

Pastor's Message – Easter, 2024

Isaiah 35:1-8

Romans 6:1-4

Matthew 28:1-10

Today we celebrate Easter, the day of resurrection of our Lord. Today, we remember where we have been, focused as we have been these last many weeks of Lent on the cross of Christ. But we also take a turn now past the cross and go to the open tomb, where Jesus arose to give us new life.

It has long been a tradition in some churches for the preacher to offer Easter humor to celebrate the joke that was played on the devil. He thought Jesus had died, but the joke was on him when Jesus was raised three days later. I've tried to offer some jokes in the past – some better than others, but it gets harder and harder each year. Plus, I'm not much of a comedian-I leave that to Wayne and his jokes.

However, I've collected some "groaners" for you this year:

- One Easter, a father was teaching his son to drive when out of nowhere a rabbit jumped on the road. Slamming on the brakes, the son said, "I nearly ruined Easter! I almost ran over the Easter Bunny." His father replied, "It's okay son—you missed it by a hare."
- Therapist: What's been up lately? Chocolate bunny: I don't know Doc, I just feel so hollow inside.
- Where does the Easter Bunny like to eat breakfast? *IHOP*
- How can you tell which rabbits are the oldest in a group? *Just look for the gray hares.*

Like I said, I was planning on telling some jokes, but they're not all they're cracked up to be.

The groundhog predicted spring in six weeks, we're still waiting for two snows on the robin's tail, but Easter is often celebrated as the beginning of spring every year and not by mistake. It arrives at a time when, in spite of early spring snows, plants are poking out of the ground, grass is growing, trees are budding. New life is sprouting up in nature all around us. And new life is

sprouting up in us spiritually this day because Christ has risen to new life for us.

We are forgiven by Christ; we are renewed in our love for God; we are refreshed with the sure hope that we, too, will rise one day, as Jesus has today, to join him in heaven, where new life will spring forth eternally for us all.

The turning from the death of the cross to the life of the open tomb is depicted in the Bible when it says that Mary Magdalene went to the tomb on Easter morning “while it was still dark” (John 20:1). We, as the people of God, are moving “out of darkness into his marvelous light” (1 Peter 2:9).

What does new life look like for the women at the tomb? As the Bible tells us, it is earth-shaking. There was an earthquake at the tomb. It is powerful. An angel rolls away the stone and sits on it. An angel tells the women that Jesus is risen. New life is a little scary at first for the women, but the angel assures them that they should not be afraid. The risen Jesus himself stands in the midst of the women, newly alive, and their initial response is to take hold of him and worship him.

What does our new life in Christ look like guided by what happened on that first Easter? As people guided by the cross to Easter, we are a people filled with the light of the Lord. We are a people whose foundation is rock-solidly based on the death and resurrection of Jesus. We are a people who are no longer afraid of the future because we know the future belongs to Jesus. We are a people who reach out to be with Jesus and who seek to hold on to him to help us in our lives. We are a people who worship and praise our Savior for the life he now gives us to lead. We, like the women at the tomb, are compelled to go forth and tell people that Jesus is alive, and he is alive in each one of us.

Easter energy makes it possible for us to greet each new day with confidence that the Jesus who went to the cross and grave for us will guide us on to witness to others about what we have seen and heard and experienced regarding our living Lord so that they can see, hear, and experience Jesus too.

In another 40 days, the Holy Spirit will come again as we celebrate Pentecost and Jesus will continue to guide us in new life. He takes us to the places where sadness and hardship still exist that we may spread the joy and

gladness Christians receive in Jesus. He leads us to places where there still may be anger and hostility to bring peace. He sends us to the lonely, forsaken, and forgotten places to fill them with his presence and his great love for all.

The journey of life as Easter people never remains in the past but always looks forward to better times on the horizon. When hard times come in the meantime, we are then able to look beyond the trouble to see the triumph of heaven. Nothing on this earth can take us away from the paradise that awaits us. Jesus makes it very apparent to his disciples about where their thoughts should be centered. "Let not your hearts be troubled," he says. "Believe in God; believe also in me. In my Father's house are many rooms. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also" (John 14:1-3). Jesus lays it out for us in these words. Don't look down. Look up. Keep in mind the glorious end goal of life together with him forever.

Living new life in Christ awakens us to glimpses of the promises that await us. We see the hand of God at work in our relationships with fellow believers that we might focus more on our common faith together. We notice and commit random acts of kindness that point to the Father's deep and lasting love for us. We feel the strength from Jesus to persevere in difficult days. We recognize when people smile and laugh and find joy in the moment. We have peace of mind even when things are not going exactly how we would expect them to.

There is life at the end of every tunnel we find ourselves in because Jesus is there. There is happiness after every hardship because Jesus is there. There is a gift around every corner because Jesus is there. And he is alive, living and breathing new life into you every day. Therefore, Easter is not just a day, a season, a moment. It is a way of life, a state of mind, a reason for being, a force that keeps filling us with good things to ponder and prepare for.

Life is not something to ever take for granted, but life is something that is granted to each one of us to live with vigor for the victory won. Jesus propels us in our words and deeds to be both followers of him and guides to others. His story becomes our story. As that wonderful hymn says,

“I love to tell the story,
'twill be my theme in glory,
to tell the old, old story
of Jesus and his love.

Being an Easter people means we are always ready to share our story with those around us so that his story may be known most of all. In the telling of Christ's story in our story, we help people take part in the new life Christ has to share with them in their lives.

St. Paul gives us a framework for how to present Christ's story in his story in 1 Corinthians 15:3-10: “ For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me. For I am the least of the apostles, unworthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God, I am what I am, and his grace toward me was not in vain.”

Every day becomes, then, an Alleluia, a way of saying “Praise the Lord” for life overflowing with beauty and bounty and grace. As Easter people, we have the opportunity to greet each morning as an Easter morning from this moment on, and let the fresh start given to us by Christ encourage and invigorate us to shine with his salvation and glow with the glory that he provides.

So, this Easter Day, we are no longer guided to the cross for the cross stands empty. Instead, we are guided to the open tomb. We are guided to the risen Christ, and guided to a life that is lived to honor and glorify the Lord of Life from this time on and forevermore. Amen.