

12 April 2009
The Resurrection of our Lord

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“True Hope”

Text: John 20:1-18 (1 Corinthians 5:6b-8)

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

Alleluia! Christ is risen! [He is risen indeed! Alleluia!]

St. John told us today: ***Mary stood weeping outside the tomb.*** We can certainly picture the scene, and understand it. For it is a scene that we see often - men, women, and children, weeping outside the tombs of their loved ones. Whether that tomb be in a cemetery, or a tomb of fallen cement after an earthquake, a tomb of collapsed house after a tornado, a tomb of crumpled steel after a car wreck, a tomb of collapsed towers after a terrorist attack, a tomb of a wiped out village after a tsunami, or a tomb of tubes and machines in a hospital. There is no shortage of tombs or tears in our world today. Death, however it comes, is an equal opportunity tyrant, which effects us all, and will come for us all. For all have sinned, so all will die.

Yes, there is no shortage of tombs or tears in our world today. What there is a shortage of is hope. True hope. Not the false hope we hear so often - the platitudes of those who are grasping for hope. But true hope. Real hope. Solid hope. Hope that comes not with pious sounding wishes, but from the certainty that death is not the end. That there is an answer - a real answer! - to the tombs we face; the tombs that seem so fearsome; that look so great and final; that cause us to sob such tears.

Today, we have such an answer! And we have such a hope! For the bodily resurrection of Jesus from the dead means that we have a Saviour who has met our enemy, and won! A Saviour who entered death to deal death itself a mortal blow from which it will never recover. A Saviour who entered the stinking gullet of death, and like Jonah's great fish, forced it to vomit Him back to life, never to die again. And so our most fearsome enemy has been defeated. Whatever tombs we see and face, the steely grip of death cannot hold those who are in Christ Jesus. For when death comes for us, the Word of God made flesh will speak to death and say: *Release my child. You have no right to her. For I have atoned for his sins. Therefore your claim is empty. Release her!* And like the creative Word spoken in the beginning, it will be so. And we too will bodily rise from death to life, in Jesus.

And so today, the Church calls out all over the world ***Christ is risen!*** Because this is our hope! And because this is a victory that is not known unless it is proclaimed. Because like Mary, all we see are the tombs. We look around and nothing looks victorious. We see sadness and pain, wars and fighting, disease and struggle, death and defeat. And it all looks and feels so fearsome and final. . . . But for Mary that morning, there was a word that pierced the darkness; a word that flew through her ears and entered her heart and caused her such joy as she had never felt before. It was the voice and the word of the Good Shepherd - *her* Good Shepherd. For as John told us earlier in His Gospel: ***“My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me.”*** (John 10:27) So when Jesus spoke her name: ***“Mary”*** - she heard that voice she knew so well! She heard and knew that her Redeemer lives! (LSB #461) And her tears of sorrow were changed to tears of joy. At His voice, she is released from her prison of sadness and grief, and given life again. A life of joy and hope. A life of confidence and peace.

And so it is with us as well. There is a Voice and a Word that pierces the darkness of sin that enshrouds us; that releases us from the prison of sin that seeks to hold us captive; and that takes away the fears that try to overwhelm us. The voice of our Good Shepherd that raises us and gives us life again. His voice that makes every day for us an Easter Day. A day of joy and hope. A day of confidence and peace.

For His is the voice and the Word that sounds forth at every baptism, releasing us people of death and raising us to life, joining us to Himself, *and making every day an Easter day.*

His is the voice and the Word that sounds forth in absolution, proclaiming in His “I forgive you all your sin” His victory over sin and death, releasing us from sin and raising us to life, *and making every day an Easter day.*

And His is the voice and the Word that sounds forth at every Supper, as giving us His body to eat and His blood to drink, He joins Himself to us, releasing us from the famine and drought of sin and filling us with His righteousness and life, *and making every day an Easter day.*

Like that day was for Mary. That wonderful day in that garden that Jesus’ presence made Paradise again. And though we still live in a world of thorns and thistles, of disease and death - where Jesus is and speaks, there is no garden so lovely and no day as joyful. And we live again in joy and hope and confidence and peace.

Now, that’s quite a change! From death to life, from despair to hope, from sadness to joy, from fear to confidence. But that is the fruit of Jesus’ resurrection and His victory over sin, death, and the devil in our lives even now. For not only does His victory mean eternal life for us in heaven - it changes forever how we live here and

now. How we live, how we grieve, and how we die. For no longer must we worry about what this world and life will bring us - about the future, or what will happen to me, or about dying, or about natural disasters or terrorist attacks or accidents. Whatever tomorrow brings, be it joy or sadness, life or death, we are safe in Jesus. Death did its worst to Him and lost! And so we can now live in the confidence that it can do its worst to us also, *and it will lose again*.

But that's not all - for our freedom in Christ changes how we live in another way also. For if I need not worry about me and my life anymore, but am confident that I have a Saviour from sin and death, and a Father in Heaven who is taking care of me always - then now I am free to worry . . . about others. And I can now lay down my life for others because I know my life is secure in Jesus. And so we now live as that **"unleavened bread"** Paul was talking about in the Epistle - both as individuals, and yet united to one another as the body of Christ here in this place. For free from **the "yeast" of malice and evil**, of sin and death, we now live a new life. Not because we have to, because it is the Law! But because as Paul said, this is who you really are. **You really are unleavened.** Cleansed, forgiven, and free in Jesus.

Does that sound like the life we need? It is the life you now have, because of this day! Because Christ is risen, and death has been overthrown.

Christ is risen, and Hell has been vanquished.

Christ is risen, and the demons have fallen.

Christ is risen, and the Angels rejoice.

Christ is risen, and life rules.

Christ is risen, and the grave is open.

Christ is risen, and is the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep.

(From St. John Chrysostom's Easter sermon)

Yes, Christ is risen, and one day His voice will sound forth once again and - like Mary - call your name. And your ears will know His voice, and follow from the grave. From this life to the next. From this valley of the shadow of death to Paradise - open again. Where the entrance is no longer guarded by angels with flaming swords, but the entrance at which the angels sing the praises of Him who died but lives again - and we too will join their song. Just as we do here, joining the *"angels and archangels and all the company of heaven"* as Jesus comes to us here - bodily - in His Supper. But then we will see Him no longer veiled in bread and wine, but shining as the sun in His glory. And then the celebration will really begin!

So sing today in full voiced joy! Sing today of our victory that has been won! Sing today of your confidence and hope! For yes, you know that your Redeemer lives! For Christ is risen! [He is risen indeed!] Alleluia! Alleluia! Alleluia!

In the Name of the Father, and of the (+) Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.