It’s March 31 as I write this. Minnesota is on its fourth day under the stay-at-home order. I don’t know the future — whether we’ll still be social distancing when you read this or trying to return to some semblance of normal, but I do know this: Easter joy still matters.

I think it’s important to continue celebrating the Easter truth in our COVID-19 context. To be sure, this crisis has disordered our lives on this side of eternity. However, the resurrected Jesus brings with Him the promise of divine peace, comforting relief and everlasting order.

At Easter, we celebrate as Jesus punches death in the face, laughs at the devil and shines the light of His irreversible love on you and says, “You are mine for all of eternity.” This is the mind-boggling goodness of the Good News, and it is for you.

So take this Good News into your hearts, into your minds and into your lives. It’s not merely meant for Easter Sunday, but for every Sunday and every day of the week. Easter joy is not just a once-a-year event. You’re invited to take it into your homes, to your family, to your friends and to your workplaces — even if they are still web-based from our social distancing guidelines.

Alleluia! Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! Alleluia!
Friends, the tomb is empty! Death has been defeated. Hope is here. Don’t keep it in. Like a sneeze that wants to get out, let it out. Shout it out! In fact, take it out to the streets and up to the rooftops. Shout it so that everyone can hear: Alleluia, Christ is risen! He is risen indeed. Alleluia!

Jesus went from life to death, but that was so He could take you from death to life. Now, I realize coming to the point of death is not something we look forward to. With each year of age, with every new body ache and every new pain, along with every sickness or wretched disease or pandemic that afflicts us or our loved ones, death inevitably draws closer. And if we are being honest, it often terrifies us because we know all the pain and the heartache that come with death — most of us intimately so from the journey through the valley of the shadow of death with a loved one.

Even so, that’s precisely the nature of what it means to be a Christian. It’s what it means to be a disciple of Jesus. When Jesus calls you to follow Him, He bids you to come and die. He asks you to die to yourself but to live to Him. In other words, He asks you to repent of everything that would come between you and Him, to put to death in yourself every idol, desire and impulse that means more to you than Jesus does.

That’s not easy, of course. It can be painful. Death always is, you know. But it is a divinely designed death. For when you are baptized into Jesus, the Word of God says you are baptized into His death so that you might live with Him in His resurrection (see Rom. 6:4). In other words, you go with Jesus from life to death so that you can go with Jesus from death to life.

Of course, that’s easier said than done. The madness of this pandemic world, the chaos and disorder of our time — it’s threatening all around us. But Jesus comes and stares it all in the face with us as the way, the truth and the life. He is the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. He is the great savior of great sinners, a fear-eater and a death-defeater. He fights for you.

The simple fact is this: One day, sooner or later, we are all going to come face-to-face with death. Sin has guaranteed it. There’s no escaping it. And as scary as it is to think about it, and as gut-wrenching and agonizing as it is to see our loved ones endure it, the triumph of Easter lets us face death with new confidence — even joy.

Not that we take death lightly, but rather Easter brings with it a great song and declaration that stares death in the face and says, “You don’t win! I know that my redeemer lives. And that means He wins!” It also means that you and everyone who dies believing in Jesus Christ will live again, too.

Easter blasts out to every last casket, coffin and crypt that Christ is Risen! He is risen indeed. Alleluia! Death does not get the final say. Thanks be to God that Jesus gets the final say. He is the resurrection and the life. You are safe with Him now and always.
Rev. Paul Rieger (in center) was installed as senior pastor of Trinity Lutheran Church, Faribault, on March 8. He began serving as assistant pastor at Trinity in 2015. We pray God would continue to bless Rieger’s service at Trinity, equipping him to faithfully shepherd the congregants and community.

Rev. Rieger is now SENIOR PASTOR

Even though we are following social-distancing guidelines, Rev. Dennis Heiden (left), senior pastor of Hosanna, Mankato, and his puppet friend continued to reach out and teach the Hosanna children (and their pets!) in their living rooms. We would love to see what your current church/school life looks like. Please see page 8 for more details.

Congregation mission receipts

For the period ending March 31, 2020

- Actual receipts: $135,663
- Budget receipts: $175,000
- Over (under) amount: ($39,337)

Year-to-date receipts

- Actual receipts: $523,592
- Budget receipts: $525,000
- Over (under) anticipated amount: ($1,408)

Use of mission receipts (YTD-year to date)

- 50% remitted to Synod (YTD): $190,825
- 100% remitted to Synod (YTD): $21,623
- 50% for district operations (YTD): $190,825
- 100% for district operations (YTD): $120,319
- Total receipts: $523,592

Mission receipts—2020 vs. 2019

- Mission receipts — YTD 2020: $523,592
- Mission receipts — YTD 2019: $498,722
- Over (under) last year: $24,870

2020 congregational receipts budgeted at $2,100,000

MINNESOTA SOUTH DISTRICT LCEF

February 2020

- New investments: $5,601,689
- Withdrawals: $1,563,082
- Net increase (decrease): $4,038,607

Year-to-date July 1, 2019–Feb. 29, 2020

- New investments: $16,796,402
- Withdrawals: $15,232,089
- Net increase (decrease): $1,564,313
Grace, love, fellowship? Those wonderful words in 2 Corinthians still bring comfort and joy to us today. Perhaps, however, they are most meaningful to those who feel the weight of sin in their hearts, who desperately long for peace and forgiveness in their daily lives.

The mission of correctional ministry here in the Minnesota South District is not just to say those wonderful words, but to live them too. We are concerned for the welfare of those who live behind bars, and equally as well as the recently released.

Their problems are compounded by their newfound freedom. They will not have enough money to live on. They will need medical care, clothes, food, shelter, a job and a place to worship.

Some will not make it without the support of others. Some will run out of options and become imprisoned again. This is a humanitarian crisis of epic proportions. There are 4,500 who are permanently homeless in the Twin Cities. Another 5,000 return to this district every year.

For some, there is good cause for hope. The Freedom Store at Jehovah Lutheran Church, St. Paul, offers a small doorstep ministry where people receive any number of wonderful gifts. There’s a vicar on duty to receive them. They are given clothes, groceries, a Bible and maybe even a blanket. Crossing HOME, a Christian charity, helps them with jobs and a decent place to live. Together, they receive about 300 visits every year.

Many take complete advantage of these services. Many, in fact, attend church and Bible classes. Thanks to the continued support of the LCMS and the generous gifts of various individuals, parishes and organizations such as the LWML, the ministry is working, and working well.

Today, however, the Freedom Store faces the new crisis of COVID-19. We are no longer able to meet with various Lutheran supporters and ask for resourc-
es. And, at this very moment, these returning Christians are being laid off from work. They will need at least a few days’ worth of food to sustain them until they can make long-term plans or find new jobs.

While we can usually accept a wide array of donations, we are currently focusing on providing nonperishable food and distributing Bibles. We need grocery bags to put them in as well. We would like to hand out 50 bags every week.

This ministry nourishes both the body and the soul, making the Lutheran church not just any church, rather mother church in a critical transition which they will never forget, a time when they not only receive a second chance at life, but also a wonderful opportunity to share the joy of salvation with fellow Christians. These same men who worship at Jehovah Lutheran also serve as lectors and ushers. They have cooked dinners and volunteered for other projects like church maintenance. Some have been baptized. A young couple has enrolled in premarital counseling. About 15 regularly attend a weekly Bible class.

The concept of the Freedom Store is based on the parable sometimes known as the prodigal son. In Luke 15, the father welcomes his son with open arms, gives him new clothes, puts a ring on his finger and kills the fatted calf in order throw a first-class banquet. The closing words of the chapter explain:

“It was fitting to celebrate and be glad, for this your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost, and is found.” — Luke 15:32

It is precisely this same radical act of welcoming that is needed to celebrate those who return to the church.

How you can support correctional ministry

If you are so inclined to join us, please feel free to donate. We do not wish for any clothing or linens during the COVID-19 crisis. We will do the shopping to tailor to the needs of our recipients, and we will have volunteer drivers safely distribute food and hygiene supplies.

If you would like to support this endeavor, please feel free to send your contributions to:

Rick Marko
Treasurer, Minnesota South District
14301 Grand Ave. S.
Burnsville, MN 55306-5707

Earmark the check “for prison ministry.”

It is safe to contribute Bibles. Email Jim Seemann for details at seemann@csp.edu.
Zones learn about POBLO

The North Carver and South Carver zones held their Christian Life Workshop on March 7 at St. John’s, Chaska. Rev. Greg Snow, St. John’s pastor and South Carver Zone pastoral counselor, presented a thought-provoking devotion about the coronavirus, noting that as God’s children, we are not to panic, but rather to be patient, take precautions and know that God is with us during this time. Keep in the Word!

The speaker was Nader Alaraj, a missionary at POBLO International (People of the Book Lutheran Outreach), with help from his wife, Georgette. They organized the International Friendship Centers (IFC) in the Twin Cities. Nader and Georgette work out of Mount Hope Lutheran Church, Bloomington.

At the IFC at Mount Hope, missionaries and volunteers are involved in various mission and community engagement efforts. Nader and Georgette and the volunteers are connecting people from many countries at Bible study and worship as they share the Gospel. They also provide food, clothing and furniture to refugees in need.

The centers offer free classes for immigrants and refugees in English, computer skills, knitting, cooking and sewing. Citizenship classes are also offered, as well as childcare. The International Friendship Center is open to anyone, no matter your country of origin.

What can you do to help? You can serve as an instrument to bridge the cultural and religious gaps that exist by serving as a prayer warrior for this mission effort. You might also consider volunteering to teach classes, transport students or provide donations (as needed) or financial assistance.

“You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.”
— Matt. 5:14-16

Young women serve in Worthington

The LWML of St. Matthew’s, Worthington, has a Young Women in Missions group that meets monthly. Activity meetings rotate between devotions (from the LWML website) and a servant event or special project. For March, the women prepared and served a Lenten supper, shown above.

What a joy to see these young women “Serving the Lord with Gladness.” If you don’t already have a young women’s group in your congregation, perhaps you could begin thinking about what you might be able to do to start such a group.

Christ’s hands working in Atwater

St. John, Atwater, Ladies Aid and LWML hosted a craft day on Feb. 18. A group of 17 men, women and children gathered in prayer and service to create 31 pillowcase dresses, which will be donated to Orphan Grain Train (OGT) and sent to underprivileged children overseas.

This idea came from a handout picked up at the Litchfield Zone Fall Rally in October. Members have been donating pillowcases since November.

Another craft event was held on March 7. An additional 56 dresses were sown, also for OGT.
Whose place is it?

By Mike Rodewald
Lutheran Bible Translators
CEO and Executive Director

One of our Bible translation consultants was working within a language community in a remote part of Africa. The process of Bible translation includes checking texts with local translators and influential members of the language community. This helps minimize mistakes and distortions and creates ownership of the final text.

A group was checking the Old Testament book of Job: “Naked I came from my mother’s womb, and naked shall I return.” (1:21). There was quite an animated discussion. The consultant asked the group what was going on. They were confused. They did not understand “mother’s womb.” The advisor explained the place and function of the place in a mother’s body which carries the baby. They replied, “The first house inside the mother is not the mother’s place. That place belongs to the child.”

Within that language community’s cultural perspective, the mother provides the “first house.” She is given life-long honor through the providing, but that “first house” is the child’s as long as the baby needs its home.

When there is not an exact word such as to describe a “womb,” translation principle dictates choosing a solution which creates the least amount of distortion for those to which the Scripture is intended. For example, one might stick close to the original text, “I came naked from my mother’s womb...” and then put a footnote explaining “my mother’s womb” as that of “first house” for the baby. Or they might make it more naturally understandable to the language community by rendering it, “I was naked when I came from my first house...” Or the translators might even choose to paraphrase it, “I came on this earth with nothing...” In the end, the language community discusses and decides what form maintains the meaning of the original with the least amount of distortion while still being acceptable to the community.

There is a succinct point illustrated through the perspective of that language community. If we had the same perspective, it would change points of discussion for what is now a national debate in the United States. Without the womb/house, the unborn child cannot be sustained. Possession for the one inhabiting the womb/house is arguably as valid and perhaps even more important than that of the one providing it.

In the same way that the mother provides a place for the child, God provides me a place in His Kingdom by faith through Jesus — a place which sustains me. The Bible is God’s Word. It is God’s communication to me through my own words. In the Bible, I see the story of His salvation — Jesus coming to me right where I am. I am undeserving, I am helpless in my human nature. But salvation through Jesus is given to me anyway. “For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people.” (Titus 2:11). “Through faith, salvation is ours” (Rom 5:1, Gal 2:16).

We honor and serve not because God owns salvation or needs honor, but because He has given us everything we need. You and I have salvation, not because of something we have done, but because God provides it for us. That is a good place to be.
As we navigate our present normal, we are thankful that we still have opportunities, at home via the internet, to hear God's Word preached to us by our pastors. And our Lutheran school students can also be in class, albeit on a computer screen.

So, what does this look like for you? Please snap a quick photo or two ... it could be of you and/or your family seated in your living room or a table watching the worship service on your computer or big screen TV; or your student (or a teacher) at her desk, working or looking into a screen of her classmates in rows of rectangles. Or if you are one of the few souls in church helping with the livestream, capture a scene.

Let us know who and where you are and where you worship, and we’ll use them to show that while we’re physically apart, we’re still together as the Body of Christ.

Send your photos and stories to communications@mnsdistrict.org or tag us on Facebook or Instagram @mnsdistrict.

Here are sample photos to use as a guide.

Student joins her class for online lessons.

Third-grade teacher leading her online class in song, with help from her son.

Children visiting their grandmother, through the window of the nursing home.

Family watching Sunday service from the comforts of their sofa.

Following along with worship on the radio.

Praising God outside in the lovely spring days, either through music or a chalk drawing.