

The Resurrection of Our Lord (Easter Dawn): March 31st, 2024

“Hey! I Recognize That Voice!”

Alleluia! Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! Alleluia! This greeting is well-known and well-used for many centuries. As God’s children, redeemed by the blood of Christ, we are never done with the crucified and risen Lord. We preach Christ and Him crucified; as on the cross, the very payment for sin was made. We proclaim His victory over death; as each Sunday, we gather to celebrate Easter. This has been since the early church. Every Sunday is a celebration of Easter. Forgiveness given for the past week’s offenses, and strength for the week that is to come.

Believe it or not, many Pastors have a hard time preaching on Easter Sunday. There is much that can be said, and should be said; and it has to be limited to just a few minutes, because people have eggs to find and open, and ham to eat. It is fine to open Easter eggs, in fact, the empty shells remind us of the empty tomb, and the good stuff inside reminds us of the good stuff that was placed in the tomb and is now given to us to consume through word, bread and wine. It is not the eggs that are the problem. The candy isn’t a problem either, unless you are diabetic. What we really lack is recognition. In many ways, we are just like Mary on that first Easter morning.

Mary, full of grief, goes to the tomb and finds it empty. She had a special bond with Jesus, and had great faith in Him. Jesus had driven out seven demons from her. With the Passover Sabbath now over, she was free to finish the burial customs. So, she runs to the tomb, to mourn her Lord. She walks through the Garden of Joseph of Arimathea, and sees the stone no longer sealing the tomb. This causes her to run to Peter and John and cry, “They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him.”

What an awful feeling Mary must have experienced. She had seen Him die. She goes to mourn. She knows the ill-feelings that those in charge held towards Jesus. She finds the stone moved and the tomb empty, “They’ve already killed Him. What more do they want from Him? Why take His body?”

Peter and John run to the tomb to see for themselves. They see the tomb empty and the clothes lying there, folded and nice. John looks and believes, but did not quite understand. Then Peter and John went back to their own rooms, the places where they were staying in Jerusalem for the feast.

After reporting to the Disciples, Mary again returns to the garden. Overcome with grief, and seemingly no answers to her many questions, she stands at the entrance to the tomb, at the foot of the grave, and weeps. At one point, she looks into the tomb and she sees two angels sitting where Jesus should have been. They confront her with a simple question, “Why are you weeping?” At her wits end, you can hear it, “They have taken my Lord. I don’t know where He is!”

At this point, she turns and sees Jesus. She doesn’t know it is Him. She does not recognize Him. Just like the angels, He asks, “Why are you weeping? Whom are you seeking? For whom are you looking?” She sees a random guy who she assumes works in the garden, and she bellows, and bawls, the same answer, “Sir, if you have carried Him away, tell me where you have laid Him. I will take care of Him.”

This is a picture that is easy to see. We are familiar with the loss of loved ones. It is a common experience. There are cemeteries filled with mourners. Homes are broken. Sin, Satan, and my own sinful flesh lead down the road of many bad decisions. Drugs, alcohol, anger, violence, hard hearts and false assumptions, hurtful words and terrible actions, lead to all sorts of losses among the living; then death seems to finalize that loss. In the pain and struggle of everyday life, we lose sight; we lose recognition.

Why are you weeping? Whom are you seeking? For whom are you looking? These questions are posed to us. How often do we seek to lose our Lord? I know we wouldn’t readily admit it, but is it not true? We frequently magnify problems and underestimate what is really important. We look for instant results, and if God doesn’t supply, well then, He must not be listening. My grief must instantly be gone, or God doesn’t care. Many attempt to lose God, and shed no tears about it. There are many activities are deemed as more important than hearing God’s Word and receiving His gifts.

There are many who are becoming more and more unfamiliar with God's Word, that it becomes harder and harder to recognize His Word and His gifts, especially in times of trouble and sorrow. The importance of this is highlighted by Mary this morning.

Mary stands in her grief and is unable to recognize Jesus. He is unchanged, but her grief blinds her. She makes the best assumption she can, given the information around her. He has to be the gardener, right? Who else would be there that early? Yet, her own reason and assumptions were completely wrong. She looked inside herself, and at the world around her, and still came to a wrong conclusion. This woman was close to our Lord. He drove out seven demons from her. She followed him and served Him for several years.

Our experiences can be helpful, but not always. Our reason, what we think we know, what we think we see, are not always safe guides for matters that relate to life and death, for eternal death or immortality. We are blinded by sin. We have a limited view. We can only see things from below. On our own, we can only recognize that which we see, hear, touch, taste, and smell.

Mary's greatest mistake was looking for a dead Lord. She thought that death had conquered the Lord of life. This is all too common a mistake that we still make. Family separations seem so irreversible. Addictions to substances, anger, sadness, anxiety seem so permanent. Death appears to be so final. By experience, we know that life is tied up with the body. The body suffers. We get that. The body lays in the tomb. We see it. We feel the loss. Tears may blind us to the reality of the life to come.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, it only takes one word from our Lord. Jesus calls her by name, "Mary." His voice pierced her sorrow and cast light on the darkness. The voice that cast out seven demons, now is heard once again. Just as the voice of a parent calling the child's name who is scared in the middle of the night awakened by a nightmare, so the voice of the Lord of Life calms the grieving and troubled heart of Mary. Her waking nightmare is over.

There is much suffering she will still experience through her earthly life, but she recognizes her Lord. She recognizes with the eyes of faith. She hears the voice of the Great Shepherd, and her faith is strengthened. Even here, in the midst of the tomb, at the grave, surrounded by death, she cannot mistake His voice.

This should press upon us the importance of being familiar with His voice during common times. In the normal course of life, the daily, weekly, hearing of His voice is to become so familiar to us that in the midst of turmoil, pain, toil, grief, and even death, we recognize His voice. We are called back to the Lord who defeated death; who drank the cup of God's wrath against sin. In the face of sin, Satan, and my own sinful flesh, we recognize the common voice that calls, "Father, forgive them." The voice that proclaims, "Your sins are forgiven." The voice that bids, "Let the children come to Me and do not hinder them for to such belongs the Kingdom of God." The voice that invites, "Take. Eat. This is My body given for you. Take. Drink. This is My blood shed for you for the forgiveness of all of your sins." We are to know His voice so well that we cannot mistake it, even standing by the open grave.

Weekly, we get to gather around His gifts. We get to hear His voice. We get to celebrate His resurrection. We get to receive His victory over death. We get to receive His payment for sin. We get to hear His voice ring from the Holy Scriptures and sing in response,

"Now hell, its prince, the devil,
 Of all their pow'r are shorn;
 Now I am safe from evil,
 And sin I laugh to scorn.
 Grim death with all its might
 Cannot my soul affright;
 It is a pow'rless form,
 Howe'er it rave and storm." Amen.

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

Prayer of the Church
The Resurrection of Our Lord
31 March 2024

Let us pray for the whole Church of God in Christ Jesus and for all people according to their needs.

Almighty God, You kept Your promise and delivered up Your own Son to be our Savior. By His sacrificial death, our sins are forgiven, and by His rising again, we have the hope of everlasting life. Keep us in this holy joy throughout the Easter season and all our daily lives, that we may not fear our enemies nor give in to the temptation of despair in our days of trouble. Lord, in Your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

You have brought us to this new day of hope and joy through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. Hinder the enemies of Your Gospel, that this Easter message may be proclaimed to all people in every place and bring many to faith. Lord, in Your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

Bless Joseph, our president, Kim, our governor, and all who make, administer, and judge our laws. Frustrate the forces of evil, and do not let our leaders cooperate with those who would promote wickedness or abuse their positions of trust. Guard our armed forces as they stand watch for us at home and abroad. Let them serve with honor and integrity. Lord, in Your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

We thank and praise You for the gift of life and for the protection and care you have provided as *Jana, Susan, Lindsey, and Brody* celebrate their birthdays, and *Dennis, June, Zared, and Brody* celebrate their baptismal anniversaries. Grant that they may grow in grace, continue to know Your loving-kindness, abide in the confession of Your care and protection, serve You faithfully all the days of their life and finally come to the fullness of Your joys in heaven. Lord, in Your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

Have mercy on the sick and those in any need *especially for Esther, Ruth, Zoey, Betty, Jeri, Denise, Pastor Small, Debbie, Guy, and those we name in our hearts.* Let the dawning light of the new creation in Christ sustain them in faith. In accord with Your will, grant them renewed health — a foretaste of their eternal healing in Him. Lord, in Your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

Give us joy in Your Son's great victory feast as He shares it with us from this altar. In the eating of His true body and the drinking of His precious blood in faith, overcome our sin by His forgiveness and swallow up our death in His life, that we may be glad and rejoice in His salvation. Lord, in Your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

We praise Your holy name, O Lord, for all Your servants who have departed this life in faith. We pray that You will not abandon us to Sheol but that, when we awake in the resurrection of all flesh, Your presence will give us joy. Lord, in Your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

We join today in singing eternal alleluias with innumerable angels in festal gathering, with the assembly of the firstborn enrolled in heaven and with the spirits of the righteous made perfect, and we bring these petitions before You, dear Father, trusting in Your mercy; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. **Amen.**