

## Son Rise Service

Good morning! On this highest of Holy Days it is customary to use a particular Call and Response.

I say: *Alleluia! He is risen!* And you say: *Alleluia! He is risen indeed!*

This tradition came along with the tradition of not saying *alleluia* at all during Lent. *Alleluia* is a joyful word, and really means something like *thanks be to God* only better, more joyous; during Lent it just doesn't seem appropriate to say *alleluia* so the tradition has us 'bury' the *alleluias*. Then on Easter morning we bust out with them saying: *Alleluia! He is risen! Alleluia! He is risen indeed!*

The first *alleluias* after the resurrection might have come from the women. They were the first to approach the tomb early on the first day of the week. As soon as the sun had risen. They were worried about moving the stone and so were surprised to find it was already moved aside, the tomb standing open. A young man was inside, and he spoke to them. *Oh, were you looking for Jesus? Well, he isn't here because he was raised from the dead. But he said to tell you all to meet him in Galilee as he asked you to. He'll be there, just as he promised!*

The identity of the young man isn't given, but we can assume he was an angel, a messenger from God. We know that, don't we, because he begins by saying "don't be afraid." When someone in the Bible says, "don't be afraid" we know 2 things for sure: the speaker is a messenger from God, and something awesome is about to happen. (And really, how effective is it to tell someone to not be afraid? If you're saying that, isn't there usually something going on that you might be afraid of? But I digress.) The awesome thing in this case is that Jesus is not in the tomb, he is alive and has moved on to Galilee. Now, in the other gospels the women go back and tell the rest of the disciples what has happened and the disciples don't believe them but go running to the tomb to see for themselves. In John's gospel Mary actually sees Jesus in the garden of his tomb. But in Mark's gospel the women are afraid and they run away in terror and amazement *and they don't tell anyone*.

I think this is important. I think this more important than we maybe understand. From the other gospels has come the understanding—and the internet meme—that calls the women the first evangelists. And from Matthew and Luke and John, that's true—they are the first to know of Jesus' resurrection and the first to announce it to the others.

But in Mark—especially if we understand that the *original* first ending to Mark is the last verse of this passage-- *So they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid* – even the women run away. Certainly, they don't run away until after he has died, and after he has risen; but they are afraid to tell anyone what has happened. In the end, in Mark's gospel anyway, even the women betray Jesus.

There are more verses to the end of Mark. Scholars generally agree that they were added later, probably because ending the story at verse 8 is just too much of a cliffhanger. Sort of like 'who shot JR' in the 70s. Y'all remember that, right? These days cliffhangers on TV shows aren't that unusual. Then, it caused a sensation. Imagine the readers of Mark's gospel getting to that verse and going *huh? That's not a very good ending—what happened? Did they go to Galilee? Did they see Jesus? Was he mad at everyone for running away? What happened?*

We, on the other hand are lucky enough to know what happens next—that Jesus does appear and no, he's not mad—but he has a job for them: to carry on the ministry by continuing to be disciples, by being witnesses, by telling everyone what they had heard and seen and experienced. Jesus knows that the betrayal, the running away, is going to happen, but he also knows that his followers, at their

hearts, are true. The commandment to *love one another* would pull them together; the instructions he would give them to take the gospel into the world would get them going; and the training with which they had been prepared—the going out in pairs to share the good news would sustain them.

It is into the world that they did go, once they had seen Jesus, once they had received the Spirit of God. Were they perfect? No, of course not. We'll see over the next few weeks some of the trials and tribulations of the early church. (we already know some of them from reading Paul.) But we know that, as dicey as things were in the beginning, the resurrection of Jesus really did bring people together around him and his ministry. We are here today because people were drawn to this story, we are here today because when it seemed as if everything had come to a tragic end, it turned out to be a new beginning.

We are not perfect either, of course and the church has betrayed Jesus many times over the years. But because of the death and resurrection that betrayal isn't the end for us either. God in Jesus Christ has an infinite amount of grace to offer, an infinite amount of love to give. We share in that grace that liberates us from the deadly effects of betrayal by forgiving others as we are forgiven; we share in the infinite love of God by loving others as we have been loved. In our relationships with those who are closest to us, those who are new to us, and those who are on the other side of the world we can share the grace and love of God.

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This is the meaning and message of Easter. Jesus isn't in the tomb, he's out in Galilee—or Covington or Ludlow or Nicaragua—out ahead of us, ready for us to come and join him. We don't have to be afraid—for Jesus is with us always. Let's go meet him and share in his joyful, joy-bringing ministry to all people. Amen.

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We also read from Acts today and we see this same message in that passage. We all share in the love of God through Christ, and God is Lord of all. This is a story from the early church that I talked about earlier, one of the places where the growth of the early church didn't go as smoothly as we might imagine. While Peter gives this speech some time after the resurrection, it was a new idea for him. Even after the resurrection this new Jesus movement, witnessed to and lived out by the disciples, was expected to be a renewal of the Jewish faith and not a new religion in and of itself. A few days before this speech Peter has a dream about clean and unclean food, and then an encounter with a Gentile centurion whose whole household became baptized followers of Jesus. Between those two happenings Peter's understanding of the meaning of Jesus' ministry, as well as the death and resurrection, was changed. No longer would this new movement be only for Jews; remember a couple of weeks ago when Jesus said that when he was lifted up—as in, onto the cross—that all people would be drawn to him. The death and resurrection of Jesus meant and means today that all are welcome, all colors and races, all genders and expressions of sexuality, all socioeconomic levels, all people everywhere are welcomed into the family of God.

Many of us have questions. What about Muslims? Or Jews? Or Buddhists? What about people in the bush who never hear of Jesus? What about babies who die before they have a chance to live? What about those who just don't believe? I have heard all these questions; and the truth is, I don't know. The specifics of what it means that Jesus' resurrection brings all people to him are beyond me—especially when I see so much strife between different organized religions and exclusionist behavior from organized religions. Heck, even between different branches of Christianity there's argument and

dissent. In much of the world religion in general has a bad name. And it certainly doesn't seem that all people are being brought together because of the death and resurrection of Jesus.

And yet...

I believe God is the Lord of all. I believe all are welcome into God's family and perhaps anyone who knows God is accepted. I believe Peter's revelations not only expanded his vision of what Christianity could be, but opens the door for a much broader understanding of who belongs under God's umbrella that we allow for, opens the door for a much broader understanding of who God really is than we, in our human understanding, allow for.

We humans have a limited view of things, of all things. Just think how hard it is to imagine the size of the universe! Or even the distance between the earth and the sun. We are limited, most of us anyway, to understanding things by our 5 physical senses: touch, taste, sight, hearing, and smell. And those things are limited, right? We can only see certain spectrums of light; we can only hear certain sound waves. And so on. Our understandings of the world don't really extend beyond those things.

This limited view of the world means we have a limited understanding of God. We might know intellectually that God has no limits, but like the size of the universe we have no capacity for understanding what that really means. And so far there's no 'Hubble telescope: religious version' to help us understand.

But we have the Bible, and we have statements like the one made by Paul in Acts and we have a wonderfully poignant giving of self in Jesus Christ through which we can view the world that gives us a bigger picture, a picture of all persons, all races, all genders, all people everywhere being drawn to Christ. We just don't know what to do with it.

Theologian NT Wright has this to say about the Bible: it's like a play in 5 Acts, only the final act hasn't been written yet—at least, not completely. The first act is creation, the second act is the fall, third act is Israel, the fourth act is Jesus, and the 5<sup>th</sup> act is the church. We have a little tiny bit of the 5<sup>th</sup> act written down as the New Testament, but the rest is really all improv. We're making it up as we go along. And that's ok—do you think the disciples had a set of directions about how to set up the church? They did not; they had the teachings of Jesus which they have set down for us, but in reality they were also making it all up as they went along. What we think of as canon, what we think of as written in stone, was for them a fluid, changing, unsettled time and they did the best they could to create a church that fulfilled the teachings of Jesus.

This is what I think for us too: we do the best we can. Times change, people change, expectations change. And so we improvise. We make it up as we go along, trying not to be afraid of getting it wrong. Because the risk is that if we get it wrong we might end up on the outside. And that's scary, right? If we side with those on the outside, we can't also be friends with those in power. It just doesn't work that way. And so, we try to follow Jesus, we try share the good news whenever we can, we try to be open to the lost and the lonely; we do our best to welcome the stranger and not turn away from anyone because they are different or strange to us or make us uncomfortable. Because if we've been listening at all we know that following Jesus isn't intended to make us comfortable, in fact as we are drawn to him and follow him we are going to our deaths—maybe or maybe not physical deaths, but certainly deaths of the imperfect human beings who go along with the powers that be, who don't question whether we are complicit in abusive and destructive and violent systems, who go along to get along. But we also know that as a result of that death we will have new life, a different life, a life rewarded by supportive, loving, forgiving community that is ours now, and forevermore. Amen.