

# Alleluia

## **Sermon for Easter Sunday, April 9, 2023**

*Readings:* Acts 10:34-43; Colossians 3:1-4; John 20:1-18

*Sermon text:* Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb.

Alleluia, a Greek transliteration from the Hebrew Hallelujah, meaning praise Yahweh. Praise God.

It is right and a good and joyful thing to praise God. It may be one of the main reasons we were created. So the old Westminster Shorter Catechism puts it: Question: What is the chief end of man? Answer: Man's chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever. It is why we call the main Christian worship service the Eucharist—another Greek word meaning thanksgiving. So let us praise God. Alleluia.

Now when I say Alleluia I know you all want to hear “Christ is risen” and reply “Christ is risen indeed alleluia.” But hold on—we’ll get there.

First let us us thank and praise God for two miracles before we come to the resurrection of our Lord.

The first is creation, let us praise God from whom all blessings flow and for the beauty of the earth. As E.E. Cummings famously wrote:

I thank You God for most this amazing day  
For the leaping greenly spirits of trees  
And a blue true dream of sky  
And for everything which is natural, which is infinite, which is yes  
I who have died am alive again today

And you see even that praise for the beauty of creation—for the green spring and the blue sky—depends to some extent on the second miracle, the eyes to see, the senses to enjoy, the mind to wonder, love and praise.

As Cummings ends his poem of thanksgiving and praise:

Now the ears of my ears awake  
And now the eyes of my eyes are opened.

So let us thank God for this world and for our being alive to see it, live in it, even to some extent shape it, to question it, and even to die with hope and faith in eternal life, a faith that allows us to more bravely live this life and see more clearly the work and love of God shining through the world.

My friends, here's a third miracle indeed, one we celebrate today, the miracle of resurrected life. The miracle of the empty tomb, the unfolding discovery of what happened to Jesus, the gospel proclamation: Alleluia, Christ is risen. [The Lord is risen indeed, Alleluia.] The miracle of Easter.

On this day the world pivoted on its axis.

On this day the stone rolled away and into the deepest darkness came a shaft of light.

And those with eyes to see saw. But not all, and even those who came to see did not see all at once. Revelation came in stages, like the dawn. So it comes to us, as we deepen in our understanding. And so it came to that most brave and faithful woman, Mary of Magdala, our model of a resurrection witness and the apostle to the apostles. Let us more carefully review the stages of her discovery.

The gospel of John tells us that “Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb.” The first sight: the stone was gone. She ran and told Peter and he and John ran to see for themselves. They got there, a little breathless (the evangelist tells us the younger John outran Peter). The large stone sealing the tomb had indeed been rolled aside. John peered in—now the dawn was breaking, but it was dark in the tomb—but he didn't enter. Brave Peter arrived beside him, breathing hard; let me look inside—and bowed down and entered the small cave. His eyes adjusted to the dim light. He looked to the right where there was a ledge where the body had been laid. The body was gone, but the linen shroud was there, like a sheet thrown off. John came in then, and looking a little longer, and with keener and younger eyes saw the head wrapping, rolled up and place in a place by itself. There in the corner.

Do you see how sharp the details, the kind of thing that sets apart an eyewitness account, or one told to the scribe by an eyewitness.

The body of Jesus was indeed gone. The two men went back home to tell the others.

“But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb.” And the longer she stayed the more she witnessed. She peered into the tomb. The daylight outside grew stronger, but strangely a pair of lights glowed from within—angelic presences, speaking softly, “woman, why are you weeping.” He is gone—they have taken his body! And she turned and there, out in the morning light, was a man, who also asked her why she wept. Supposing he was the caretaker of the cemetery, she said, they have taken the body of my teacher and friend—do you know where they have put him?

He said her name and in a flash she recognized him. My Rabbi! She reached out and touched him.

If we are to picture this scene as the artist who created the Resurrection window of Grace Church did so beautifully we should imagine Mary and Jesus briefly holding hands while he gently says goodbye: You cannot hold on on to me—I have to go and ascend to the Father. Go tell the others what you have seen, and felt and heard.

And do not mourn. Peace I leave with you. The peace of knowing this life in all its beauty and pain, joy and loss is only part of eternal life with God. I go to prepare a place for you—so where I am there you will be also. And although I am no longer bodily in this world, you will still feel and know my spirit, the Spirit of God.

Morning is when I am awake and there is dawn in me., Henry David Thoreau wrote. Dawn when light and dark meet and new day opens and the stone is rolled away yet again and we emerge, blinking into the new light. Every day a new dawn—should we truly awaken.

This is such a day—now is the acceptable time. Christ is risen and the world is new. Praise God from whom all blessings flow.

This is the day when we can stop weeping—not that all suffering and sorrow, tragedy and death is gone, but they are set against a greater frame, they no longer end the story. Now we can join with the poet and say, “I who have died am alive again today”. Now we can join the great chorus of praise, now we can sing: “Rejoice and sing now, all the round earth, bright with a glorious splendor, for darkness has been vanquished by our eternal King.”

Alleluia, Christ is risen. The Lord is risen indeed, Alleluia.

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