

In this Easter season, words fail

After the resurrection, the disciples' words failed too.

by [Ruth Everhart](#) in the [May 6, 2020](#) issue



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I spent Good Friday evening on the phone with my mother, trying to help her master Zoom technology. During these disrupted days, I've been talking with her daily on FaceTime, but I had a vision to connect her with the whole family over Easter weekend.

Like many frail elderly people, my mother lives in a facility and has been sequestered in her room, unable even to enjoy meals with her friends. Still, she's bearing up well. She was born into the Great Depression and is tougher than she looks. She soldiers through my instructions about "icons" and "apps" and "links," bravely using words she does not comprehend. She does understand that when she touches certain configurations, things open on her tablet like magic. Until they don't. Until the words disappear from the screen, or the sound won't play, or the colorful

wheel spins. Then I tell her to press the home button and we try again. The hours we spend struggling to establish this new connection feel as sacred as any I have ever spent on Good Friday.

The elderly are much on my mind. My mother-in-law is also living in a facility far from us—or she was until the day before Good Friday, when she was admitted to the hospital with a bad cough. By a trick of the calendar, Good Friday also happened to be her 87th birthday. She spent it in an isolated room awaiting the results of a COVID-19 test. Although she has a lung condition and depends on supplemental oxygen, our far-flung family prayed that she had pneumonia. Only pneumonia.

We got together on Zoom to sing “Happy Birthday.” I recorded it so I could send her the link to watch later. It felt like an act of faith to hold lit candles and sing into the darkness of a screen.

In the Christian tradition, the time between Good Friday and Easter is a time of darkness, a time to ponder the veil between life and death. Holy Saturday is the day that Jesus lies in the tomb. Theoretically it’s a day of stillness, though in practice it’s often a day of Easter preparations.

This year there would be no family Easter dinner. So on Saturday my husband and I lay together on our bed—pretending to nap but really just holding each other, mostly in silence. The words that did slip out were freighted with our history but as gossamer as air. We named gratitude—for each other, for our mothers, for our time together on this planet. We named fear—that the woman who brought my husband into the world might leave it. That she might suffer. That she might die alone. Our whispers dissolved into the late afternoon stillness.

This pandemic has been teaching me something the Easter story has never quite managed to teach me: the limits of words and the limitlessness of faith.

Since my own small losses and griefs matter to me, I attempt to name them, to give them voice. But when similar losses and griefs are repeated infinitely around the globe, they are no longer small, no longer nameable. To read the news these days is to enter a sort of Fresnel lens where each loss is refracted through a series of mirrors, which magnifies and disperses it. Two centuries ago, before the invention of radio beacons, lighthouses used enormous faceted lenses to concentrate and multiply the light from a single kerosene lamp. This light alerted ships to danger and saved lives. The words journalists use are acting like a Fresnel lens, conveying the

shock of stories on repeat around the world, calling us to witness the wreckage already past and to be alert to the danger ahead.

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What words can people of faith use this Easter season? The world is still in the grip of a novel virus, and the disruption stretches ahead for weeks if not months. My clergy friends are exhausted from trying to bring the lens of faith to a hurting world, from running into the limits of words. Already there is much conversation about what ministry will look like “after.”

I wonder too. But I wonder if, meanwhile, it’s time to do Easter differently. What if we lingered in the stillness of Holy Saturday, the day of the tomb? Yes, the Easter celebration has come and gone, and Christ is risen every day. Let us proclaim that. But let us also fall silent, admitting how little we can say in the face of global grief. Let the limits of our words give way to a wordless faith in the one who dared to lay in the tomb while his friends grieved.

During this particular Eastertide, we are like the women and the disciples on that Saturday—caught in something entirely too large for us to comprehend. We can follow their lead. Like them, let us observe Shabbat, lighting a candle in the dark, praying for understanding. Soon enough it will be half-light, and, like the women, we will head to the tomb—where our work is ever before us, the work of tending the body of Christ. Like them, I imagine that we will be surprised when that work turns out to be something different than what we prepared for, on a scope we have not yet conceived.

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title “What language can I borrow?”