

He is Risen!

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

April 4, 2021 Easter Sunday

Christ is Risen! He is risen indeed! There are no sweeter words that one could ever speak or preach than these! He is risen, and he is taking us along for the ride! Are you ready? Because He is risen, we can experience new life. Whole life. Abundant Life. Redeemed life. Resurrected life . . . more life than you ever imagined. In fact, life in Christ never ends. The purpose of life is not death, Easter says, but a life that triumphs over death now and forever. It is the reality of Easter that makes everything else worthwhile.

It wasn't always that way. Easter marks a fundamental change. Remember Jesus' final words on the cross, "It is finished?" When the soldiers took Jesus' body down from the cross and stabbed him with a spear, "blood and water came out" (John 19:34). He likely suffered a ruptured aorta — a broken heart. Jesus died of a broken heart.

On Easter morning, the great surprise is that his great sacrificial love was not in vain, and it was not the end of his mission. Easter says it was only the beginning -- a new beginning. Out of Jesus' broken heart emerged a new heart, a resurrected heart, an unbreakable, unstoppable heart.

At Easter, the words "It is finished" are replaced with the new words, "It is only the beginning." Life begins anew with the resurrected rhythms of an Easter heart for those who believe. The "beloved disciple" -- generally thought to be John the Evangelist -- looked in at the abandoned grave clothes and "believed" that Jesus had risen.

At that instant, his Easter heart started beating. Mary Magdalene heard her name called by her beloved teacher's own voice. She saw and believed as the risen Lord stood before her. It was at that moment Mary's Easter heart started beating.

When Jesus walked and talked with two of his disciples along the road to Emmaus, they believed because they had a personal encounter with the risen Lord. They said, "Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road?" (Luke 24:32).

If the disciples needed any more evidence, it came when Jesus went home with them for supper. At the table, he blessed the bread and broke it. As he shared the bread, the disciples were convinced because they shared a meal with the risen Lord, and they were able to see for themselves.

He is risen, and so are we! We are given a new heart and mind -- the mind of Christ. An Easter heart is full of new life and new possibilities. An Easter heart throws off the old grave clothes and quickly dons the new Easter apparel that shouts, "He is risen, and so are you!"

An Easter congregation that is filled with an Easter heart offers signs of hope and new life to the world and the community where we live. We can be encouraged along with Mary Magdalene, who at first was distraught upon discovering that the rock had been rolled away from the tomb's entrance. She thought that perhaps the body had been stolen, and would never be seen again, when in fact, the rock that had been rolled away offered a way out.

Everybody needs a way out from darkness and death . . . a way to escape when you're "between a rock and a hard place." What about you? Will you allow God to roll away the rock that has gotten in your way and prevented the life God intends you to live?

Today would be a great day to take the road Christ himself traveled – a road less travelled that leads past the detours and dead ends you have experienced. You can roll away the rock of despair, and find a path to hope. You can roll away the rock of delusion — delusions like, "If only I had more money or possessions, I'd be happy." Today we begin to roll away the rock of covid lockdown that has held us captive for over a year.

We're all rock-rollers today. I didn't say "rock 'n rollers," though some of us baby boomers might be that too! We can roll away the rock in our lives because Christ has rolled the rock away from the tomb and set us free. We can roll away the rock of fear, and step out into the light. We can roll away the rock of negativity and old habits. You can make new choices and find new opportunities. You can rise above you past. You can rise above a lousy childhood that you keep blaming for making you the way are. You can rise above a bad marriage. You can rise above a bad job. You can rise above misfortune. You can rise above addictions because Christ has risen above them all.

I had a friend back in New Jersey who was a recovering alcoholic. He said, "I don't know about new life at Easter, but I know about new life at our house, because for the first time in five years, I'm sober. That is something to really celebrate. He is risen, and so are you.

I think it's extremely important to be a part of a community of faith on a day like this. It would be hard to realize the full impact of Easter in solitude. Just think of all the people who see today as just another ordinary day –another day of routines and drudgery. They are still in their tombs.

Christ is risen, and that makes all the difference for you and me. Nothing can ever separate you from the love of God in Christ Jesus –nothing. Are you ready? Are you ready for the brand new life the risen Christ brings?

It doesn't mean that bad things aren't going to happen in your life, but when you begin to see the world through Easter eyes, it makes all the difference in the world. You're

going to emerge victorious. You're going to walk with Christ. Or, to be more accurate, Christ is going to walk with you.

I've experienced many resurrections in my own life. When my father died at the age of 56, life as I knew it came to an end. My earthly father – one I talked to and confided in was gone. But I knew he lived with Christ and he lived in my heart, and from time to time, there is still an overwhelming sense of his presence.

Then there was the time when I lived alone in a rural Indiana farm community, and had pretty much come to terms with being single, because no one would ever find me at the ends of the earth in rural Indiana, God worked through Louise – I've come to call her "Saint Louise" – who was a member of my church. She set me up on a blind date with my future wife. That's all it took. It was a new life shared with someone else.

When we lost our twin son Jacob at birth – the heartbreak and sadness of losing a baby was co-mingled with the joy and new life of his healthy brother, Jackson. Four years later, we were blessed with the birth of our second son Joshua, who has brought much joy and goodness into our lives and into the world. We will experience the power of new life again in just a couple weeks, for we will get to see our boys and all be together for the first time in over a year due to covid. I think we need Easter this year more than ever. Can I get an "Amen?" Do UCC folks shout out during the sermon like that? I had to coax it out of Presbyterians!

Today is the first Sunday we have gathered together to worship in person in over a year, except for one Sunday here in October. Are you ready to start a new chapter? A new chapter beginning here in the spring? Easter means new life, and who could argue that new life has begun? We don't have to look far.

We can give thanks for our own Annie, and the new life she has been given as she recovers from life threatening surgery. We can give thanks for Alana, and the new life she is experiencing after unexpected brain surgery. There is new life all around us.

I'll never forget the thrill of spring in New Jersey where we lived for twelve years, and the first signs of forsythia, or the early buds that appeared sometimes while there was still snow on the ground.

We were made for Easter. It is our birthright. It is time to carve out a new life after lockdown. It is time for many to reunite with friends and family, go out to dinner, go to church, and I might even get to go to a baseball game this summer if the opportunity presents itself! As I often tell my wife, it is no accident that Easter and the opening day of baseball season are only a few days apart!

What will rise up in you? What will say "new life" to you? What will change? What will be different? What will be new for you in place of the old? I know one thing. We

won't take things for granted again. At least I hope not any time soon. We won't take our health for granted. We won't take our friends for granted. We won't take tomorrow for granted. We won't take our church for granted. But we will cherish today -- this moment that we have together -- and behold the new life that is in our midst.

Easter is the ultimate reality. In fact, Easter is the fabric that is woven throughout time. That the Divine can take on flesh in the form of Jesus is the ultimate grand mystery. It doesn't mean there won't be heartache and disappointment. It doesn't mean that our loved ones will be spared of illness or that they won't die. It does mean that death does not and cannot have the last word – ever.

As John Donne put it so eloquently in his poem, Death, Be Not Proud: Death, be not proud, though some have called thee Mighty and dreadful, for thou are not so; . . . One short sleep past, we wake eternally, And death shall be no more; Death, thou shalt die.” Easter saw to that.

Easter ushers in a dimension of the eternal, and it is with us now at this very moment. It is what the Greeks referred to as *kairos* time. Another poet, William Blake, begins his poem, Auguries of Innocence this way:

“To see a World in a Grain of Sand
And a Heaven in a Wild Flower,
Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand
And Eternity in an hour.”

This is the hour that holds eternity for us all to experience. That is the sort of dimension and quality of life that Easter brings to us today. Nothing is mundane and secular anymore. It is all sacred -- every moment, every leaf, every bird that flies through the air has an eternal quality about it.

I realized as I wrote the end of my message today that perhaps Easter for me is best expressed in poetry – rich, suggestive, whispering of immortality, the kind that is rooted in the earth, but reaches toward the heavens. I appreciated Mary Oliver so much as we read her poems in our Lenten reflections.

So go out and write your own poem today. Better yet, *be* the poem that soars to the heights. Embody the essence of the risen one. His DNA is in you. Christ is risen, and so are you! Now go and live like it. Amen

Colossians 3:1-4

1 Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God.

2 Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things.

3 For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God.

4 When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.

John 20:1-18

1 Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene went to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the entrance.

2 So she came running to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one Jesus loved, and said, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we don't know where they have put him!"

3 So Peter and the other disciple started for the tomb.

4 Both were running, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first.

5 He bent over and looked in at the strips of linen lying there but did not go in.

6 Then Simon Peter came along behind him and went straight into the tomb. He saw the strips of linen lying there,

7 as well as the cloth that had been wrapped around Jesus' head. The cloth was still lying in its place, separate from the linen.

8 Finally the other disciple, who had reached the tomb first, also went inside. He saw and believed.

9 (They still did not understand from Scripture that Jesus had to rise from the dead.)

10 Then the disciples went back to where they were staying.

11 Now Mary stood outside the tomb crying. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb¹² and saw two angels in white, seated where Jesus' body had been, one at the head and the other at the foot.

13 They asked her, "Woman, why are you crying?"

"They have taken my Lord away," she said, "and I don't know where they have put him."¹⁴ At this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not realize that it was Jesus.

15 He asked her, "Woman, why are you crying? Who is it you are looking for?"

Thinking he was the gardener, she said, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have put him, and I will get him."

16 Jesus said to her, "Mary."

She turned toward him and cried out in Aramaic, "Rabboni!" (which means "Teacher").

17 Jesus said, "Do not hold on to me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father. Go instead to my brothers and tell them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'"

18 Mary Magdalene went to the disciples with the news: "I have seen the Lord!" And she told them that he had said these things to her.