

# The Spirit

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There is a cave in Kentucky called Mammoth Cave. When you first enter, it appears quite empty of life. Dark, quiet, dank, barren.

And yet ... and yet ...

Like many caves, first impressions can be deceiving. You see, over 200 animals live in Mammoth Cave. Animals that range from raccoons and other small creatures who accidentally venture into the cave and cannot figure out how to return to the outside, to animals who deliberately live both inside and outside of the cave, to forty-two species of troglodites - animals adapted exclusively to life in the darkness. ***Amid seeming emptiness, life is abundant.***

If one were to drive by most of our church buildings, parking lots would be empty and the doors would be locked. A casual observer might say, "That church is empty. Nothing is happening there."

And yet ... and yet ...

First impressions can be deceiving. There is a lot of life happening in congregations and ministry sites. There are people who have joined communities of faith in our synod that, for various reasons, would never have entered the doors of a church building. They have become part of the community through online worship – even if they live thousands of miles away. There are people who were a part of the church community for years – but because of work schedules or health issues or mobility concerns – they had faded away. Now they are coming each week as they re-connect. And there are people who have never left. They continue to foster relationships, enjoy serving in the community of the church, and who are faithful to the tasks that are required to keep churches functioning.

We have groups in many churches that are working with other organizations to help feed, clothe, teach, and be with people in the neighborhoods. We have those who are having sometimes uncomfortable (but always fruitful) conversations about what it means to be faithful in this time and place. We have many who are visiting and calling the sick and the dispirited.

Fundamentally, together we are living into the good news of Jesus and journeying together in the Spirit as we are Church in the world. ***Amid seeming emptiness, life is abundant.***

Listen to these words from the first Easter, "Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb. So she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, 'They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him!' (John 20:1-2)

Mary looked into that tomb and saw only lifelessness and she despaired. She peered into the shadows and felt, deep in her bones, the darkness of sorrow, abandonment, disappointment, grief, heartache, and pain. She had gone searching for something, someone, and she came away with nothing.

And yet ... and yet ...

Jesus had risen. Jesus, scars and all, was going to meet her in the garden. In a few hours Jesus would call Mary's name and assure her of his love. Jesus would come to the disciples and breathe on them – giving them peace and asking them to, "Feed his sheep." And they would. ***Amid seeming emptiness, life is abundant.***

Dear Beloveds, this last year has felt somewhat like we were living in a cave. We have been confined, somewhat lost, weary, and wondering where the new life is. We have stumbled on rocks and fallen in despair.

And yet ... and yet ...

We trust that soon we will be gathering in-person together. Soon we will be beyond this pandemic. Soon life will not "return to normal" but instead will move forward as we live God's calling of loving God and loving neighbor.

We know this because we are a resurrection people. Out of death comes life. We place our trust in our risen Savior who died and is raised again. ***Amid seeming emptiness, life is abundant in Christ Jesus our risen Savior.***

And we all proclaim: Alleluia! Christ is risen! Christ is risen indeed!

+ Bishop Shelley Bryan Wee

## From our Synod Vice President



“I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end.” Revelation 22:13

This Lent seems to be a season for remembering firsts and lasts. The first time I heard the term “novel coronavirus,” my last in-person

choir rehearsal, the first time I attended a virtual worship service, the last time my daughter was home for a visit, the first time I attended a Zoom memorial, my last time working from the school, my first Zoom cocktail hour. The list goes on.

I do often find myself wondering what thing I am doing now will turn out to be a last. I didn’t know, when I attended church on March 8, 2020, that it would be my last time worshipping in person, at least for the duration of the pandemic. My daughter did not know, last February, when she decided not to wait until April to visit because she was worried the virus might complicate travel plans, how wise she was, nor that that visit would be the last one for over a year. As vaccinations become more wide-spread and we inch cautiously back into the world, what will I look back on and realize it was a last? Some things dwindle slowly, and we don’t notice when the last time actually occurs. We never know what thing we are doing today will be a last – but God does.

I also wonder what new firsts will be around the corner. Firsts are often more noticeable, perhaps because we are looking for them. A baby’s first words and first steps, for example, are eagerly anticipated, but I imagine most of us don’t remember the last time the child crawled as their main mode of locomotion. I feel I can say with confidence that our upcoming synod assembly will be full of firsts. It will be the first assembly chaired by our (relatively) new bishop. It will be our first fully virtual assembly and we will hold our first virtual elections. We have a little practice, having had several virtual congregational meetings over the

past year. We look forward to experiencing something new and we hope you are looking forward to joining us.

This preoccupation with firsts and lasts reminds me of a change I’ve noticed in the way I approach reading mystery novels. When I was younger, I would read them the traditional way, beginning at the beginning, and reading straight through to the end. I enjoyed trying to figure out the puzzle before it was revealed. As I’ve aged, however, I have developed a new pattern. I read from page one until I have a good sense of the characters and the central plot, and then skip to the end to see how it all turns out, and finally I go back and read the middle to see how the author got from point A to point B. Sometimes I wish life were like that, but then I realize that in many ways it is: If I know God, then I do know the beginning and the end and I’m just living in the middle, discovering the plot as I go along.

Amid all these firsts and lasts, it has been helpful for me to remember that God is in all these moments with me. God is the firsts and lasts and everything in between. “I am the Alpha and the Omega,” says the Lord God, who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty. – Revelation 1:8.

Here are a few things I or the Synod Council have been up to:

- The Synod Assembly Planning Team met March 10.
- Executive Committee met on March 11.
- I met with the Debt Reduction Grant team to award the next round of grants.
- The Synod Vice Presidents on March 13 by Zoom.
- Synod Council met on March 20.

I would be happy to visit and worship with you—online. Please don’t hesitate to contact me: [veep@lutheransnw.org](mailto:veep@lutheransnw.org).

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NW Washington Synod/ELCA

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