

In the name of God, who makes us, loves us, and keeps us. Amen. Alleluia!

‘On this day the Lord has acted; let us rejoice and be glad in it.’ In our parish Bible Study on Thursday evenings, we have spent the last 3 months pondering some of the Psalms. And if you have joined us on those evenings, you will know that we have discovered that there is a wide variety in the available translations of the psalm texts. The variety of differences in the Psalms is probably more obvious in the psalms than anywhere else in the Bible. For our Episcopal liturgical use, we generally default to the translation found in our Book of Common Prayer, where all of the 150 psalms are included in a section called ‘The Psalter’. And the translation there was written by Bishop Miles Coverdale back in the 16th century. His translation of psalm 118 verse 24 from the ancient Hebrew into English reads: ‘On this day the Lord has acted; let us rejoice and be glad in it.’ We read it together this morning. But you might be more familiar with the King James Version translation which proclaims: ‘This is the day which the LORD hath made; we will rejoice and be glad in it.’ Our Bible Study participants have concluded that, when there is a variety in the translations, it is helpful to consider all the variants together. In this case, the Lord ‘makes this day’ and the Lord ‘acts’ on this day; God creates and God intervenes; God generates something out of nothingness, and God does something special with it.

So, I invite you to carry this verse in your hearts all day: ‘On this day the Lord has acted; let us rejoice and be glad in it.’ There is hardly any way to overstate the joy we experience on Easter Day. It is truly a day for rejoicing, as the Psalm says. God creates and God intervenes. God made this day, and God acts on this day. On this day each year, we hear the story of Christ’s resurrection, of Jesus’ rising from the grave to live forever as our Savior and spiritual companion. It is a story which we delight in recalling. It is a story which each new generation deserves to hear. It is a story which the ancient Apostles used to introduce God’s love to converts. It is a story about which Paul wrote in his letters. It is a story which we mark both communally together and personally in our hearts. It is the reason we are here each Sunday, and the faith by which we make our prayers each and every day. Jesus is alive. No amount of beating and flogging and humiliation has been enough to kill him off or keep him down. God has turned his apparent death into a reminder of eternal life. The Lord hath made this day, and on this day the Lord has acted, and we will rejoice and be glad in it.

But what does Resurrection mean, exactly? St. John’s account of how the Lord has acted that Easter Day is full of imagery which may help answer that question. Mary Magdalene comes to the graveyard early that Sunday morning, enduring the dark and the chill. It was the first opportunity that such a visit would have been allowed, since the Saturday Sabbath restricts such activity. The Bible is full of stories about faithful women, often in contrast to the inconstant men. While the male disciples ran away when Jesus was arrested, the women, scripture tells, stood by him to witness the brutality to which he was subjected and the crucifixion, too. When Mary discovers to her shock that the tomb has been opened, she runs to wake up the men and tell them what she has seen. Had she not taken the time and effort to go to the grave that morning, had she not been faithful and slept in herself, the story might have been told much differently, if at all. God acts, God intervenes, but it is the faithful who will be the first witnesses. It is those who brave the darkness and chill and hardship with constancy who will be the first to rejoice in the acts of God, for they will be in the right place at the right time. After checking things out, Peter and John go back home. They don’t stick around to see the risen Jesus. Could faithfulness be a hallmark of Resurrection?

The Gospel lesson says that Mary stayed there and stood weeping outside the empty tomb. Tears of grief. Tears of loss. Tears of desperation. Faithfully, she had witnessed the miserable events of these

three days, and all of it caught up with her as she stood there. She sobbed under the weight of it all, the betrayal, the beatings, the injustice, and the execution. And if all that wasn't bad enough, the body of her beloved had apparently been stolen from its place of repose. Someone, for some unknown reason, had made off with that which she cherished. Jesus had encouraged her, forgiven her, revealed God's love to her, and now the tangible evidence of all that was gone, it had been removed from her in the dark of night. She was empty, forlorn, and swept with sadness. She wept helplessly. It was all she had left to do. And then, at the moment of her greatest desperation, Jesus appears to her and calls her name. Imagine the joyful surprise. Imagine how her tears of grief turn to tears of joy! On this day the Lord has acted; we will rejoice and be glad in it. Is Resurrection like this? Does resurrection follow emptiness and desperation?

Think of the time of that day which the Lord has made. Mary comes to the tomb while it is still dark, while knowledge of the resurrection event is still hidden by darkness. In the imagery of John's Gospel, darkness is symbolic of ignorance, of a need to learn and grow. But, ignorant darkness can be overcome by the light of Christ. In fact, says John, the light of Christ can never be extinguished by insipid darkness. Jesus brought light into the world from the beginning, and as reliably as the sun daily brings light to each time and place, the light he brings illuminates truth among us. To see by the light is to know. The darkness threatens to obscure and prevent the truth, but the light reveals reality. The reality revealed to Mary, and then to the other followers, and to us in our own generation, is the risen Jesus. The sun rises over the graveyard, and, unexpectedly, hope is restored. Is this what resurrection is like? Is this what brings us together each week to celebrate the Lord's Day?

And think of the massive stone, the one no individual person would be able to move. What does it represent in this story we retell each year? The intent of its placement, which must have taken the strength of several strong people, was apparently to preserve, to keep the scene untouched and unexposed. In John's account, Mary comes to the tomb only for a faithful visit, to honor Jesus by standing before his resting place. The stone would have prevented anything more. But she saw it rolled aside, and this is her first step toward understanding. Seeing is believing, as they say, and she has seen this first clue. But she could have not discovered it on her own. Some greater power has made this possible. The stone, like the darkness it has imposed on the interior of the tomb, represents an impediment to understanding. In our own lives, it might represent our own sinfulness, which, though it preserves what we have been, prevents us from seeing the light. It might represent the injustices imposed on us by others, which keep us in our place and prevent us from rejoining those who bask in the light. It might represent our fear of exposure, our fear of death itself, which hinders us from enjoying the light of dawn each morning. The stone may be so heavy that we are unable to roll it aside by ourselves, but in this story the obstacle has been removed by the power of God, and Jesus has shown us that release is possible, that God's promises are true. Is Resurrection something like that?

Jesus tells Mary that his father is her father, that his parent is her parent, that his God is her God. He shares this teaching as one who has experienced resurrection himself, as one who has experienced the removal of the stone, as one who has witnessed the betrayal of some and the faithfulness of many, as one who has had his own turn weeping for God's people. Having seen the Lord, Mary is beginning to understand what resurrection is all about. Like her, we may never quite grasp the entire mystery, but believing begins in the heart, and like her, our hearts are full of conflicting emotions this day. Despair, perhaps, or surprise, or confusion. But, like her, we are beginning to see the light, beginning to know the power of God. And, like her, the risen Jesus is calling us by name, and calling us to go and tell our brothers and sisters that he still lives. And I hope that you will have this cadence in your thoughts today: 'On this day the Lord has acted; let us rejoice and be glad in it.' Amen. Alleluia!