

Going ahead of us into Galilee

As I am writing these words, I already know that we will not be able to open our churches for live worships during Easter time. Similarly to last year, the COVID pandemic will once again force us to stay at home and participate in the services online or read an Easter sermon sent by our pastor via e-mail or regular post. Alternatively, we can use the Phone-a-Friend function of earlier quiz shows and ask a Christian sister or brother for help – and there is no time limit to the call, unlike in the quiz show. Another option is to open our Bibles and read the Scripture alone or with others, pray together or nurture our souls with the articles of our fortnightly magazine *Evangélikus Élet*. As a word of encouragement: God will never leave us without the comfort of His word. And, when we can finally return to church, we should consider it a gift of God!



Obviously, as a pastor, I also suffered from seeing empty churches in the Holy Week and at Easter last year. It was painful to let go of the traditional Washing of the Feet ceremony and the Good Friday programs at the Castle Hill Church in Budapest. In the Deák tér Church, the Lutherania Choir had to cancel the performance of St. John's Passion, an annual highlight offering a cathartic experience to the audience. I missed the sunrise liturgy at Easter morning, when we usually celebrate the baptism and confirmation of adults, participate in the Holy Communion together and share a breakfast meal.

Preaching my Easter sermon to a camera on Good Friday was one of the most touching moments of my ministry. The confusion caused by this peculiar mingling of the days was only made worse by the sight of the empty church. Then I realized how God was offering his comfort: the emptiness of the church reminded me of the empty grave. “He is not here; he has risen. (...) He is going ahead of you into Galilee (Matthew 28:6-7)”, the angel told the women visiting the grave.

At Easter 2021, the message is the same – no matter what form our worships take. The question asked by the angel also remains relevant: “Why do you look for the living among the dead?” (Luke 24:5). Our Risen Lord cannot be locked into the church; he goes ahead of us into Galilee.

Tomáš Halík, a theologian and philosopher from Prague, quotes a sermon that the former Cardinal Bergoglio, later known as Pope Francis, preached one day prior to being elected pope. Based on the well-known verse in Revelation 3:20 – Jesus

is standing at the door and knocking – Cardinal Bergoglio said: “Christ is indeed standing at the door and knocking. But today, Christ is knocking on the door of the church from the inside, trying to go out.”

This year’s Easter, though overshadowed by the coronavirus pandemic, makes us realize that the best place to encounter the Risen Lord is not necessarily within the walls of a church or in a procession. The way to meet Him is much simpler, yet more personal: He can come close to us in our own homes. Apostle John adds a special element to his report about the Easter events: after His resurrection, Jesus came to the anxious disciples “though the doors were locked” (John 20:26). Then He stood among them and greeted them thus: Peace be with you! You could not wish for a better Easter present than these words.

Jesus tells us what he told His disciples after His resurrection: “As the Father has sent me, I am sending you” (John 20:21). Our call is to share the good news of resurrection with the world. After this crisis, when the involuntary closure of church buildings is lifted, we need to be a different church community. We should learn from the thousand-year-old story that talks about an Egyptian caliph who had the churches of Christ’s followers closed. Then, as he was walking down one of the streets inhabited by Christians, he heard prayers and songs of praise from each house. He immediately gave a new order: “Open the churches and let the Christians worship as they want. I wanted to close a church in each street but now I realize that I have actually opened a new church in each house.”

Jesus, the Risen Lord is going ahead of us into Galilee. In biblical times, the place of sacral worship was considered to be Juda, with the sacred city of Jerusalem at its center. In contrast, the region north of Samaria was referred to as “Galilee of the Gentiles” (Matthew 4:15). Yet, this is where Jesus started his ministry. Most of his disciples were Galilean. Galilee saw many special miracles and major conversions. And now, Jesus wants his disciples to return there. He is calling the whole church to Galilee, too: to the world of sinners, the vulnerable, the sick, and the afflicted.

At Easter this year, let us set out and follow Jesus to Galilee, where He will give us our mission. The Glorified Lord will then move on to an even more distant place, a place of trials and persecution. As the Book of Revelation tells us, He visits Apostle John on the Island of Pathmos, practically a penal colony, to give John the following message: “Do not be afraid. I am the First and the Last. I am the Living One; I was dead, and now look, I am alive for ever and ever! And I hold the keys of death and Hades” (Revelation 17:18).