's kisses, a prominent chocolate rabbit, a Cadbury creme egg, all nestled on a bed of crinkled plastic grass. This gift basket was delight, it was wonder, it was gratitude and joy.

Even deeper than that, it was a sign that our world is a place of benevolent figures of overwhelming power. After all, most every house that I knew as a child received a visit from ones such as these, not only at Easter, but at Christmas night, and also when a tooth fell out. The world is undergirded by hidden figures who know where we live, who know us by name, who come to visit, and who have gifts for us. Not for the adults, mind you. Gifts for us, the little ones. Our delight was their joy and purpose.

Now the Easter Bunny was different than the others in that he didn't require good behavior, or lost teeth, this Great Animal only asked you to hunt. To hunt for the eggs hidden in the grass and in the holes of trees. To hunt for the candy behind your own sofa or your potted plant. "Seek and ye shall find. Knock and the door shall be opened unto you."

That early morning hunt was never the end of Easter for us. There was more. There was getting dressed in our Sunday finest and going to church to sing about Jesus' resurrection, to hear a story or two about what happened back then. It made wonderful sense to me back then. Jesus was alive again! His grave was rock, not dirt, and it was empty. His friends are flabbergasted. He appears to them, And Jesus confuses them at first, but in time, his friends recognize him. He's himself, but changed. Alive, but somehow untroubled. He still has the marks on his hand and feet, but he isn't in pain, he isn't mad, he isn't out for revenge, he's peaceful, he wants to be with them. He even tells his friends what we said at church so often: "Peace be with you." He doesn't want them to be afraid. And he doesn't want them to give up on the friendship and love that makes them one with Him.

If Christmas was set in the night, with a new light shining in the darkness; Easter was about the day, with the daylight was somehow doubly shining, from both the Sun and from the Resurrected Jesus, our friend, and God Himself.

All this I internalized very early in my life, thanks to Easter services essentially the same as we are sharing today, yet on a smaller scale. I was confused about the timing for a while, though. I remind you, “long ago” is all a unified picture for a six year old. To a child, Easter, the moon landing, the Alamo, they all blend together into one landscape in the rearview mirror.

Not only is the past a jumble, but so are life’s patterns. I thought for a while that Jesus came back every year. Now I’ll defend my child self, because it seemed just like the annual appearance of Santa, and like the Easter Bunny, and just like that enchanted, Yankee Groundhog. All of these figures came back every year, so why not Jesus?!

And so I truly looked forward to the day when I would be old enough to save up and take a plane to Israel just in time for Jesus to appear. I somehow knew that the crowds would be overwhelming, and that I had no expectation of seeing Jesus up close, but I would have been satisfied to see Him with my own eyes, just the same.

This was all cleared up once I gave voice to my expectation, and it was a bitter disappointment. There were other things about Easter that took me some time to learn, too. And I hope I can convey them here.

One thing I’ve learned since then is that the Risen Christ isn’t like an Easter basket or an Easter egg. He doesn’t hide. You are the one who is hiding, and He finds you!

The Disciples hiding in fear in the Upper Room or the disciples fleeing from Jerusalem on the road to Emmaus, and then there is Paul on the road to Damascus to execute more Christians. Jesus finds them, appears to them, and changes them forever, out of a half-life ruled by the fear of death or out from under the thrall of the machines of death. They are lost and he finds them. They were blind but now they see. And Easter is the vital moment of our being found and taken out of the darkness we made.

Another thing I’ve learned about Easter since then is this: that what the Romans and the enemies that Jesus had among his own people and friends tried to do by crucifying him, that this backfired spectacularly. They expected that his gruesome ordeal and death would break Jesus, it didn’t. They hoped that his friends would be scattered to the winds, they weren’t. And they trusted that his execution would have them remembered as judicious civic leaders and vigilant religious protectors. Far from it. “There is a light in the darkness and the darkness could not overcome it.” The Resurrection didn’t only serve as a divine “Yes” to Jesus in the face of the leadership’s brutal “No” to him. The Passion and Resurrection of Christ revealed the love and life of Christ, but it also revealed the horrifying depth and sophistication of the campaign to destroy Jesus, to not only kill him but to transform him into some kind of monster. There’s a lot going on behind the scenes: conspiracy, deception, betrayal, public relations, kangaroo courts, and professionalized cruelty and civic murder.

The Risen Christ is a divine “Not on your Life” to all of that. And Easter is a divine “no” to all that still persists of that in our time, endemic. You would think that the Risen Christ would be out for revenge. Of course, He would be justified by any human standard of retributive justice or any expectation of a hero’s story arc.

But no. The executed Lord returns not with a sword, but with Peace itself, His very Spirit that he breathes upon them. The command of the executed Christ is to forgive. To forgive sins, even what they did to him. And so how can we trust in any leader who would instead enshrine retribution and punishment at the foundations of civic, judicial, and religious life? If the Risen Christ is our Lord, and if we are called to forgive the ones who killed God, how much more so are we called to forgive lesser

crimes against humanity? How much do we fail Him in trusting that our judgment is keen enough to keep Golgotha in operation, that execution (however considered, ceremonial, or sanitized) could serve the common good? Like the logic of the Cross, the logic of noose, the electric chair, and gas chamber withers to dust in the Easter Light. So withers much of the logic of war, and all the persuasion that contorts God's world into hell on earth. For all of us who trust that retribution and acceptable collateral damage is the way out of that locked room, the risen Christ will find us, enter in, breathe upon us and say "Peace be unto you; as my Father hath sent me, even so I send you."

I think about how, as a child, the first death I really processed fully was Jesus'. I was fortunate to not have any death in my family in my first six years of life. And there weren't many children's shows or books that dealt with death so face to face as our iconography of Christ Crucified or our Passion Narratives, even the accounts of the Passion which are made for children don't let you off easy. But it is difficult to convey the consolation that came from experiencing from a very early age the joy of Easter, very much knowing that Easter took place after something horrible, the day God died. God died, we killed Him, and yet he didn't stop being God, he didn't stop loving us, he didn't stop living with us and in us. And so when my Great Granpa Otto died, my grief was prepared to be illuminated by the Easter light. There was no quarter for despair or horror. Because of Easter, Jesus didn't stop, nor did Great Granpa, who was with Him.

The last thing I learned about Easter since I was a child is that I was actually right in my confusion about how often Christ would return, but I just didn't take it far enough. Jesus does keep coming back, yet not only once a year, and in one place, but all the time, and practically anywhere you would look, in so many people, more than you would think is fair. Not only that, He's been there all along, and surely He is with us always, even to the end of the age.

May the grace of the Risen Christ, and the love of God, and the Fellowship of the Holy Ghost be with us all, evermore. AMEN.

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