

Rejoicing with Jesus

a sermon based on

John 20:1-18 and Colossians 3:1-4

and delivered on

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Easter Sunday (Year A)

for

Cherry Valley United Methodist Church

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He is risen! He is risen, indeed! That's really all the message that we need to hear today. Isn't it? He is risen. That's basically what the women told the women Mary and Mary and the other women when they found the tomb open and empty. Well, not quite empty: the burial cloths were still there; and it's a little confusing whether the angel appeared inside or just outside the tomb. But Jesus wasn't there. So the angel spoke, (depending on who tells it Matthew, Mark, Luke or John, with a little different ordering of the words) saying, "Jesus isn't here. He's been raised." He is risen!

They couldn't yet give that response. Could they? He is risen, indeed! There was no way they would be adding, "Alleluia, Alleluia." Even though they saw the tomb empty, Even though they were told that Jesus had been raised, it was a bit much to believe. Let's be honest: It is a hard story to believe. That's why so often, I remind you and my peers how imperative it is that we don't even bend the truth in small things. Lest our witness to this wonderful truth be dismissed; and others miss out on the joy and the hope that comes in the confidence that St. Paul mentioned in the Colossians passage from earlier of being raised with Christ and living in his glory. Even these eyewitnesses to the empty tomb weren't believed by the people who knew how devoted they were to Jesus. In the Gospel reading for next Sunday, Thomas refuses to believe. Why weren't they ready to rejoice? Jesus has been raised.

One of the things going on here is that their grief is getting short-circuited. Not only that, just a week ago they had paraded alongside Jesus as he entered Jerusalem. They'd shouted "Hosanna, blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord." Right? A week ago, they thought this would be the day of triumph. {aside} It was: but not in the way they expected or comprehended in the moment. They had gathered in Jerusalem for the Passover. It was a special Passover occurring on the Sabbath. From their history, they knew that it was the day after the Spirit of the Lord passed over every home in Egypt marked with the blood of a sacrificial lamb, that Pharaoh finally let their people go. That was the victory for today. This was supposed to be the day for Caesar to let this people go.

Instead, on Friday, the day before the Passover, when the lambs were being slaughtered in preparation for the special Sabbath, Jesus had been killed: not quickly either. He'd been kept up all night the night before. He'd been beaten. He'd been whipped. Thorns had been pressed into his brow. He'd ached and sweated as he carried his own cross to the hill, as people hurled insults and probably a few stones and spit on him. All this before they strapped him to that cross and drove nails into his hands and feet. His body was a mess: dirty and bloody. Yet, because of the hour he died and the impending Sabbath, they couldn't take time to properly tend to his body.

Now, the day after a mournful Passover, their grief gets compounded because they can't even do for Jesus what he deserves and what *they need* to do.

This is important. Until about a little over a hundred years ago, most people didn't rely on funeral directors or morticians to tend to their dead. Undertakers provided a coffin and hole in the ground. Do you know what changed it? The Spanish flu. So many people were dying so quickly in so many homes that people were overwhelmed, and yielded that role to morticians.

Caitlin Doughty does a YouTube series called "Ask a Mortician." Back in October, she sat with Anna Dhody, the curator for the Mütter Museum in Philadelphia for a video explaining what happened there during that pandemic.¹ Caitlin is a proponent of "hands-on-funerals." I don't know how to say that better. Essentially, even though she is a mortician, even in her funeral home in Los Angeles, she advocates for those who grieve and works to include families in process to help them with their grief. That even includes walking them through the process of preparing the body. We're not talking embalming, but the traditional preparation for burial. That process provides a means by which mourners can offer their final blessing. That is what those women came for on that Sunday so long ago.

¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IH2Laha7III> (Accessed April 8, 2020)

Even though they were told the good news that he is risen, they couldn't rejoice. They were stuck. We're even told that Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. I suspect it was after Peter and John had made their examination. Think about that. She'd already told others that the tomb was empty. She'd heard Jesus tell his disciples about what would happen and that he'd be raised on the third day. But she didn't get it. She needed her grief.

It seems a bit odd or out of place that she'd weep. She'd been given good news: he is risen. Right? But I can sort of get it now. I love Holy Week. For all the busyness and lack of sleep with no day off, I'm usually energized. Not so much this week. I started talking to the worship committee months ago about my plans for today: the procession and extravagance worthy of Easter. But... Here I sit in my office, still waiting for *that* Easter celebration on that day when we're able to worship together in the church. Yesterday, though, while I was putting the elements together for today's service, I started to cry. I don't like to cry. It's not very manly; and I'm a manly guy – just look at this beard. When that video of the worldwide choir (a lot more tried to be a part of it but it was limited to 500) played, my eyes watered and I got a lump in my throat. This is Easter? Yet, there was comfort at the same time to have this visual reassurance, that we are not alone. We're no more alone than Mary was when she went down to that empty tomb.

We have a choice. We can choose to stay stuck in our grief and misery at our current inconvenience, so that even if Jesus were to stand a few yards away we wouldn't notice or recognize him or maybe even blame him (That's sort of what Mary did when she thought he was the gardener: "Where did you put him?")

Or we can claim the good news that: He is risen. We can claim the good news that because he is risen, we too have been raised. What Mary, the other women, and the other disciples didn't quite get that morning or even for a while after that was that the next day promise of Passover had been realized. Maybe it wasn't Pharaoh or Caesar letting God's chosen people go; but on this day all of God's people were given freedom from our self-imposed bondage to sin: *Sin* with a big "S", not *sins* like our infractions, but sin as this inherent separation from God's divine nature that formed us and gives us life.

This is the good news. We've already been steeped in the good news that he is risen. We proclaim it again in the great mystery during Holy Communion when we say Christ has (past tense) died, Christ is (present tense) risen, and Christ will come again.

We have the choice. Unlike the disciples who locked themselves in a room out of fear that the religious and political leaders would be coming after them next, now that the Sabbath was over and they could, we are confined (mostly) to our homes to stymie the spread of a virus know that he is risen and that even death has no power over us.

So we can reach out by telephone and computer, or even the post office to claim the liberty we actually have right now not under the watchful eye of employer or teacher to be "on task" every moment to pause and to reach out to one another with words of hope or encouragements – or maybe to reach out for some words of hope or encouragement.

In John 14, when Jesus was trying to prepare the disciples for Friday but then today, He said, "I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you. In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you also will live." (Jn 14:18-19) Even though we are distanced, we are not alone. Is that any more evident that seeing that image of hundreds of Christians coming together – even virtually – from around the world to sing "Christ the Lord is risen, *today*"? Or having our bishop read the Gospel text for today?

Upon his resurrection, Jesus spent forty days dropping in on his disciples. Even then, they had a hard time getting it. It's okay that it we might have a hard time getting it. I'm just hoping

we don't have another forty days before we can be together. Regardless, we have at least another two and a half weeks to choose whether we will be stuck in our sadness and grief about where we've been deprived; or we can say, "He is risen. He is risen, indeed!" Then claim the Alleluias as we look for where the risen Christ is present – maybe just a few yards away in that gardener. Or (an inclusive *or*) maybe "When Christ who is (our) life is revealed, then (we) also will be revealed with him in glory." (Col 3:4) AMEN.