

The Episcopal Diocese of Pittsburgh



May 1, 2020

Dear friends in Christ,

*Alleluia! Christ is risen!
The Lord is risen indeed! Alleluia!*

Today our Governor, Tom Wolf, is speaking about possible plans for the reopening of various parts of the Commonwealth, some of which may affect us. Now I wish to emphasize from the outset the difference between whatever proposals there are for the opening of businesses and the best practices for the reopening of our congregations. We have a number of larger congregations in small places; smaller congregations in large spaces; a high incidence of older people that are classified as being in the most vulnerable population, and so on — a lot of variables that need to be sorted out locally.

Our diocesan Committee on Emergency Preparedness and Response is putting together a whole set of best practices and criteria to help parishes develop their own individual plans for their reopening, but this will take us some more time. So for now, I ask everyone to continue to be patient as we coordinate with leadership within the diocese and with public health authorities in order to arrive at outcomes that are going to be successful, not only for our communities but also for the safety all those around us.

This waiting is, as I have said before, is not only a time of great challenge, but also a time of giftedness when we receive gifts from God — some of which we are not looking for, and frankly, when they come to us we don't really want. In this particular case, I am thinking of the gift of anger. I'll begin with my anger.

I am angry that people are dying, that others have to risk their lives to care for them, angry that the world is shut down, angry that our churches continue to be closed and that we don't know when they'll be open. The list goes on.

But what really makes me angry is this: This virus, this thing that's killing us, isn't even alive. It's just a tiny chunk of genetic material with some pretty hideous properties. One great biologist has called it "a piece of nucleic acid surrounded by bad news." It is chemically active but biologically inert. If you died in a battle with a bacterium, at least you would have faced a living foe. But to be killed by this thing, by the zombie of the microbial world — that is such an insult to human dignity, an affront to the image of God. That makes me furious.

So it helps a little, to know that God is angry too. Think of the moments in Jesus's ministry — and there are plenty of them — when the Lord's indignation breaks out against the powers that corrupt and destroy God's children. He does not reason with demons; he rebukes them. In the face of infection he declares his word, "Be clean," and the sick are healed. At the tomb of Lazarus, in the Gospel of John, Jesus confronts the collusion of death and hopelessness. Surrounded by the weeping of the villagers, John says, that Jesus becomes angry in his spirit, not with the mourners, but with the illness that has brought this death among them. He weeps with them. Then he goes and raises Lazarus from the dead.

So, this anger can be a holy thing, our share in a force unleashed from the heart of God to snap us out of despondency, to awaken us once again to Christ's fierce love for us and bring our eyes back to the God who *wonderfully created and yet more wonderfully restored the dignity of human nature* (BCP 252). This anger is the power that awakened Christ from the tomb, the power that rolled the stone away so the disciples could go in and see what the Father had done for them, for us. When Jesus descended to the dead and stood in front of the gates of hell, he did not use a key to open them, but rather tore them asunder with the ferocious power of his love. There is a scene in a recent play that imagines Christ standing there a second time. The doors have been re-hung but they're all askew and patched together, poorly hung. Before he blows them apart again, Christ shakes his head. "Honestly," he says, "they do such bad work down here."

Yes, they do bad work in hell, sending a lifeless thing to kill the living, and that is worth getting angry about. But even better is remembering that God in Christ has brought an end to every bad work. Even better is asking God to turn the anger into prayer; prayer filled with the fire of compassion, with a holy fury to bring mercy and healing to those in need, in the name of Christ the great and indignant physician. So, let us pray to be quickened in our intercessions for the caregivers, the sick, the dying and the dead, and for those who seek a cure. Pray in the name of the one who has beaten down Satan under his feet, whose love destroys fear and death. Then let us continue to do what we have been doing — pick up the phone, get on Zoom, look after one another, do all we can, above all as we reach out, let us speak again and again the grave-shattering words of Eastertide: *Alleluia! Christ is risen! The Lord is risen indeed, Alleluia!*

May God bless and keep you and those you love safe and well.

Faithfully your bishop,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Dorsey", with a small cross symbol to the left of the first letter.

(The Right Reverend) Dorsey W.M. McConnell, D.D.
VIII Bishop of Pittsburgh