



EASTER SUNDAY

This COVID Easter two images are seared into my mind – each a consequence of the pandemic. The first was journeying with a young seminarian from Pompey, in Micronesia, who kept vigil for his dying father. Augustine watched on a mobile phone, mostly alone, for more than 36 hours, with his family gathered around his father's hospital bedside. And he waited. Eventually his dad died, and again he watched from afar, this time, as the catechist led the mourners in a burial service for his father in his home village.

The other also involved a phone. But this time it was a phone recording, a video of a 23-year-old Tongan Marist student lying in our seminary chapel in Suva. Through the video image his mother was able to look one last time on the face of her dead son, Saia. Closed borders meant that grieving families were severed at the very moment they needed one another's comforting touch. Closed borders meant that neither Augustine, nor Saia's family could prepare the funeral or the burial of their loved one. Instead, in the case of Saia, the weeklong funeral rituals were prepared by his Tongan brother seminarians. Closed borders prevented mourners from physically engaging with Christian ritual, that is so necessary to offer hope and consolation in the faith of a risen Christ. These scenarios are not unique; they have been repeated countless times over the past year in almost every country throughout the world. So, what does it mean to celebrate Easter, the story of dying and rising, of new life, of hope and joy at this time of uncertainty and unease, of separation and continuing helplessness?

Each year we gather to keep the Easter Vigil. We encounter the living, saving Christ through natural elements—both God given and human crafted. We prepare a new fire and from it we light the Christ candle that we carry aloft throughout our churches. Ancient stories of our salvation history are once more told. Water is poured and oil is dripped onto the bodies of new Christians. Bread and wine are blessed and broken and shared in communion with the Risen Christ. Once more we immerse ourselves into the Paschal Mystery. Each year the symbolic elements and the ritual actions are the same. And each year they are completely different, because we live in a different time and place, and our lives are shaped by our recent experiences.

The pandemic has upset our usual routines. It has stopped travel and often confined us to a home or place separated from loved ones. Many are struggling to survive because they've become unemployed. This year many more of us than usual have experienced suffering and hardship. This year, as we come to remember again the death and resurrection of Christ, we've come face to face with our own fragility, our own death and loss.

Easter invites us to live in hope. We celebrate the new life of Christ, perhaps not with the usual happiness, when we see so many continue to suffer, but with the deep joy and peace that only faith in a saving God can bring. We live in the present and look forward to the future, because the risen God is with us.

Carmel Pilcher rsj