

OPINION

In these times of darkness, let's remember the hopeful message of Easter

JOHN PENTLAND

CONTRIBUTED TO THE GLOBE AND MAIL

PUBLISHED APRIL 2, 2021 UPDATED APRIL 2, 2021

28 COMMENTS

John Pentland is the minister at Hillhurst United Church in Calgary.

This is our second Easter living through COVID-19. It feels like Groundhog Day. This spring we are slowly emerging from our cave-like existence. It has been a long year and difficult year.

Some have experienced sorrow due to the death of a loved one from COVID-19 or other causes. Some people have lost jobs. Many have experienced mental health challenges. Some have had to work as frontline workers and had to endure stressful workplaces. Others have lived and worked from home, juggling Zoom and kids.

All of us have missed physical contact. Hugging, touching or shaking hands is a distant memory. We are all missing gatherings of friends and family. We are weary and fatigued. Someone recently said to me, "I feel like I have been living in a very dark cave." And we wonder, "Can anything good come from this dark COVID-19 cave?" I believe so.

I was surprised recently to discover that the origin of Christianity begins in a cave. At Christmas we hear the story of Mary and Joseph seeking a place to rest in Bethlehem. We hear that there was no room for them at the inn and they found refuge out back. Many theologians believe that the manger was literally a cave underground at the back of the inn. The Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem houses the suspected cave underground. It was a safe place to store animals from predators.

The cave was the darkness that cradled Jesus's birth. It was from this dark, humble cave that Jesus emerged to teach, touch and encourage the least, lost and lonely. Jesus reminded people that they mattered and that there is hope in life's darkest caves. His teaching challenged greed, violence and self-serving ways. He challenged systemic injustice and called for compassionate care for all. Sadly, he was a threat to the political authorities, who rejected his call to this radical compassionate love and they nailed him to a cross. Jesus was crucified in a public and humiliating death. People rejected his vision and still do.

Good Friday isn't simply a day of the past – it reminds us of our present-day reality. The cross symbolizes this continuing experience of crucifixion in our world. Racism,

violence, hatred and injustice are present realities. We have heard people cry out from their darkness for light, redemption and transformation.

This is precisely where the cave becomes our greatest hope. We are told that after his death, Jesus's body was placed in a cave and a stone covered the entrance. It was a damp, dark tomb. We are told that three days later, women went to the cave to prepare his body for burial and they found the cave empty. The darkness of the cave birthed great light and hope. The cave was a womb that birthed the story of new life that we celebrate at Easter. (The Church of the Holy Sepulchre stands over the sites of this cross and cave in present day Israel.)

COVID-19 has been a cave-like existence and it remains a tomb of despair. Yet it is from the dark caves of our depression, grief, helplessness and loneliness that transformation comes. We have been shaken to our core. Our society has been shaken at its roots. We are all learning to walk in the dark and to trust in this unfamiliar space. Many of us feel like we are still stuck in a cave with no way out. We long to be resurrected from our darkness. We wait trusting that this darkness will be the fertile dawning of our Easter joy. Like seeds underground and babes in wombs, new life will emerge. Easter isn't the flip of the switch, it is an experience of transformation.

Today we are living in the dark period leading up to Easter. We can't go back and we can't go forward. We are on the threshold. We have learned so much this past year. We have been inspired, supported, loved and held by the creator as we wait in our caves of darkness. We have been in this together and we will emerge together.

Faith promises that we will emerge, like a chrysalis from a cocoon. We will fly again. The truth of Easter during COVID-19 is a promise that we will emerge from our caves resurrected and ready to soar.