

Pastor's Message – Easter, 2023  
 John 20:1-18  
 Psalm 118:1-2, 14-17, 19-24

There is a tradition in the Eastern Church to tell a joke to begin the Easter Sunday service to remind us of the great cosmic joke that God played on the devil on Easter Sunday. Jesus was not really dead, death had no ultimate power, for God raised Jesus to life again.

I've brought that tradition into my Easter Sunday preaching a few years ago and I have a couple more jokes this year.

*What does the Easter bunny say before he eats? Lettuce pray.*

*Why doesn't the Easter Bunny, covered in fur, get hot in the summer?*

*He has "hare-conditioning."*

It's not wise, perhaps even dangerous, to use words like "always" and "never," but it seems to me, as I look back, that I have always built worship services on Easter Sunday that start with a bang, because Easter Sunday is the biggest day of the year for Christians and even, dare I say, the biggest day in all the history of the world. So, as I was planning this day, I felt led, instead, to start out quiet and low – and I'm still a little uncomfortable with it.

But, as I think about it, Easter *dawned*. The good news of the resurrection *unfolded*. Those who were the first visitors to the tomb on Sunday morning were confused or silent or terrified. Only the Beloved Disciple in John's account of the resurrection "saw and believed," but then he didn't tell anyone.

I suspect that the number of people who roll out of bed this morning did not immediately shout "Christ is risen!" How many of us, addled by sleep would be confused by not finding what we expect to find going to the tomb on that first Easter morning? Only the Beloved Disciple "got" it right away. Perhaps some of the people worshipping at home are just watching the live streamed worship this Easter morning and are like him. Perhaps, you are sitting with your second cup of coffee, lamenting that you are not here to smell the lilies and experience the excitement and energy of an Easter Sunday crowd, not here to receive the bread and drink from your cup with others.

And in this moment, consider the physical distancing message that Jesus leaves Mary with, "Do not hold onto me...."

The first Easter was not a grand, celebratory pageant. The first Easter was a whole lot of scared, broken, confused people who could not believe that God had turned the shadow of death into daybreak.

We live in an anti-Easter world.

Easter's astounding good news falls into a cacophony of bad tidings, and the bad news seems more powerful than any message of hope. The headlines scream of pain and disaster, and the stories of our families and friends reveal foreclosures, job losses, health worries, weather disasters, and more. Our one day of Easter seems like small consolation in a world gripped by disaster and distress.

Can Easter be just our private celebration as Christians, a day off from bad news before we go back to the real world? Is the resurrection as unrelated to reality as

marshmallow bunnies, or as flimsy as decorated eggs? Is it all just a pleasant fantasy we hold as people of faith -- a day off from reality? Nice music at church, a lovely dinner with friends and family, in some traditions a new hat (do people still do that?) -- and then back to reality, back to school, back to work, tomorrow?

John's gospel gives us the familiar and powerful story of Mary Magdalene, and the drama of the resurrection unfolding for her, and then for the other followers of Jesus. She comes to the tomb, for what reason, we really don't know and finds cause for unbelievable joy.

The same happens for us on Easter. We can be preparing for the worst, believing the worst, accepting the worst about our own world, and Easter summons us to find cause for celebration. Easter is alive in our world, not so much in spite of the disconnection between God and humanity, but because of it. Because God understands pain and fear, loss and anguish, this is the world where Jesus lived and died and rose again, holding up another reality next to the one that seems so powerful. We live with twin truths -- the world holds sorrow and pain, evil and violence, and yet this is also the world in which God is alive.

This is the day; **this is the day,**  
That the LORD has made; **that the LORD has made.**  
Let us rejoice; **let us rejoice.**  
And be glad in it; **and be glad in it.**

This is the day that the LORD has made; let us rejoice and be glad and rejoice in it.  
This is the day; **this is the day that the LORD has made.**

If you were to inspect many of the products and gadgets in your home, you'd discover their point of origin. Somewhere on the product is a message proclaiming where it was made. Most likely, the item will declare: "Made (by workers) in China." It is less likely to say: "Made (by workers) in U.S.A." Perhaps the toaster was made in Canada, the wristwatch in Switzerland, the car in Germany and the tequila in Mexico. Our text says that every day is made by God (v. 24). And God, who has made our days, gives them to us! Perhaps this is why the psalm opens, "O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good; his steadfast love endures forever!" How, then, should we react? "Let us rejoice and be glad" (v. 24).

Psalm 118 is, perhaps, an unlikely text for Easter Sunday. Yet, it connects an enduring and lasting theme with the resurrection. It makes sense to have Psalm 118:24 on our bulletin cover. For this is the day that the LORD has made.

On Easter Sunday, we can talk about two stones: One is real, the other figurative. The first is the stone that was rolled away from the tomb by some unknown, unseen, Powerful Hand. The second stone refers to the person within the tomb who left the tomb when the stone was rolled away. This person, Jesus Christ, is referred to as the Cornerstone. Foundation stones, or cornerstones, were important in the Middle East in Jesus' day. Scripture has many references to a cornerstone. In the OT, see Job 38:6; Isaiah 19:13; Isaiah 28:16; Jeremiah 51:26; Zechariah 10:4; and today's text (v. 22). In the NT, see Matthew 21:42; Mark 12:10; Luke 20:17; Acts 4:11; Ephesians 2:20; and 1 Peter 2:7. So, people in Jesus' day were quite familiar with cornerstones. In fact, ancient building

construction relied on the cornerstone more than today. These days, the laying of a cornerstone is largely ceremonial and may have a time capsule inside. Dignitaries and celebrities may be invited to the laying of the cornerstone of an important public building. But it is ceremonial. In Jesus' day, great care was taken in the selection of a cornerstone. The psalmist snickers in the knowledge that the stone that the "builders" rejected, i.e., found unsuitable as a foundation stone, has become the "chief cornerstone." On Easter Sunday, we, too, find this "marvelous in our eyes" (v. 23). And Easter Sunday is truly a day that "the LORD hath made." We should, indeed, "rejoice and be glad in him" (v. 24). Jesus, the risen Christ, is the cornerstone of our faith. And as a foundation stone, Jesus Christ is also the cornerstone of our lives. He is not merely a ceremonial stone that's nice to look at from time to time. He is the critical component of our lives, and everything else is ordered and aligned with this stone to ensure the structural integrity of our lives.

This United Methodist Church has been chartered in Waupun since 1844 and is arguably the oldest church in Waupun, and it has celebrated Easters for 179 years now. The very celebration of Easter, that you and I take part in, is evidence of the magnitude of Christ's work and of God's love. Think about it. On Easter morning, whether a church is bursting at the seams or comprised of a faithful few, we are joining with millions of other people around the globe at the same time, and there will be millions more next week in the East, celebrating the same truth.

Something so huge happened that the majority of the world now measures time against it. Jesus did something -- Jesus was someone -- so consequential that his life became the pivot point of human history. We struggle to remember who played in the Super Bowl just weeks after it took place. And yet the world is still running from the empty tomb of Jesus Christ breathless, excited and full of wonder. Something happened there.

Since the message is still resonating, its benefits are still in play, and the implications are still enjoyable. This is something that we need to remember again every Easter morning. The world gathers, not just to celebrate this demonstration of God's love and power in the past, but to receive and taste the sweetness of the fruit again today.

That first Easter and every Easter from thereon and until the end of time is the fulfillment of God's promise. Sin has been defeated! Death has been defeated! The grave has been defeated and we can have peace!

- If Jesus is more powerful than death, is he more powerful than the loss of a job, the sickness your friend is experiencing or the evils of international terrorism? Yes. Have peace.

- If Jesus has conquered death, as promised, then he can be trusted with everything else he has promised. He promised to be the sacrifice for your sins making you right with God -- believe him. Have peace.

- If Jesus promised to hear your prayers when you cry out in weakness, and to fill you with his Holy Spirit to make you strong -- believe him. Have peace.

- If Jesus promised that he will return from the right hand of God, resurrect us all and right every wrong that still exists in this world until we, his forgiven people, reside with him in a new creation -- believe him. Have peace. As the psalmist notes in today's text: "I shall not die, but I shall live, and recount the deeds of the Lord" (v. 17).

- Jesus has promised never to leave you or forsake you, but to be with you in your cancer, in your divorce, in your depression, in your loneliness, in your breakups and in your breakdowns. He promised to be with you even in your bad hair days -- believe him. He is risen. Have peace.

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That the LORD has made; **that the LORD has made.**  
Let us rejoice; **let us rejoice.**  
And be glad in it; **and be glad in it.**

This is the day that the LORD has made; let us rejoice and be glad and rejoice in it.  
This is the day; **this is the day that the LORD has made.**

This is it. The end of the line. Our journey is complete. This is the end of the beginning. Today is a day of rejoicing and celebration, it is also a call to move out. We are, above all things, followers – that’s what it means to be disciples of Jesus Christ. We follow where he leads us; we go where he sends us. We move out into the world to live our proclamation in acts of service and in hospitality. To live in awe of grace is not to be stunned into inaction, but to live each day alive with possibility and hope, with love and with peace and longing for the kingdom of God that brings justice, community, and wholeness. Christ is risen!

Psalm 118 which we proclaimed today is helpful to reaffirm our trust in God. It speaks of the steadfast love of God, help in times of need, and victories being won while God is by one’s side. Many of us feel surrounded by trouble on all sides these days and these words can help us dream of a day when we will say we have won the victory too. This psalm reminds us that God has won victories for the people before and that God will get us through this battle too. God is worth putting our trust in because God is an ever-present help in times of trouble. God was there before, and God is here now, and God will be with us all the rest of our days.

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That the LORD has made; **that the LORD has made.**  
Let us rejoice; **let us rejoice.**  
And be glad in it; **and be glad in it.**

This is the day that the LORD has made; let us rejoice and be glad and rejoice in it.  
This is the day; **this is the day that the LORD has made.**

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