



THE UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

Dakotas-Minnesota Area

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Bishop Ough's Easter message: 'Pray with your eyes wide open'

We are about to celebrate the joy of Jesus' resurrection and victory over sin and death. Easter most clearly demonstrates the faithfulness of a gracious God who, as the psalmist exalts, "did not hand us over to death" (Psalm 118:18b, CEB).

In Christ's resurrection we are not only saved from death, but we are also made new. Paul asserts this central mystery of our faith in his second letter to the Corinthians: "So then, if anyone is in Christ, that person is part of the new creation. The old things have gone away, and look, new things have arrived" (II Corinthians 5:17, CEB).

Can you even imagine the shock and awe of the women who arrived at the empty tomb on that first Easter Sunday, prepared to treat Jesus' body with the fragrant spices they had prepared? Luke's Gospel tells us that while they were trying to make sense of it all, suddenly two men in dazzling bright clothes stood beside them. The women were terrified and bowed their faces, but the men said to them, "Why do you look for the Living One in a cemetery? He is not here but raised up" (Luke 24:5, The Message).

Resurrection faith changes *everything*. With resurrection faith, we no longer have to "look for the Living One in a cemetery." With resurrection faith, we no longer have to fear death or change or uncertainty. With resurrection faith, we are free to embrace the new creation, new possibilities, new love, a new future. With resurrection faith, joy governs our lives, our work, our witness.

Our beloved United Methodist Church is in the midst of several major changes in our life together. I will highlight only two.

The recent Special General Conference failed to find a way forward that would unify the church. Our current position on homosexuality was affirmed, but the division within the church was actually hardened. Progressives and traditionalists all came away wounded and, in many cases, full of despair. Secondly, we continue to adapt to demographic shifts and the challenge of reaching new people and more diverse people. We are engaged in major efforts to enlist the next generation of leadership for the church and the world. We are seeking to extend and expand our missional impact in a world desperate for unity, justice, and hope.



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As we celebrate Christ's victory over fear, sin, and death, I invite you to join me in considering these changes through the eyes of resurrection faith. What new and joyful thing is God in Christ doing among us? Are we being led to a fresh start, a new creation, a victorious stroke of abundant life?

Many of you have been guided in your Lenten journey this year by Bishop Schnase's book, *The Balancing Act*, and the video reflections offered by the Minnesota Cabinet. At one point in his book, Bishop Schnase reflects on the sign he observed on a pastor's desk. It read: "When you're through changing ... you're through!" Bishop Schnase goes on to note that, "Change is life, future, hope, resurrection . . . We starve the old nature and feed the new creation as we intentionally move toward Christ. Change and growth are essential elements of our spiritual growth and discipleship."

The empty cross and the empty tomb signal that making all things new is the true nature of God. When we stop looking for the Living One in a cemetery, we are set free to follow the risen, living Christ anywhere and everywhere.

Years ago, I remember speaking to an annual conference on the theme "praying with your eyes wide open." The phrase was first used during the civil rights movement in this country. People prayed with their eyes wide open out of fear—to watch for danger as they prayed. Such situations of fear, anxiety, and hopelessness continue to exist in many of our communities and the world.

But, as Easter people—as people no longer looking for the Living One in a cemetery—I urge us to pray with eyes wide open in anticipation of the future. This is a faith stance. Resurrection faith is always future-oriented. Paul wrote of this posture in II Corinthians: "We look not at what can be seen but at what cannot be seen; for what can be seen is temporary, but what cannot be seen is eternal" (II Corinthians 4:18, NRSV).

Looking to where God is leading will always lead to eternal, life-giving results. Looking beyond what is temporary and transient always requires faith in the future God is revealing. Looking for the risen Christ beyond the cemetery is the Easter proclamation and commission.

May you, your family, and your congregation have a blessed Easter. Keep praying with your eyes wide open, because Christ is risen. Christ is risen, indeed!