

***Philippians 1:20-21*** <sup>20</sup> *I eagerly expect and hope that I will in no way be ashamed, but will have sufficient courage so that now as always Christ will be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death.* <sup>21</sup> *For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain.*

What's so special about this Sunrise Service that makes us excited and happy to be here each year? If someone dragged you out of bed this morning, then maybe you're still trying to warm up to the idea of sitting outside in the cold to watch the sun rise. But sitting outside in the cold to watch the sunrise while there's a perfectly warm sanctuary right over there – it doesn't get much better than this, does it? And if I could just get my stomach to stop growling, man, this would be even better! I mean, it's just so unique and *fun* to be here right now with you all – it's like camping, right?

Many of you have been to this service before, and despite the very early hour and the chilly temperature, you look forward to this with much anticipation. Christians all over the Valley, the state, our country and the whole world have been waiting for this moment. It's the moment that stands in contrast with the mourning and grief we've experienced throughout the past 40 days of Lent, culminating with the horrible suffering and death of our Lord Jesus on Golgotha's cross. And this morning, yes, at his very early, cold hour, he warms our hearts with his Word. He wipes away our tears and doubts with his promise, ***“Peace be with you!”***

That's what we have been waiting for: peace. This peace is made certain by Jesus' resurrection. We're so certain of this fact that we celebrate it like this each year. No one went to bed last night wondering, *“Wow, I wonder if Jesus really rose from the grave? The suspense is killing me – I'll just have to go and find out first thing in the morning – before I even wake up!”* No, in fact the truth and reality of Jesus' resurrection is something we celebrate each week, normally in a comfortably acclimatized sanctuary. And every single day we live with this certainty.

That's called 'faith,' and it's grounded and founded upon the words of Jesus, ***“I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies. And whoever lives and believes in me will never die,”*** (Jn 11:25,26). Many of you have heard those very words spoken at the funeral of a loved one. In those moments of grief and pain, the enemy known as 'Death' tries to enshroud you with fear and doubt. *“See how easily I took these others? You can't stop me, either. One day I will come for you, too.”* And it's true. When it's our time to go, it's our time.

And again it's faith that looks to God in those moments and places his gracious will above personal preferences. And here's the comfort: we know that God's gracious will is that sinners come to believe in the truth; that we come to know the power of the resurrection and what it means for us; that whoever believes in Jesus has eternal life. ***“Death has been swallowed up in victory,”*** (1 Co 15:54). WE can't stop death, but our Lord Jesus can – and he has. His resurrection means that our eternity with him is certain. Heaven is yours and mine!

That might not be enough to warm our feet right now, but the hope of the resurrection warms our hearts. That's a good thing, since this world is filled with so many harsh, cold elements. Do you ever feel like the world is crumbling apart; that the love of so many people is growing cold? We know that sin is at the root of all these problems, and it will be this way for a very long time – that is, until Jesus returns. But until that day, the cold and crumbling world around us and our very own self-destructive, sinful nature within will remind us that our true home is somewhere else. And we can hardly wait!

To see Jesus face to face in our true home – it's beyond words. We live each day with that ***“inexpressible and glorious joy”*** (1 Pe 1:8) that Peter spoke of. It's the joy of knowing that we will be with the Lord forever, free from the curse of sin and the daily grind of temptation. Our joy overflows into our thoughts and emotions, our words and actions, so that our lives revolve around that single most important truth of the resurrection. And when this truth is the central focus of your day, especially at this hour, it's no wonder why we are so excited and happy to be here.

But what about an hour from now? Or this afternoon? Or tomorrow or next week? Because we're not always happy, are we? We have the sure hope of heaven, and nothing can take that away from us. But we still experience heart-rending challenges and disappointments. Making the right decisions isn't always a straightforward, simple process. Sometimes we make really bad choices and end up regretting them. Just because we follow Jesus doesn't mean we can expect a forecast of perpetual blue skies and rainbows – not in our present condition marked with sin and death.

“But we're Christians, so shouldn't we at least *try to look* happy?” Have you ever *tried* to look happy, when you really weren't? I'm not very good at that, either. And you're probably not fooling the people who you know you best, like the screaming or argumentative kids you're trying to deal with calmly; or the spouse you want to protect from whatever it is that's eating you up inside; or the friends or co-workers you want to impress with your upbeat and outgoing attitude. C'mon! We're supposed to be happy, right?

If you asked the Apostle Paul if he was always happy as a servant of Jesus, he might tell you to read chapter 11 of the second letter he wrote to the Corinthians. He gives us a snapshot of how 'happy' his life of ministry was. On five different occasions he received 39 lashes (that's almost 200) with a whip for preaching the gospel. How happy do you think he was then? On three other occasions he was beaten with rods (think of a bamboo cane)? He was stoned and left for dead, shipwrecked, and stranded in the open sea. He was constantly on the run from those who wanted him dead, facing danger wherever he went. He wrote, “<sup>27</sup> ***I have labored and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked,***” (2 Co 11:27). (Sounds almost like he's describing what we do to get ready for a Sunrise Service.)

This faithful servant of Jesus endured tremendous turmoil and stress, BECAUSE he followed Jesus. Jesus mentioned this as part of Paul's job description, “<sup>16</sup> ***I will show him how much he must suffer for my name,***” (Ac 9). During his earthly ministry, Jesus called many to follow him, and many did – at first. But when they realized how difficult it was, many turned away. “<sup>24</sup> ***Then Jesus said to his disciples, “If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me,”*** (Mt 16). Jesus spoke to them in very direct and honest language – no gimmicks or false hopes of earthly glory. But many were frustrated and sad, angry and in despair for all the things that they wanted more than Jesus. Do you think they ever found true happiness elsewhere?

Where do you expect to find true happiness? What is the key to living life to the fullest? A close-knit, functional family? A fulfilling, purposeful vocation? Good friends? Traveling and seeing the world?

And the more you experience these various blessings from God, the more you begin to realize that our life in this world is not about the pursuit of happiness at all. It's not about achieving this or that success in life, because none of these treasures will last. Most are prone to disappointment and failure sooner or later. And if we set our hearts on these false hopes, we can separate ourselves from the one thing that brings true life and joy. And we are bound to an eternity without Him.

There is only one source of lasting joy, which endures and shines through the cold and rainy storms of life. Paul said it this way: “<sup>21</sup> ***For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain.***” And whether you feel happy or sad, cold or warm, excited or just plain tired – the power of Christ and his resurrection lives in you. Through faith it's as clear as the rising sun that God so loved the world. And your entire life has meaning and purpose, because Christ has rescued you and shields you from the threat of sin, death and Satan himself. By his perfect life and his bitter suffering and death, Jesus has paid the price for your life in eternity and even the life you live for him now. Jesus' resurrection stands as the undeniable proof of the peace you now have with God and of the life of joy he gives you now and for all eternity.

May the Spirit of Jesus fill your heart and mind with the peace of forgiveness and the joy of his resurrection! Pursue this peace and joy found only in knowing Jesus' cross and empty tomb. Live close to him through his Word and sacrament, and you won't have to *try* to look happy. The joy of the resurrection just has a way of shining through. Christ is Risen! He is risen indeed! Amen.