

**Life**

St. John 20:1-20 &

Colossians 3:1-4

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April 16, 2017 – Easter Day

Alleluia, Christ is risen!

He is risen indeed, Alleluia!

That's the Easter acclamation. That's the Easter greeting. But what does it mean? Sometimes we forget that "Christ" isn't Jesus' last name. Christ—or *Christos*—is the Greek word for *Messiah*. And *Messiah* is a Hebrew word. It's the Hebrew title for the *King* who would come to rescue God's people—and not *just* God's people, but all of God's creation. When we talk about "Jesus Christ" what we're really talking about is "King Jesus". I think we need call him that more often so that we remember just who Jesus is and just what he's come to do. Thinking of *King* Jesus would help us to remember *why* Easter is so important. I think we're prone to forgetting the *why* of it all. Good Friday is a sad day because Jesus died. It's also "good" because Jesus is God's Son who died for our sins, but if we forget who Jesus *really* is—not just God's Son, but also God's King—Easter tends to just become a happy ending to all the grief of the Cross. I struggled with this for years. When I was a freshman in University I wrote a paper on the Cross. I understood very clearly why Jesus had to die. His death was a sacrifice to redeem us from our sins. But then I got to Easter, I got to the empty tomb and Jesus' resurrection, and I sat there in front of my computer screen stumped. I went and asked our student ministry chaplain for help and after that I wrote that Jesus rose from the dead as evidence that he really was God's Son and to prove that his death really did accomplish the forgiveness of sin. Those were good answers, but I missed the most important answer and I missed it because I wasn't thinking of Jesus as King.

But I was in good company. In our Gospel this morning St. John tells us about Mary Magdalene arriving at the tomb that first Easter morning. Things had happened in such a hurry on Friday that Jesus' friends hadn't had a chance to properly prepare him for burial. They'd wrapped him in linen and put him in the tomb. She was going to anoint him with oil and perfume—part of the embalming process. And she was shocked to find the tomb empty. She didn't know what had happened. Well, she *thought* she knew. There was only one logical answer: The Romans or Herod's people must have taken Jesus' body. The idea that Jesus would rise from the dead—as much as Jesus said this would happen—it just wasn't on Mary's radar. It wasn't on anyone's radar. That's not how resurrection was supposed to happen—not just one person all by himself. Resurrection was supposed to happen to everybody...all at once...when the end of the age came and the Messiah ushered in God's kingdom. But that wasn't going to happen now. Jesus was dead and that meant he couldn't be the Messiah after all. So someone must have taken the body.

She ran off to tell Peter and John. They came running. John got there and stooped down to look into the dark little tomb and he saw the linen wrappings lying there. Peter actually bent down and scrambled through the little entrance to take a closer look. What did it mean? If someone had taken Jesus' body they wouldn't have unwrapped it first. John says that he went into the tomb himself after Peter. You can imagine them staring at the linen clothes, probably picking them to take a closer look since it was still fairly dark. They hadn't believed Mary when she said the tomb was empty, but now, seeing it for himself, John says that he believed. Not that Jesus was alive again. That thought didn't even cross their minds. Again, that's not how resurrection was supposed to happen—at least as far as everyone thought. No, John had seen the evidence and believe that the tomb was empty. John says that they didn't yet understand what the Scriptures said, that the Messiah must rise from the dead.

Think about that. Not long afterward John would understand, after he'd seen Jesus risen from the dead and after Jesus walked his disciples through the Scriptures to show them how it had all been prophesied long before. And John points to that here when he says he didn't understand. What he didn't understand is how Scripture had been pointing to Jesus' resurrection all along. This was the point to which the Biblical story had been moving right from the beginning. This is the point we've been moving toward all through Holy Week. A week ago, on Palm Sunday we were with Jesus as he rode into Jerusalem and was hailed as King. We need to remember that. Again, "Christ" isn't Jesus' last name. It's his title. He is God's King. And then we followed Jesus into the temple where he upset everything. There's a reason why John tells the story a little differently. John puts Jesus' action in the temple not at the beginning of Holy Week, but at the beginning of Jesus' ministry years earlier. Jesus declares to the people, "Destroy this temple and I will rebuild it in three days!" And those words echo through John's Gospel right up to Easter. When the disciples finally met the risen Jesus, that's when it all "clicked", that's when they started to understand the Scriptures and what Jesus had said back in the temple.

The temple was the place where God's realm, heaven, and the human realm, earth, came together. It was the place where men and women went to meet with God. And for John—just as it was for Jesus—Easter wasn't just about the proof that Jesus is really God's Son or that his death really did accomplish the forgiveness of sins. That's part of it. But Easter is, first and foremost, about Jesus being affirmed as the King. When the people crucified Jesus they were declaring him to be a false Messiah, a false King—rejecting his claims—but when God raised him from the grave, he vindicated Jesus. This *really* is the King and the Resurrection proves it. And because he is the promised King, that means that in Jesus, God meets humanity, heaven and earth are rejoined. In him a new temple has been established. Easter declares that God has won the battle just he said he would.

He's with his people and he's setting the world to rights.

As John describes everyone rushing around—the women running to tell the disciples and then Peter and John running to see the empty tomb for themselves—John may have had a much older story in mind. In 2 Samuel 18 we read about the two messengers who ran to give King David the news that Absalom and his rebel forces has been defeated. The first of the messengers arrived and told David the good news: the rebels had been vanquished. But there was more to the news. Absalom, the rebel leader, was David's own son. The first messenger knew that David would be relieved that the rebellion was over, but he also knew that the news of Absalom's death would grieve the king. He held that part back. But then the second messenger arrived. He didn't know David. David asked him about Absalom and the man joyfully blurted out, "May all the king's enemies end up like that young man!" David grieved, "Oh my son, my son, Absalom! Would I had died instead of you!"

In John's gospel these two messengers go running to the tomb and there they receive the news to go out to all of Creation that great David's greater son has died for the sake of his rebellious subjects. David's Lord, as the psalmist describes him, has given his life to defeat sin and death. He has done what it was said all along the Messiah, the King would do. He has defeated the enemies of God and of his Creation.

That's the other theme in John's gospel that stands alongside the new temple. Jesus has ushered in God's new creation. We saw this as we looked at the Good Friday Gospel, also from John. Genesis describes God creating the world in six days. And now, on the sixth day of the week, the same day that God created human beings in his image, to be his rulers or his stewards in his Creation, John tells us how Pilate stood Jesus before the people and declared, "Behold the man!" John describes how later on that sixth day, as he was hanging on the Cross, Jesus declared with his last breath, "It is finished!"

John even uses the same word that the author of Genesis uses to describe God finishing or completing his creation. Jesus had set to rights what we humans, in our rebellion and idolatry, turned upside-down. And then, on the Sabbath, just as his Father had done in the original creation, Jesus took his rest.

But now it's Sunday, now it's Easter, now it's the first day of the week—or as the Church Fathers described it, the *eighth day*. A new age has dawned. God's new world is here. As we read in Matthew's account last night, an earthquake rocked the world, an angel descended, and Caesar's soldiers were struck down as if they were dead—there's no place for them in God's new creation. This is the moment to which John builds right from the beginning of his Gospel where he writes about Jesus, the Word of God Incarnate: In him was life, and the life was the light was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it. The light was so bright that first Easter morning that Mary couldn't even look at it, still mired in the darkness of Good Friday, the death of her friend, and her crushed dreams, and yet we see the beginnings of God's new creation even in the next few verses as Mary meets Jesus there in the garden, near the tomb, and mistakes him for the gardener. Here's Jesus, newly risen from the dead, and he's hanging around the garden tending flowers. Doesn't he have something more important to do? But, no, this is just what he was raised to do and to be. He's the second Adam and here he is, tending to the garden. New creation is breaking into the world. And as I said last night at the Vigil, when Mary is sent to "go and tell", we should see ourselves invited to be part of that new creation—not just made new by it, but being part of its happening and its growth.

Easter, the resurrection of Jesus, is proof that resurrection waits for all those who are in him. Paul stresses that in 1 Corinthians. What's happened to him will one day happen to us. He's gone first and we will follow. But that's just it. Easter isn't just the proof of new life and new creation *in the future*. Easter is

the beginning of it. That first Easter was the day when the life of God burst into Creation to begin making whole, to begin the work of restoration, to begin making new. Brothers and Sisters, Easter is about God's kingdom *on earth as it is in heaven*. And Jesus calls us to come and see, to be part of it as we pass through the waters of baptism, to be plunged into the life of the Holy Spirit, to come and eat and drink at his Table, to know it as we immerse ourselves in his Word, to be transformed as we live it in prayer and worship.

But more than that, Jesus invites us to the work of his new creation. That's what Adam and Eve were called to do in the first place: to tend the Lord's creation, to have dominion over it as his representatives, and to be fruitful and multiple. If they had done that, the garden would eventually have filled the whole earth. Humanity rebelled, rejected God, and everything went wrong, but Jesus has put it right and we see him, the new Adam, on Easter in the garden, doing what Adam had been called to do—and Mary mistakes him for the gardener. Jesus surely had more important things to do, but—you know—it's almost like Jesus knew exactly what he was doing in the garden that morning. It's a vivid illustration of the King who set the human race back on track and restores us to our original and God-given vocation. But do you know what that means? Brothers and Sisters, it means that following Jesus isn't what we so often have come to think—that it's about a disembodied heaven after we die or that it's escape from the evil and pain of a world going to hell in a handcart.

We sang one of my favourite Easter hymns at the start of the service. We sang that line, "Now above the sky he's King". Well, yes he is, but the point of Easter is that he's not just King in heaven, but that he's King on earth too, because in him what was separated by our sin has been brought back together. In a little while we'll sing that other great Easter hymn proclaiming "He is risen! He is risen!" We'll rejoice that "he has opened heaven's gate." But the good news of Easter that the angel

commands us to go and tell isn't so much about how to get to heaven when we die. It's about King Jesus bringing heaven here, about new creation bursting into the world, about all things being made new and for us, if we have given our allegiance to Jesus, one day rising from the dead to live with him in this world finally and fully set to rights. Easter summons us to join Jesus in the garden, as his new creation begins, doing the work that Adam abandoned. Easter summons us to preach good news to the poor, release to the captive, sight to the blind, to work to see goodness and righteousness and justice and peace done in the world around us. Jesus calls us to live and to work in a such a way that we lift the veil on his kingdom and give everyone around us a glimpse of God's new world. The world won't like it one bit. Caesar, Mammon, Aphrodite, Mars—the false gods of the world will fight back, but Easter reminds us that Jesus has already beaten them. He did that at the Cross. What's left is a mopping up operation.

In our Epistle from Colossians, St. Paul shows us where to begin. Taking on the world may seem like an impossible task and so Paul tells us to start with ourselves. He says to set our minds on the things above, on the things of God's kingdom. This is that *on earth as it is in heaven* mindset again. We've been made new and given new life in Jesus and that means really living the life of heaven. That means, Paul says, setting aside things like sexual immorality, impurity, evil desires, covetousness, idolatry, anger, wrath, malice, slander, obscene talk, and lying. Don't do these things he writes, because we've put off the old self and put on Jesus. God is renewing us in his image. Again, he's restoring us to the life and to the vocation for which he originally created us—to bear his image, to be stewards or regents of his Creation. He created this world to be his temple and he created us to be his priests. Jesus has given that holy vocation back to us. Easter proclaims the good news that Jesus is the world's true King and he is setting all to rights—and that he invites us to be part of it.

But that's not the end. Easter might be the end of Holy Week, but it's the beginning of God's new world. Read the four Gospels and notice that none of them ends at the empty tomb, as if Jesus' resurrection was the end of the story. All of Scripture has been making its way to this point. The Cross and the tomb are the places where the plotline of the story of redemption is finally resolved. Jesus really did declare, "It is finished!" But there's more. Matthew and Mark both end with Jesus commissioning his disciples to go out and tell the world this good news of his death and resurrection. Luke went on to write a sequel to his Gospel: the book of Acts, and there we read how the disciples went out to Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and to the whole world with this good news. John describe how the risen Jesus breathed on his disciples saying, "Receive the Holy Spirit," and then sent them out saying "Follow me" and "Feed my sheep". Jesus has won the battle and now he sends us out into the world, empowered by his Spirit, to be his renewed people for the sake of his new world.

There's a story about a university professor who was interrupted in the middle of his lecture. It was 1939 and someone burst into the classroom to announce that the war had begun. Everyone ran out of the classroom. As the story goes, six years later, in 1945 classes resumed. This professor walked back into his classroom and started his lecture saying, "As I was saying when I was so rudely interrupted..." Friends, Easter is something like that. A war upset God's creation, but Jesus has won the battle. Sin and death have been defeated. And now it's time to pick up where things left off. It's time for us get busy with the work of being real and genuine humans, faithfully bearing the image of God in the world. Death has been defeated. We need to get on with the task of bringing God's new life into the world. As the song goes: Hymns of praise now let us sing, Alleluia! Unto Christ, our heavenly King, Alleluia! Who endured the cross and grave, Alleluia! Sinners to redeem and save. Alleluia! Brothers and Sisters, let us go out singing Alleluia!, let us go out

singing "God be praised!" and let us sing it in such a way that the whole world might know that Jesus is King and join us in our praises.

Let us pray: Glorious Lord of Life, we praise you, that by the mighty resurrection of your Son, you have delivered us from sin and death and made your whole creation new; grant that we who celebrate with joy Christ's rising from the dead, may be raised from the death of sin to the life of righteousness; through him who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, on God now and for ever. Amen.