

ALLELUIA! HE IS RISEN!

What a joyful statement we make when we respond, “The Lord is risen indeed, alleluia!” It brings me such joy to say and hear that, I want to do it all over again, and let’s respond with all the joy and gusto that we have in our hearts for the sure and certain knowledge that what we are proclaiming is true.

ALLELUIA! HE IS RISEN!

But what is it that brings us this joy?

Just a week or so ago, when we were gathered at the Quina’s for dinner, I made the remark,

“I can’t wait until Easter Sunday, I’ll be able to eat chocolate again!”

And yes, while that was indeed true, that isn’t the joy of which I am speaking. There is a greater joy in the arrival of Easter than the joy of completing a small fast, the giving up of a favorite food or activity during Lent.

Several years ago, Joyce and I were attending a church in Virginia on Easter Sunday and we heard the Assistant Rector preach a sermon where she proclaimed, “Easter is the day that brings joy to our hearts, because it is Easter that allows us to live our lives in freedom; we are freed from the threat of eternal damnation, we are freed to live our lives as we desire, free to be ...” and she listed a number of so called freedoms that are condemned by God as so aptly illustrated in the story of Sodom and Gomorrah. This revisionist priest totally ignored all that scripture has to say regarding these sinful activities and our need to repent and turn from them.

Within three weeks I had resigned from the vestry and we had moved our membership to a small mission church whose theology was in tune with the scriptures.

Easter does indeed bring us freedom, but it does not bring us the freedom to live a profligate life devoid of repentance and in defiance of God’s laws and His calling to us to live righteously.

Many churches celebrate Easter by gathering for a sunrise service. Someday I hope to institute such a service here, perhaps next year. Those gatherings at

sunrise are not to watch the sun, S-U-N, rise, they are scheduled at the rising of the S-U-N that we may celebrate the rising of the S-O-N.

The S-U-N rises every day of the year, but Christians round the world gather to watch the

S-U-N rise only on Easter morning. They gather at sunrise Easter morning because the Son, S-O-N has risen—the Son of God, who was dead, but who burst the bonds of death—the Son of God, who rose only once, but about whom Paul says, “...Christ is risen from the dead, *and has become the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep.*”

In this expression, we may be wondering what Paul meant by saying that Jesus’ rising from the dead resulted in His becoming “*the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep.*”

In our great and prosperous land, that has everything in abundance, it is difficult sometimes for us to appreciate the full impact of expressions that are used in the Bible such as this one. We can only imagine what it was like in Biblical times.

For example, in Biblical times, people couldn't fly in fresh fruits and vegetables from California, or Brazil, or Peru. It was a long wait for the season in which the fruit would grow and ripen. And once the fruit became visible on the trees and plants, it seemed as an eternity before it would ripen. When summer came and fruit began to ripen, it was a happy event. People had waited nearly a year for the first fruits of the season. Imagine their delight in the first fruits.

Recently, we enjoyed the first fruits of the strawberry season, and we will soon get the first fruits from tomato plants we may have planted. We will finally be able to eat a real tomato again—not the tasteless, hard tomatoes of winter, but the firm, ripe, red, juicy tomatoes of summer. That first real tomato of the year is a special treat, isn't it? And how about a nice, hot, grilled hamburger with a thick slice of vine-ripened tomato topping it off; there is really nothing like it.

A part of the joy of the first fruits of the summer is the realization that they are just the first of many ripe, juicy fruits that we will be able to enjoy for the season. That first strawberry announces the coming of a host of fresh fruits, and it is the first of many fruits.

So, when the Apostle Paul says, “...Christ is risen from the dead, *and has become the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep,*” he is telling us that Easter is God's

promise that, not only has Christ risen from the dead, but that, through his victory over the grave, we too shall rise victorious from the grave.

Alleluia?

Christ rose as the first fruits, the first of many who will rise from the dead.

Easter is special, not just because Jesus rose from the dead, but because His rising makes it possible for us to rise from the dead. Easter is special, not only because Christ conquered death for himself, but because he also conquers death for us.

We Christians use the word, "Gospel," which means "Good News." This is the good news "...Christ is risen from the dead, *and has become the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep,*"

That is Good News for tomorrow, when we come to the end of our life on earth, but it is also Good News for today. Many have had loved ones who have already gone to their glory, and of course we have grieved their departure. But Easter is God's promise that the huge stone that blocks the mouth of the tomb is never so large as to block the resurrection.

Frederick Beck said,

"The stone at the tomb of Jesus
was a pebble to the Rock of Ages inside."

Herbert Booth Smith put it this way, "The biggest fact about Joseph's tomb was that it wasn't a tomb at all—it was a room for a transient. Jesus stopped there a night or two on his way back to glory." In other words, Jesus' tomb was really nothing but a borrowed room in which to spend the weekend.

And, because Christ broke the bonds of death, the grave is not the end for your loved ones who died in Christ. One day, we who have trusted in Jesus will reign eternally with Him, reunited with those whom we love—and finally be able to love completely.

But the Good News of Easter is not confined to the resurrection of the dead. Jesus is the Lord over death, AND, He is the Lord of life. Just as we need help from Jesus in overcoming the bonds of the grave, we need help in life as well to overcome our moments of fear, suffering, and quiet desperation.

Most of us experience desperation and suffering at times that are very real and perhaps for significant periods of time.

In our reading today from John's Gospel, we see Mary who is sorrowful, grieving and forlorn. She was in the throes of grief, surrounded by the darkness; then in her grief she turns to and speaks to one whom she believes to be a gardener, and this man calls out her name and instantly she recognizes Jesus, and the day began to dawn.

Here she had turned to Jesus, spoken to Him, and He to her, and it wasn't until He called her by her name that she was able to see...and at that moment, when she encounters the risen Christ for the first time, everything changes.

At the very call of her name by Jesus, her hopes suddenly rise and her heart fills with Joy, He's here! He's alive! We can get back to the way things were!

But Jesus corrects this thought when He says, "Do not cling to Me, for I have not yet ascended to My Father; but go to My brethren and say to them, 'I am ascending to My Father and your Father, and to My God and your God.'"

Jesus is telling Mary that He is indeed going to leave them and ascend to His Father, her Father, and to His God and her God. That she could not cling to His physical presence as it would no longer be here. And Jesus tells her to go and be His arms, His legs, and His voice, and tell the disciples what she has seen and heard.

In that moment, Jesus asked Mary to change everything about her life.

For those whom God has called by name, this should be no new revelation. When He called the fishermen, their whole lives changed and they left family, and vocation. When He called the Tax Collector, his whole life changed and he repaid all from whom he had extorted money. For Mary it's no different. When our living God calls your name, everything changes.

And just as Mary's first thoughts were that everything would be as it had been, we too are prone to think, "Oh boy, everything is going to be the same, only better.

But resurrection is definitely NOT about staying the same.

When we're confronted with Jesus' resurrection, when we as Mary, come face to face with the risen Lord and He calls us by name, everything changes.

Everything!

For Mary, that meant going to the disciples and telling them what she had seen and heard. She is the first to witness the Risen Lord and the first to proclaim, the Good News, He is Risen!

The good news of the resurrection is that Jesus called Mary by name and offered her the opportunity to follow the Living God; to follow Him out of the dark despair of that morning into new and life-giving light.

God called her by name . . . and God calls us by our names.

But . . . telling a 2000 year old story once a year as a tradition isn't likely to change much, and remember, Jesus' resurrection changes everything.

We cannot leave this place today to put the miracle of new life and the promise of resurrection back on the shelf until next year.

You see, God is calling our names . . . every one of us, just as He called Mary. We are each extended a personal invitation to go and tell. Jesus calls our name and asks us as He did Mary to go, to live our lives with the conviction that the Good News of Easter, is not simply a dry and dead ceremony we celebrate once a year, instead, it is a freedom from the darkness in which we live when we live without Jesus in our lives.

Jesus is calling our names . . . your name Joyce, your name Heather, your name Steve, and my name. Jesus is calling us to live as if the Gospel matters, He is calling us to go and tell the others in our lives and to live out the resurrection of His glory in our lives, every day of our lives.

Jesus wouldn't let Mary leave that day without being changed, and Jesus won't let you or me encounter His resurrection and leave unchanged, either. If Easter means anything at all, we, each of us, are going to walk out of here determined to walk in His resurrection.

Jesus has called you by name and just as he asked Mary to go and tell the others, He is asking you to do the same. Can you hear the resurrected Savior calling you by name? Today, Easter Sunday, the day of resurrection, is certainly the day to answer that call.

Jesus admonishes us, just as he did Mary that day, "Go and tell." Take His resurrection hope out of this building and into the world. This is your assignment this and every Easter and every day . . . because God has called you by name.