

### A Reason to Rejoice!

“This is the Lord; we have waited for him;  
let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation” (Isaiah 25:6-9).

Christ is risen! *He is risen indeed, Alleluia!* What a great day to be in church! Our “spring breakers” on the beach may disagree, but there truly is no better place than in this sacred space to rejoice in the Resurrection of our Lord. And today, the signs of celebration are all around us. Our musicians and choir have been preparing for weeks to lead us in songs of praise, the chancel is bursting with color from the flowers that fill it, and today, as I look out into the congregation, the sanctuary is dotted with Easter outfits and smiling faces. Everything about this day exudes light and life. And yet, before we shout our “Alleluias” and move on to the family gatherings that await, we need to take a step back and consider how shocking Easter truly is. And nowhere do we see the astonishment of Easter more clearly than in the experience of the women who followed Jesus.

As the sun set on Friday, Jesus was dead. The women were there. They had watched his lifeless body as it was pulled from the cross and rushed into a nearby tomb to beat the start of the Sabbath. And what an awful Sabbath it must have been as images from the cross haunted the women, and how could they not? These women had witnessed His suffering, they saw Him take His final breath, and they had viewed his bruised and battered body as it slumped in death. There hadn't been time to properly prepare the body of Jesus for its repose, and so they waited.

The Law had delayed their grief. So, as soon the sun set on Saturday and the Sabbath was officially over, the women went out and purchased the spices they would need to care for the corpse of the Lord when the sun rose on the first day of the week. And again, they waited. It's difficult to understand the dread these women must have felt during this sleepless night. They were compelled to honor Jesus by anointing his body, but this is not a task anyone wants to do. We know from our own experiences with death that there are necessary and nauseating things that must be done. Whether it's a trip to the hospital or funeral home to view the body of a loved one, or the overwhelming silence of an open grave at the cemetery, the duties demanded by death are devastating. And that's the weight these women felt as they pried themselves out of bed and began their journey to the grave.

But what they saw when they arrived, was something they never expected. The massive stone designed to seal the tomb had been rolled back and, instead of a rotting body, an angel greeted the women with the most shocking statement in history: “Do not be alarmed. You seek Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has risen; he is not here.”

Think how strange these words must have sounded to the women. And, before their minds could catch up to their eyes and ears, the angel gave them words of instruction: “Go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going before you to Galilee. There you will see him, just as he told you” (Mark 16:7). And then Mark tells us that the women, “went out and fled from the tomb, for trembling and astonishment had seized them, and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.” And who could blame them?

The Resurrection of Jesus Christ is always shocking. And yet, the Resurrection of Jesus is the single, most important teaching of the Bible! The world treats the Resurrection of Jesus as archaic mythology and even some who call themselves Christians talk about the Resurrection as if it were only a metaphor to help us overcome life's problems. The truth is, reason can't accept the Resurrection of Jesus and, to the world, death remains an inevitable and irreversible fact of life.

The Apostle Paul addressed this challenge in today's epistle reading as he writes, "Now I would remind you, brothers, of the gospel I preached to you...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, (and) that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures" (I Corinthians 15:2-4). Paul minces no words here! The Resurrection is the foundation of our faith and it is the most important thing, and, my friends, without the Resurrection there is nothing to believe in. Without the Resurrection, life has no ultimate meaning, or as Paul said, without Easter, we are "to be pitied more than all men" (I Corinthians 15:13-14, 19). "But..." Paul also writes, "Christ *has* been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. For as by a man came death, by a man has come also the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive" (I Corinthians 15:20-22). The Resurrection of Jesus is the centerpiece of Scripture. The Resurrection of Jesus means that His sacrifice for our sins was accepted! And the Resurrection of Jesus guarantees us that the end of this life is not the end of life!

Throughout the season of Lent, we've been using works of art to accompany our reflections on God's salvation story. Over the last few weeks, I've been looking for the perfect piece of art to celebrate Easter, but as I searched through dozens of Easter images I kept finding pictures that portrayed the Risen Christ as a solemn and stately character, very calm and serious. I also found paintings showing Jesus with His hands raised in a campy way as if to say, "TA-DA!" None of them communicated the message I wanted and I had almost given up on the idea altogether. But then I remembered a painting I'd seen on sabbatical.



We were in a church in Bruges, Belgium called Sint Salvators, or Saint Savior's Cathedral. Like so many cathedrals in Europe, the moment we entered the narthex, our eyes were drawn upward to the gothic arches and stained-glass windows that encircled the vaulted ceiling. The nave was long and led to an altar that was surrounded by tapestries illustrating scenes from the life of Christ. The church may as well have been an art museum with all of the masterpieces it held. I'm ashamed to say this but when you are in Europe, you almost become numb to the architectural and artistic beauty found in the churches. Yet, as I moved down the aisle and the altar started to come into focus, I saw an image of the resurrection like I had never seen before. Instead of the composed or campy Christ emerging from the grave, the altarpiece of Saint Savior's showed a vibrant and victorious Risen Christ bounding out of the tomb like he had been shot from a canon. And, as I stood at the foot of the chancel, I found myself smiling with joy at this spirited image of Jesus that screamed life. And that, my friends, is what Easter is all about!

Today, we have a reason to rejoice like no other. Christ Jesus has conquered the grave and, in the language of Isaiah, has swallowed up death forever! My brothers and sisters, Jesus lives! And because He lives, the pains of this pitiful world will come to an end. Jesus lives! And because He lives, our sins are forgiven and our faith has meaning. Dear friends in the faith, Jesus Christ lives! And because He lives, the power of the grave is broken, the curse has been reversed forever, our farewells are never final, and on our day of Resurrection, together we will say: "This is the Lord; we have waited for him; let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation" (Isaiah 25:6-9). Christ is risen! *He is Risen indeed! Alleluia!* Go with the peace of this promise God has made to you today, and all God's people say, "Amen."

