

St. John's Episcopal Church  
Hamlin, Pennsylvania  
The Rev'd. Ronald Royce Miller, Ph.D.  
Easter Day  
1 April 2018

Scripture readings:

Acts 10:34-43

Psalm 118:1-2, 14-24

1 Corinthians 15:1-11

John 20:1-18

Christ is risen!

The Lord is risen indeed! Alleluia! Alleluia!

We make much during Lent about dropping the use of Alleluias in the liturgy, and then we bump up against a funeral and we sing the hymn, "*At the grave my song shall be Alleluia, Alleluia,*" and we make mistakes. It's always the choir that does this. *[laughter]* When you're not supposed to say Alleluia, they always do it, and then we titter and giggle and carry on. Well, now you can say Alleluia all you want, and the louder the better.

What is this Alleluia all about? The world may not understand you when you say that. It's not an English word. It's probably Hebrew or of even more ancient origin. We have words that don't mean much but they express a lot of emotion. I think Alleluia means a great deal and expresses a lot of emotion. Between the 8 and 10 o'clock masses we finally got around to uncovering the Alleluia banner which had been buried at the beginning of Lent on Shrove Tuesday at the pancake supper when we burned the palms to make the ashes to remember that we are dust and to dust we shall return, and we put the Alleluia away. It's technically buried. It was buried inside the church somewhere. And now it's out, and Alleluia is part of our language for Easter.

The world may not get what we're celebrating today although calendars around the world will reflect this celebration of the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. There is an interesting passage in the first text we read from Acts today which I think is worth paying a little bit of attention to. "*God raised him on the third day and allowed him to appear, not to all the people but to us who were chosen by God as witnesses.*" Could it mean that to be chosen by God as people who see the resurrection, we see something that others don't? And maybe we believe something that others want to believe and can't.

It is probably true that in my 40-plus years of ministry I have gone to the funeral home and to the grave more than I have to the altar with couples to be married, to the font with infants or people to be baptized, to any other thing that a priest or pastor does. I have done more burying and celebrated more funerals than all the rest of the stuff put together. And, friends, don't you think I wish I could say to the people in deepest grief - and the time comes when we want to say it to ourselves - "*Get up out of that grave. You're not dead. Rise up!*" And we get this great teaser from Jesus when he goes to the tomb of his best friend, Lazarus, and calls him out of the tomb.

If that's what you're looking for at Easter, I hate to tell you you're going to be sorely disappointed. It doesn't happen that way. We are in a constant process of learning, and a major component of grief is learning to say that the person grieved has, in fact, died. Period.

Then we want to imagine what happens after we die. Well, I can tell you when death has gone into my household and I got all of the religious claptrap, it virtually physically sickened me. Nobody knows what in the world happens after you die. You can make up any stories you want, to make yourself feel good about it, but nobody knows.

So what are we here to celebrate? A failed magic act that's a thousand years tired? Or do we really celebrate resurrection? And if that's what we're here to celebrate, let's talk for a minute about what that might really mean. According to the text we read in Acts, the resurrection of Jesus on the third day had something to do with people being allowed to see by virtue of faith that the truth that others had attempted to bury in the assassination, crucifixion, death, and burial of Jesus could not be killed, that there was something durable about Jesus. And, friends, I'm highly invested on this day in remembering that among all the other complexities we come to after two thousand years of Christianity, that one of the tenets of our faith is that Jesus was, in fact, fully human, and that's good enough for me.

Yesterday before I left the house I did a strange thing. I went out on the front porch and - because of the admonition of a friend who is a teller in the bank in Newfoundland - I finally took the Christmas wreath off my front door! *[laughter]* She's tired of seeing it every day. I'm glad my neighbors look in on me. And I thought, "*Oh, this is so out of time and out of sync.*" Well, is it? Does Christmas have something to do with Easter? Does Easter have something to do with Christmas? They better had! When we celebrated Christmas we opined that we wouldn't

celebrate Christmas if we hadn't had Easter. It would have just been another two thousand- year-old dusty Jewish birthday party which we for sure by now would have forgotten. And that's my anxiousness at Christmas, that we keep it the Nativity instead of the Incarnation.

But what does it mean that people are called by God to witness Jesus alive even after he has been crucified, dead, and buried? What does it mean to us who call ourselves Christians, who say we perceive that Jesus is resurrected and alive and here and now and visible with us today? Well, it's not the business of going to the cemetery and thinking that you can begin to wake up some old dead body that's been pickled and painted and powdered and perfumed and sealed in a ... I used to say to the funeral directors when they put those cement tops on the vaults, "*How do you ever expect them to get out?*" [laughter] It's time for us to grow up in terms of owning what it is we mean by resurrection.

Last night at the vigil which I know is long and complex, but it's also beautiful and wonderful, and it's also the model for everything we do all year long at every service at the church. At the Easter vigil we fill the font with fresh and pure water, and we remember that the font is for us a tomb in which we're buried. Young parents who bring babies don't want to hear you refer to the font as a tomb. Why are you going to bury my baby? And that's why the more water the better so occasionally, if we can, we get into a stream (it's hard to do that in the winter) to make the symbol of burial and resurrection. Now the font also stands as a symbol of a personal body part and a feminine one. This is the womb of the Church where Mother Church breaks water and gives birth to her sons and daughters.

Does anybody watch "*Call the Midwife*"? Did you see it last week when a woman gave birth in her apartment? It was the most amazing thing. I sat in front of my tv and wept as this human being came into the world from between the legs of a poor and confused woman. I wept because it's such a profound mystery. And nothing less happens in baptism. Mother Church spreads her awkward legs and you and I are born here. And in that hope we are born as brothers and sisters of Christ. And, in fact, we proclaim ourselves as we remember - now think of that word. Put a hyphen in between *re* and *member*. Re-member. Did you ever take your sister's doll and tear it apart and then try and re-member it by putting the legs and arms and the head back on? I did. [laughter] In all of this we re-member the Body of Christ. We put arms and legs and a face and a physique onto Jesus today.

None of us is here for long or forever. Allow me to say it once again to those who hate to hear it. Well, you can say it with me by now. *Nobody gets out of here alive*. But while we are here, the joy of being a Christian is that we can participate in re-remembering the Body of Christ around an eternal and undefeatable truth, the truth that allowed Jesus to give his life not to an angry God to save us from our sins (What a whackarama idea that is!) But that allowed Jesus to live until his last breath without abandoning his belief in a creator God who loved everything and everybody that God herself created. And that means YOU! And it means your enemy!

Now I'm aware the religious institutions can make a lot of hay on generating ideas and taking advantage of people by telling them what happens after you die. If anybody starts, put on your armor and turn off your hearing aids. Nobody knows. But I don't know where I came from either, before those awkward legs were spread and I was born. The Spanish have this down pat. The term in Spanish to give birth is *dar a luz* - to give to the light. So from whatever home we come to get here and whatever home we return to after we're dead, I know nothing. But as a Christian who celebrates Easter with you, I know this: that our joy, our hope, our understanding of resurrection is that together as baptized members of the Body of Christ - and that doesn't mean that everybody in the world is gonna get it - God raised him on the third day and allowed him to appear, not to all of the people, but to us who were chosen as witnesses. To us who believe this, we will know this, that Christ is resurrected and alive every day when your sad sack of flesh and blood and bones gets out of bed and does the work that Jesus did in his life, the work of sharing and believing and embodying (what is on the sign in the front of this church every day of the week) *We invite all people to embody the love of Christ*, which is the love of God for the whole world in all times in all places and especially in these latter days for all people - especially the ones Jesus loved, and you know who they were - the blind, the maimed, the poor, the widow, the orphan, the addicted, the strange, the leper, the women, the streetwalkers, the sinners, the tax collectors, the crooks, the gangsters, even the centurion who was brought, after the embarrassment of his terrible act, to confess, "*Truly this was the Son of God.*"

Jesus knew that if he stuck to the truth, the truth would stick to him. We know the same thing. If we stick to the resurrection, the resurrection will stick to us. It will be obvious to all that we know and to all with whom we have

any kind of relationship whatsoever. We *are*, friends, by our own confession, the Body of Christ resurrected every day in this world. And I have a suspicion that if we ever get busy enough being that Body and doing what that Body does, we would have way less time to worry about what happens when we die. We might not even care in the end, and we might be so tired when our last breath came that we would welcome it. And then the Church could honestly say and the rest of the world could say, "*Well done, good and faithful servant.*" And maybe our grief would be different as well. So we proclaim as those who are chosen by God to be witnesses to this, that Christ is indeed risen. He is risen indeed. Alleluia! Alleluia! Alleluia!

In the next couple weeks of the Church we'll be reading what are called the post-resurrection stories, when Jesus was seen after his crucifixion, death, burial, and resurrection - seen by people before he ascended and disappeared forever. The unusual and wonderful thing about that is he is usually seen having a meal with them - frying fish on the beach or breaking bread on the road to Emmaus. It is the reason, friends, that every time we gather here we share a cultic meal. Oh, it's not a big deal. If you're here to get your gut filled, it won't be done by a nibble and a sip. That's for sure. But we keep this meal constantly and celebrate it all the time because it reminds us that in the breaking of bread, in the sharing of our resources, in the mutual consolation we share, in the feeding of the hungry, in taking care of the poor, in doing all the things that Jesus did, we will, in fact, see Jesus and - get this, friends - those who are not witnesses to this resurrection *will* see Jesus resurrected in you and what you do and how you treat each other and how you relate to the world. That might make Easter last a day or two. Maybe a week. Maybe the rest of our lives.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.