

“Finding Easter in the Midst of the Struggle”

Jennifer Riddle

I’ve had a mild obsession with the apocalyptic this year. Well, maybe it’s not so mild. Following the election, I read Octavia Butler’s dystopian science fiction novels about post-apocalypse America—*Parable of the Sower* and *Parable of the Talents*. I binge watched the Hulu series, *Paradise*, which highlights a secret government-created colony created in the event of a world-wide calamity. I listened to Brian McLaren’s nonfiction work, *Life After Doom*, which addresses the same environmental and societal conditions that bring about the catastrophe illustrated in the *Paradise* series.

This isn’t my first rodeo with self-created exposure therapy. As a kid, I feared massive storms like tornadoes and hurricanes, and the destruction they wrought. Though I grew up in Western New York, where tornadoes were rare and hurricanes non-existent, every time a thunderstorm happened, I was mortified. Then one day I started to curate something I called my “Storm Book.” Each time there was a newspaper article about tornadoes or hurricanes, I pasted it into my black marble composition book. I’m not sure what initiated this process and I’m not sure how long I actively used it. My parents had no idea I was doing it until they found the book while I was away at college. This small step helped to calm my fears as I learned more about the reality of destructive weather patterns. Sometimes digging deep into the scary places can help more than we think.

The use of media to deal with things that alarm us isn’t unusual. It was reported by *The New York Times* that Penguin Random House experienced a 9,500% increase in sales for George Orwell’s *1984* in January 2017. That’s just one example of a dystopian work of fiction that surged in popularity during these chaotic times. And the reality of our world in 2025 is much worse than it was in 2017.

We’ve been walking through a lot as a country. The environmental and systematic societal injustices that were setting off alarm bells before the inauguration are now replaced by even louder sirens of the removal of Constitutional protections and violations of basic human rights. Our world was literally on fire last year, but this year those fires, both literal and figurative, are everywhere we look and hit much closer to home. It’s hard to know where to go to begin putting out fires. It’s hard to know where to spend our precious resources of time, money, and attention. It’s hard to know what will do the most good.

Amid this turmoil, we also find ourselves in the season of Easter—a time when we continue to celebrate the victory of God’s love over the finality death. How can we celebrate that when the world is like this? When it seems like nothing we do makes a lasting dent in the forces of destruction? When darkness looks like it’s winning?

We're in luck, because the Bible is full of literature written to and about people struggling with oppression, injustice, and an uncertain future. Today's text in Romans is one of our greatest reminders of God's love amid unrest and confusion. At the time when the apostle Paul was writing, the church was full of division, fear, and uncertainty. There was infighting among factions of believers on a variety of issues and broader challenges brought about by the whims of the emperor, Nero. Instability and tension were a part of the calculus for the Roman Christians. There's much we can relate to in this text.

So when Paul confirms for us that nothing in a very long list of candidates can separate us from God's love, we begin to see glimmers of hope. That list of larger-than-life troubles is there for a reason. Paul is knocking down all our objections and arguments about the things that seem bigger than God. As a result, we begin to hear something different instead: God is with us. God sees our pain. God knows our struggle. God is there beside us, in the middle of it all.

We remember Jesus, the God who put skin on this love, standing with us in the dirty, bloody mess of our lives. Jesus who dug in the mud and wiped it on a blind man's eyes to heal him. The one who humbly washed his dusty and smelly followers' feet. The one who shared sacred meals in homes of people that many called unworthy or unclean. Nothing can separate us from selfless, holy love like that.

During the season of Lent, the Godly Play class wondered through a series of lessons called "The Mystery of Easter." We had a series of plaques to tell the story of Jesus' life, from his birth, first visit to the Temple, baptism, time of testing in the desert, years of ministry, and his final days. When we reached the last week of the lesson, we showed the class this plaque. It has two sides—the sadness of the crucifixion and the fulfillment of communion at Easter.

This is what we say to the class when we get to this part of the story: "When you look at this side (*crucifixion*) you know that the other side is there (*Easter*). When you look at this side (*Easter*), you know that this side (*crucifixion*) is there, and you cannot pull them apart. This is the Mystery of Easter, and that makes all the difference."

You cannot pull them apart. The pain and the joy. They can't be separated. They exist as both sides of the same thing. This is the Mystery of Easter.

Friends, we are deep in the messy middle. We are in the foam core that exists between crucifixion and resurrection, where we yearn for the completion and the "made right-ness" of Easter. When the whole of creation will be restored. When all creatures can live as they were created to be. When no one is oppressed. When all have enough to eat and a safe place to live. When everyone and everything flourishes. That is the Easter world we yearn for.

Yet we are here. When the powers that be oppress the poor and the queer and the immigrant and the autistic. When people are sent to foreign prisons and due process is not found. When we march in the streets and others are forced behind the scenes, in fear because their skin tone or immigration status or sexuality puts them at greater risk.

We live in the Already and Not Yet and it stings. What can Easter people do?

In her *Kids and Faith* blog Meredith Miller writes, “Easter is what we do when the world is on fire. It’s not about ignoring. It’s about living out hope and joy because Easter is the promise that the world won’t always be on fire. So we practice what we know will be true. We live our hope...We’re not looking for distraction. We’re not sticking our head in the sand. We are practicing future hope.”

Friends, let’s practice hope together, envisioning and working together for the glorious future made real. Let’s be flourishing people, radiant and invigorated by the freedom of God’s never-ending, unbridled love for us. And let’s be people who listen to voices on the margins who have been practicing hope even through multiples centuries of oppression.

Practicing hope doesn’t need to be grand. It can be as small as holding a door for someone. It can be sharing a smile. It can be reading the wisdom of BIPOC people. When we live with love, selflessness, and generosity, we are practicing future hope. We are leaning into and expanding the web of love that God has given us through Christ.

In every one of those apocalyptic books and shows I’ve consumed, there are glimmers of hope, especially in the small things. Our humanity survives in gestures of kindness, bravery, advocacy, and forgiveness, despite every desperate circumstance. We all have the opportunity to choose the good in each moment we are blessed with.

Sometimes we need a token to help us remember to practice hope. Last week in the 9am service, I talked to the kids about God’s powerful love rolling away the stone in front of Jesus’ tomb. I said that we can carry a stone to remind us that God’s love is powerful enough to do anything.

I brought stones for the rest of us today. Take one if you need to remember to be Easter people, practicing hope and remembering God’s powerful love. Carry it with you, to remind you that: neither death, nor life, nor Christian nationalism, nor Presidents, nor things present, nor future worst-case-scenarios, nor fascism, nor racism, homophobia, or ableism, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate you from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Amen.

Discussion Questions:

1. What does it mean to "practice future hope" in the middle of a world that often feels like it's falling apart? What is one small, everyday action that can be a form of practicing hope?
2. The sermon talked about living in the "messy middle" between crucifixion and resurrection. Where do you feel the tension between sadness and hope in your own life or in the world around you?
3. Romans 8 reminds us that nothing can separate us from God's love—not even injustice, fear, or oppression. How can knowing this change the way we respond to current events like political unrest or societal division?