

John 20.1-18  
The Feast of the Resurrection of Our Lord  
1 April 2018  
St. John's Evangelical Lutheran Church, Topeka, Kansas

+ Hallelujah! +

*Exordium*

Hallelujah! Christ is risen! **He is risen indeed! Hallelujah!**

The Jesus question isn't this: did Jesus, the Messiah, rise from the dead? It's this: is Jesus the Messiah who rises from the dead?

For the entire Scripture testifies to this, that the promised Messiah would, according to the testimony of the dear prophets, according to the witness of Abraham, according to the witness of the very curse in the Garden—that the promised Messiah would, indeed, rise from the dead.

So again, the question about Jesus isn't whether He rose from the dead. He did. That's plainly and severally asserted. All four evangelists record it. St. Paul in his letters asserts it—and very well must he, since the risen Lord Jesus had encountered him on the road to Damascus.

And the icing on the cake? Even the Jewish detractors of Jesus knew He had risen from the dead. *More importantly, they acted like it.* They paid off the guard. And bribed Pilate to say that the body of Jesus had been stolen away by the disciples (Mt 28.11-14). And to cover *that* up, they persecuted the Holy Christian Church.

So there you have it: the dear prophets of old, the 4 evangelists, Paul, the Jewish leaders, the guard, and Pilate himself. Fellow-redeemed: for the resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ from the dead we have better historical evidence than we do for Brutus and Cassius, whose existence and deed no one doubts.

No. It's not so much that the resurrection raises the question whether Jesus rose from the dead. He did. It's that the resurrection answers the question: Is Jesus the Messiah, the promised Son of God?

And the resounding answer is Yes. Jesus is the dear Messiah, promised by God.

And if that's true—and it is—then the resurrection of the promised Messiah is the divine sign and seal and letter of authentication placed on His death.

Full and once for all atonement has been made for sin; Satan's arrows and quiver are crushed; hell defeated; and death and grave are swallowed up in victory. For Christ is risen! **He is risen indeed! Hallelujah!**

We join in the Exordium hymn, hymn 488, "He Is Arisen, Glorious Word"

Beloved in the Lord: grace be unto you and peace from God the Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

The words to which we today turn our attention are those of the Gospel, and especially these words of Jesus: "Stop clinging to Me. For I have not ascended to the Father; but go to My brothers and tell them, 'I am ascending to My Father and your Father and to My God and your God.'" (John 20.17)

*Oremus: haec, pater sancte, verba tua sunt, etc.*

Here we have it. The first recorded *official act* Jesus did when He rose from the dead. He preached a sermon.

Isn't that something? The grip of death has been broken once for all.

So final this resurrection of Christ, so decisive this rising from the grave of the Lord Jesus Christ, that on the Last Day *all the dead will rise*, believers and unbelievers alike; and at His name every knee of those in heaven and of those on the earth and of those under the earth will bow, and confess that Jesus is Lord to the glory of God Father.

For even hell itself lies in ruins. The Lord Christ in His victory over death and the devil descended into the infernal regions.

And the Law of God? Its condemnation is made null and void. Like a judgment overturned by the Supreme Court. For sin, the power of the Law to condemn, lies buried in the grave where Christ lay.

That's the enormity of what has happened.

And what does Jesus do? He preaches a sermon. Just words.

And what a strange sermon it is: "Stop clinging to Me!" Jesus says.

Almost shocking to hear. Certainly surprising. We don't expect them from Jesus' mouth as His first sermon when He's risen from the dead—especially to dear Mary, who had witnessed His torturous death. Instead, we expect to hear nothing but invitation and openness. Something like, "Come unto Me, all you who are weary and heavy laden, and I will give you rest."

But that's not what Jesus says. His first sermon is a rebuke.

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Now, you've got to understand what's going on here and why Jesus said what He said.

When Mary got up that morning and went to the perfume sellers at the crack of dawn, she was going to buy spices and oils not as she had before, to anoint the living feet of Jesus, but to cover up the stench of the dead, decaying, and rotting body of the Lord Jesus. And that expectation didn't change. Even after she found the tomb empty. Without faith in His Word that He would rise, she ran back to tell the disciples what she had found: "They've taken the Lord out of the tomb and we don't know where they have laid Him."

Now look. No one who thinks and believes Jesus was going to rise from the dead talks like this. The person who thinks and believes Jesus is going to rise from the dead would see the empty tomb, smile like a Cheshire cat, and say, "See? Told ya so." Nor would that person have bought spices from the perfumer to anoint the dead body.

Instead, Mary's words betray her expectation. Jesus had died. And the finality of His death? Plain to see. That must have what He meant when He said, *τετέλεσται*. "It is finished. My life's over. This whole Messiah project is ruined. I, who raised Lazarus from the dead, am dying." And all her hopes were dashed.

And so when she recognizes Jesus' voice when He says her name, she runs to Him. Throws herself at His feet. And hugs those feet like she's never gonna to let go.

For now she has her Jesus *again*. Just like Martha and the other Mary got their brother Lazarus back. They lost him once; and in their grief at losing him once, they won't let him go.

That's just what Mary Magdelene wants. She wants Jesus back just as she had Him before.

In other words, *she wants Jesus the way she wants Jesus.*

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How do *you* want to have Jesus?

There are probably as many ways people want to have Jesus as there are people.

Some people want a jesus who, when you talk to Him, He not only listens, but talks back. Quite apart from His written Word. Like a Google home.

Or a jesus of the "big occasions." The jesus who's smart enough not to show up *all the time* (what an inconvenience!), but only when you want Him there. At Christmas, perhaps. But certainly for your wedding and your funeral.

That's a jesus of their own invention. A dreamt-up jesus.

A jesus who...comes and goes as *you* please.

A jesus, fellow-redeemed, that is alive and well...but only in the imagination.

A jesus, who, in the end, is the affront to the Jesus who died that you might live; and who lives that you might never die.

That, finally, is what Mary wanted. A jesus conformed to her own desires.

But that's not the Jesus Jesus Himself gives us. Instead, Jesus, *in the way He is to be had*, says, "Stop clinging to Me!" Why? "For I have not yet ascended to the Father."

But those words are not only rebuke, but comfort. For with those words the real Jesus, the one who rose from the dead, gives Mary a comfort far greater than her mind could have invented. He is going to the Father. And in His ascension to the Father, He promises never to forsake His holy Church. You see, He ascends not to go away, but to be nearer and closer to His holy Church—to you—than He ever was in the clasp of Mary.

That's what's entailed in those few words, "I ascend to the Father." You remember how it goes at the end of Matthew's Gospel. Just before His ascension Jesus gathered His disciples. And He told them: "Go! Baptize! And teach all things I have commanded. And lo! (which is to say, "voilà") I am with you always even to the end of the age."

No. Those words, "I ascend to the Father," are no leave-taking. They're no final adieu. Instead, they mean that Jesus will be with us in another way. That He'll now pack Himself up and deliver Himself not in His bodily presence on earth, but in His Holy Word and Blessed Sacraments.

Why do you think Jesus told Thomas, “Blessed are those have not seen and yet believe”? He’s not pouring out praise on those who haven’t seen and yet believe for taking a brave existential leap of faith in an unseen resurrected Lord. He’s saying that the only way to have Himself as He truly is, as a Savior from sin and death, as the blessing He came to be and give, is to have Him where He promises to be: in His holy Word and Blessed Sacraments.

And that is comfort indeed! Fellow-redeemed: in the preaching of the Word of Christ you have Christ more nearly and dearly than Mary ever held Him in her grip.

In your Baptism, you have Christ not just in the palm of your hands, but wrapped about you, like a huge cape. The drenching of the water of Baptism isn’t wetness, it’s Christ.

And in the blessed Sacrament of the Altar? There you have Christ not on the outside, like Thomas, but on the inside. The One who gives you to eat and to drink His own crucified, risen, and ascended Body and Blood—the same Body and Blood that sits at the right of the Father. Eat that. Drink that. And you are joined not only with His death for you and for the forgiveness of all your sins. You are joined with His new life, and you already have one foot in heaven.

That is the blessedness of not seeing, yet believing. Of not clinging to a christ of your own invention, but to the real Christ, as He actually is and wants to be.

But try to invent any other jesus, and this is what you’ll get from the Lord who suffered and died and rose again for you: “Stop clinging. Stop grasping. Stop fetching.”

And He does this for no other reason than that He wants you to have Him as He is, where He is to be found, and doing what He does: forgiving your sins. Opening heaven to you. And giving you everlasting life.

For that, at last, is why Jesus rose from the dead. St. Paul puts it so succinctly: He was delivered on account of our trespasses and raised again on account of our justification.

Why was Jesus delivered up? Because you had sins. Because you *have* sins.

And why was Jesus raised from the dead? Because by His death you have been justified—set right with God. Once for all. His resurrection sets His death in italics and underlines it. It’s the seal and letter of authentication that His death fully atoned for the sins of the world. Including yours. That’s why He came into the flesh. Not to be Mary’s cuddlebuddy. Or yours. But to be a Redeemer. To buy you back from Satan’s thrall. And to be a Victor: to vanquish sin and death. To trample hell.

And on this Easter day? Why, that’s the sermon that Jesus, the Promised Messiah, would have preached to you. Amen.

*pax dei, etc.*

*sdg*  
*jsb*