



# Diocese of Altoona-Johnstown

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## **An Easter Message from Bishop Mark**

*Easter 2020*

It sounds so awkward to say Happy Easter this year. During the past month, people everywhere added new words to their vocabulary: Coronavirus and COVID-19. The dreaded virus that these words represent made us learn another dimension of living as we “shelter in place.” Two of my favorite Easter stories have something to do with this directive given by public health officials and other government leaders.

At the end of the Gospel of John it says, “On the evening of that first day of the week, even though the disciples had locked the doors of the place they were for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood before them.” (John 20:19). Most of the disciples sheltered in place. They were in the Upper Room where they had been with Jesus at the Last Supper.

It’s important to notice that they were afraid; especially afraid that someone might come and arrest them. And they were afraid because Jesus had died on the cross and his body was placed in a tomb. They thought the story ended on that sad note.

But John’s Gospel continues with these words: “Jesus came and stood before them and said, ‘Peace be with you.’ When he had said this he showed them his hands and his side. At the sight of the Lord the disciples rejoiced. ‘Peace be with you,’ he said again.” (John 20:19-21).

Even though we have been deprived of opportunities to be together for fear of the COVID-19 virus spreading, the Lord Jesus has not forgotten or abandoned us. And as we hear in John’s Gospel, Jesus doesn’t need to knock on the door. He comes on Easter Sunday and appears before us and calmly greets us with words of peace.

I am sure that I am not the only one who has listened to the thoughts of people who have not only been anxious and worried, but have been deeply frightened by this pandemic.

And so many people have asked me how to reconcile those feelings with our faith in God; a faith that we want to rely on. One response I heard during these past days makes a perfect connection between our faith and the precautions we have been urged to take during this pandemic.

I was reminded that health officials have urged that we wash our hands frequently for 60 seconds. A friend told me, one way to do it without watching a clock is to say the Lord’s Prayer; the Our Father. Stop right now and try it. That prayer literally takes a minute.

But don't just time it. Focus on the words of that prayer in which we call out to our heavenly Father and ask his help in making God's Kingdom a reality in a time and place that seems so strange right now. Ask his help in giving your daily bread; which includes every word that his Son has taught us. It's about forgiveness of sins and avoiding the temptation of following directions that will only get us lost, or even worse, like people who don't listen to the direction to shelter in place. Teach your children how to wash their hands this way!

The other Easter story I invite you to think about is told in Luke 24:13-35. It's about two of the disciples who decided not to shelter in place with the others in the Upper Room. They set out for their hometown of Emmaus, totally dejected over the whole experience of having followed Christ only to see him die on the cross.

But everything changes when Jesus appears, walks with them, talks with them, and accepts their invitation to stop and share a meal. It was there that Jesus revealed himself to them in the breaking of the bread.

The Lord Jesus immediately disappeared from their sight and their reaction was amazing. They recalled how they felt their hearts burning when they were walking and listening to Jesus on the road. So instead of throwing in the towel, they ran back to Jerusalem and told the others the Good News that Jesus Christ is risen!

During these days of Coronavirus and COVID-19 and sheltering in place, I have heard numerous stories of people who had become distant from the Lord Jesus for all sorts of reasons. But coming together with others and for others in this time of need has made their hearts burn with the love of Jesus who has been missing from their lives.

It means that even in the darkest times; even in the times when we feel that the Lord is far away, or we have run from him; Jesus appears to us and says, "Peace be with you." It means that the place for each of us to shelter is with each other and with the Risen Lord.

The Lord Jesus Christ is as near to each of us as he was to the disciples in those encounters that are found in the Gospels. The impact of the pandemic may be around for a while, but we have our shelter which is not just a place but the person of our Savior Jesus, who is with us all the way.

I look forward to the day when we can be together in our churches; around the Lord's altar. It will come. In this time of need, pray for each other. It will not only keep your hands clean, but it will be a reminder of the merciful love that our Father has for each of us. Easter prayers and blessing for all of you!