

Alleluia! Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! Alleluia!

God's Word we'll consider this Resurrection Day is the Gospel from John chapter 20. Let us pray:

*Thanks to you, O Christ victorious! Thanks to you, O Lord of life! Death has now no power over us, you have conquered in the strife. Thanks, because you did arise and have opened paradise! Lord, we thank you and extol you, and in heaven we shall behold you. Amen.*

Jesus is alive! And that changes everything!

Or does it?

I'll bet that some of you woke up this morning and were a little grumpy as you had to get yourself or your family out of bed and ready for this 6am service. Maybe some of you even got in a bit of a fight with your parents or with your spouse this morning. Perhaps you're distracted even now knowing that there are problems waiting at home and at work when you leave this place today.

But still... it's Easter! Shouldn't that mean something? Shouldn't that change things? Well... think back to last Easter... has anything really changed in your life since then? You still see the people you love die. You still struggle to be a better husband or a better daughter or a better friend... I'll bet for most of you, you still find the same problems, the same frustrations waiting for you most days... The same temptations... the same doubts about God and his Word... the same questions inside... wondering if any of this can really be true or really make a difference...

Well, truth be told, for Mary Magdalene and Peter and John who we heard about in the Gospel today – many of those same fears and doubts were on their hearts and minds on that first Easter morning.

Mary Magdalene is the first one mentioned in our text. Though this isn't the first time she's mentioned in the Bible. There was a point in Mary Magdalene's life when she very literally had the power of hell wrapped around her soul. The Bible tells us that she was a woman who had been possessed by not one, but seven demons... can you imagine!?

But that was before she met Jesus... a man who would never hurt her, never take advantage of her... a man who would care about her spiritual needs and befriend her... who would show her the love of God like no one had ever done before.

Just think about the torment she must've felt before she knew Jesus... and the release she experienced when Jesus came to her and drove the powers of hell from her life forever. Imagine how she must have felt about Jesus... you can appreciate why she became one of his most loyal and fervent followers... and you can probably understand how she must have felt as she stood at the foot of the cross and saw a Roman soldier thrust a spear into Jesus' side, making sure he was good and dead...

That happened on Friday of course. Now it's Sunday. And Mary gets up early. There was work to be done. Jesus needed a proper burial after all, and she would make sure that it happened. John tells us that it was still dark when Mary set out for the tomb. We know from the other Easter accounts that Mary was not alone. A group of women went out to do the work that needed to be done. But when they got near to the grave site and Mary saw the large stone that had sealed the tomb rolled off to the side... well that was too much for her... she left the other women and took off in a sprint back to Jerusalem... you see the tomb was open, the guards were gone... which meant Jesus was gone... Mary needed help, Mary needed answers... and so she went to find Peter and John, the two men who had been as close to Jesus as she had. And in her frantic and breathless state all she can manage to say is, **"They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we don't know where they have put him!"**

Who took him? It didn't matter. What mattered was he wasn't there. And that was the final blow for Mary who had already felt the crushing sting of death three days before. Peter and John clearly felt the same as we see them set out at once for the tomb... breaking into a sprint themselves as they went. What was running through their minds that morning as they ran to the tomb?

Peter, I think we can safely say, was certainly confused. And that wasn't the first time he'd had trouble understanding things when it came to Jesus. Ever since Jesus called him from a fishing boat to follow him Peter had been a bit of an enigma. He made bold and beautiful confessions of faith in one moment that were too often followed by doubts and failures. He was clearly the leader among the disciples, yet his example was not always one to be followed. He was a man who I think we can identify with. A man who was torn inside... he longed to follow Christ, but struggled to do so. And the last image he remembered of his Lord was not at the cross, where he was too afraid to go, but in a courtyard during Jesus' trial the night before that... when his Lord had turned and looked at him right after Peter had flatly denied that he ever knew Jesus for the third straight time. You've got to imagine this image of Jesus must have haunted Peter that entire weekend.

And John who was with him couldn't have been feeling much different... or much better about himself that morning. No, he hadn't denied Jesus, and he had stood with the women – the only apostle to do so – stood at the foot of the cross as his Lord died. But he too had run off like the rest of the disciples when Jesus was arrested. He didn't step forward to offer a defense for Jesus when he was on trial. And he too was hiding now on Sunday morning, afraid of the Jewish authorities and what they might do to him.

It hadn't always been like that for John. He and Jesus had always been very close. In fact, he calls himself the **disciple whom Jesus loved** throughout his Gospel, not because Jesus loved John more than anyone else, but because of their close friendship. Jesus had been John's Lord... John's Teacher... John's Savior... but he had also been John's Friend. And now his Friend was gone... some of you know what it's like to have a friend that is as close to you as family... maybe even closer... and to lose him... to watch him die... that must have crushed John.

And so there they were, Peter and John, running in the early morning to Jesus' grave. John writes: **Both were running, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. He bent over and looked in at the strips of linen lying there but did not go in. Then Simon Peter, who was behind him, arrived and went into the tomb.** Peter had never been one to walk softly. John pauses at the sight of the empty tomb, but Peter rushes right in. What they both see is the same though... Jesus is gone... Jesus is gone, but there was something that was not quite right about it all... If the gardener in charge of the cemetery had come to move Jesus' body to a different tomb, or if his enemies had come to steal his body... then what about the grave clothes? Why were the linen cloths that Jesus was buried in left behind? And not just left behind, but left behind in a neat and orderly fashion... I mean, something didn't add up here...

In the Gospel of Luke we're told Peter **went away, wondering to himself what had happened (Luke 24:12)**. John, however, saw things differently. He tells us that **he saw and he believed**. But what was it he believed? What kind of faith are we talking about here? Belief that Jesus was alive? Well, yes. But what did that mean to John on that morning? John admits that he did not yet understand *from the Scriptures* that it was an absolute necessity that Jesus be raised from death. Scripture like Psalm 16 where we hear the prophecy about Jesus: **You will not abandon me to the grave, nor will you let your Holy One see decay (Psalm 16:10)**... or Isaiah 53: **He was assigned a grave with the wicked, and with the rich in his death... After the suffering of his soul, he will see the light of life and be satisfied (Isaiah 53:9, 11)**... Or really any of the many passages that speak of the eternal rule of the coming Savior! After all, how could he rule forever if he was dead?

And not only were the Old Testament Scriptures clear that this coming Savior would rise from the grave and live forever... but Jesus himself gave his disciples that same assurance time and time again. Over a year before his death, he told his disciples: **"The Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life."** (Luke 9:22) And he would tell them this truth over and over again right up to the end. Jesus had to die to be our Savior, but he also could not be our Savior if he had stayed dead. And this has always been the message that God conveyed in his written Word.

Jesus once said in Luke's Gospel that if someone didn't believe the truth about God based on the testimony of the Bible **they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead (Luke 16:31)**. And as always, Jesus was right on. Miracles themselves, even the greatest miracle of all time when he rose from death, they will never truly create a strong and lasting faith. Only the Word of God can do that. The Bible says: **Faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ (Romans 10:17)**. I mean, even

after Jesus rose and appeared to the disciples he still had to speak to them... he had to explain to them what was going on. They needed more than just to see him, they needed to hear his voice, to be taught by his Word.

And if that was true for those early disciples it's most certainly true for us. We need to go back to God's Word for insight and strength again and again. We need to do this often in our homes. Regularly here at church, and not just on Christmas or Easter – but every single chance we get! Because when we don't – what happens? What happens is that the daily struggles, the daily temptations, the drama at home, the problems at work, the financial hardships, the illnesses and deaths of those we love – all these things cloud our vision with anger, or grief, or confusion... We get upset with each other... We get upset with God... We look at life like nothing has changed... like Easter never happened... like we have no hope... and we easily become overwhelmed by our lives and lose confidence in our God and in his promises. We need to hear his voice again in the Scriptures, and in his voice we will find our peace.

Peter and John would hear the voice of Jesus later that first Easter Sunday when he appeared to them in the flesh and spoke to them. But before appearing to them, Jesus would appear first to another one of his followers who needed to not only see his face but hear his voice... As we watch Peter and John quietly going back to their homes we don't see that from Mary do we? No Mary wasn't going anywhere... because she had no place to go. Her grief overwhelmed her. In the agony of her soul she knelt by that empty tomb choking out tears... paralyzed by the pain of losing her Lord.

But that would all change so quickly... You see, Jesus once again would have compassion on Mary... he wouldn't allow her soul to be taken captive to grief and pain again. And I suppose he could have had his angels announce the good news to her like they did to the other women who had been there earlier that morning... but it seems that Jesus knew Mary needed to hear his voice again before anything would be okay in her life.

And so, we come to the exchange between Mary and the angels and Mary and Jesus that John records... it's strange and beautiful all at once, isn't it? John says Mary sees the angels, though she clearly doesn't recognize them to be heavenly messengers... perhaps she was too overcome with grief to think straight... or maybe thought they were just men working in the garden... And then she sees Jesus... although again, whether because of her tears or Jesus' appearance, she does not recognize him... Jesus says to her: **“Woman... why are you crying? Who is it you are looking for?”**

But Mary doesn't even answer his question... she just begs him to answer hers... **“Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have put him, and I will get him.”** And Jesus does give her an answer... the only answer that could snap her out of her sea of grief... **Jesus said to her, “Mary.”**

I'd imagine most of you know what it's like as a child to be parted from your parents for a short time and to be in panic mode a bit... you go to the store and get separated or get lost in a noisy crowd out in public... but then suddenly, just when you fear the worst you hear your name called by your mother or father. Your head turns quickly... your eyes fix on the place that voice is coming from... and your heart races with joy and relief... That's exactly what happened to Mary here. She heard her name fall from the lips of the one she thought she had lost... and that changed everything.

One moment Mary is running in hopelessness and despair to the disciples and then crying by the empty tomb... but now she is running to announce the good news: **I have seen the Lord!** Her tears of sorrow changed to tears of joy because of the empty tomb... because of her risen Lord who had spoken her name. And our God knows us by name as well. He says in Isaiah: **Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have summoned you by name; you are mine (Isaiah 43:1).** Jesus himself would say the same thing when he spoke of his role as our Shepherd saying: **The sheep listen to the shepherd's voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. (John 10:2-3)... My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me (John 10:27).**

And because Jesus was alive, Mary was ready to follow. She listened to that voice. And she told the disciples not only that she had seen him but she shared the good news Jesus told her to proclaim: **Go to my brothers and tell them, ‘I am returning to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.’ (John 20:17).** And what incredible mercy and comfort we find in those words! Jesus calls the men who were slow to understand and believe his words... the men who had abandoned him in his hour of need... he called them his **brothers! Brothers!** And

because they are his brothers that means God is their Father. You see Jesus being alive really had changed everything... but not just for the disciples that first Easter. Everything has changed for us too.

The separation sin creates in our relationship with God is gone. Jesus cried **“It is finished!”** on the cross as he completed his saving work for us... and now on Easter it's as if the Father is saying, “Yes... it is finished. The payment for sin has been accepted. My innocent Son is vindicated... and this world of sinners is forgiven.” And how can this be true? Because Jesus is alive! And that changes everything!

And since Jesus is alive just as he had said he would be, then everything he ever said can be counted on to be true... This means he really is the only way to heaven... it means he is always with you; he forgives you, he loves you. It means as you deal with the daily problems of life in a sinful world you have a God who is there to help you with your problems, not add to them. You have a Lord who will strengthen you for service to him and help you battle sin and temptation. And since Jesus is alive, not just the promises for this life are true, but everything he ever promised about our future is an absolute certainty... heaven will be your eternal home... and your body will rise one day just like Jesus did.

And what is more – since Jesus is alive all of you who have seen a friend or spouse, a brother or sister, a father or mother, a son or daughter – all of you who have watched those you love die in the Lord... well... you know you have not really lost them. Why? Because Jesus is alive! And so, you have every reason to wait... every reason to hope... every reason to endure! You know that as Jesus promised, their soul lives with him now! And you know you will see them again – alive and in the flesh when Jesus returns to raise the dead just as he's promised... You can know with full assurance that you will stand side by side with them on that day and gaze at the beautiful sight Mary got to see that first Easter morning... as you look upon the risen Christ, and hear Jesus call you by your name...

Believe this good news my friends! Share this good news so others can believe it too! And cling to this good news no matter what comes in life! Jesus is alive! And that changes everything! Alleluia, brothers and sisters! Jesus Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! Alleluia! Amen!