

**Sunday, March 31, 2024**

**Easter Day**

Acts 10.34-43; 1 Corinthians 15.1-11; John 20.1-18

*The Rev. Michael K. Fincher*

*Service Live Streamed at:*

<https://www.facebook.com/stgregoryslongbeach/videos/729654126025179>

*(Sermon begins at about 31:45)*

**“Invited into New Life”**

Alleluia! Christ is risen!

*The Lord is risen indeed! Alleluia!*

On this Easter Day, we stand shoulder-to-shoulder with others who, like us, rejoice at the good news of the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. With others who, like us, have experienced the Risen Lord in our own lives, either directly or indirectly. I am not just talking about standing shoulder-to-shoulder with those who are in the pew next to us as we gather in this place. I am also talking about those across the ages who have experienced the Risen Lord. A broad array of individuals too numerous to count, with backgrounds and life experiences as varied as they were and are. A living demonstration of the opening statement Peter makes in our first reading from the Acts of the Apostles: “I truly understand that God shows no partiality.” Expressing Peter’s new understanding that God’s salvation is not just for a select few, but is extended to all. Peter’s understanding, and this reality, is woven throughout our readings for this day. This understanding is an integral part of the tapestry our faith tradition. This understanding is an integral part of our individual and collective experiences of the Risen One.

The quintessential story of experiencing the Risen Lord is, of course, our Gospel reading for today. On the day we now know as Easter, Mary Magdalene goes to the tomb. Why, we do not really know. His body had already been prepared for burial by Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus. Presumably, in her grief at the death of her teacher and her friend, Mary wanted to go and pay her respects, to say her final good-byes. She is startled to find the tomb open and empty. This could only mean one thing. Sometime over the last two days, someone had broken in and taken Jesus’ body. Not knowing what to do, she goes and finds Peter and John, two of Jesus’ chief lieutenants. Maybe they would know what to do. They check out the tomb and are of little use. They observe that the burial linens are left behind, which was certainly strange. Why would someone steal the body but leave the burial linens? Peter is bemused. John, on the other hand, begins to realize there is only one explanation: Jesus had told them that following his death he would be raised on the third day. Surely that is what happened. But then they simply return to their homes with no further explanation.

Mary, on the other hand, consumed with grief and bewildered by the fact that Jesus is missing, stays at the tomb. Presumably trying to figure out what to do next. To figure out how she might find her beloved friend and teacher, now risen. And then it happens. She encounters the Risen Christ. She does not realize it initially, presuming him to merely be the gardener. The exchange between Mary and Jesus is a tender moment that also gives a great deal of information about what it means to experience the Risen Lord. The first thing Jesus says to Mary is “Woman, why

are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?" This latter question, "Whom are you looking for?" echoing the question Jesus asks his first disciples when they come seeking to follow him. An indication that the ministry of the resurrected Jesus begins in the same way his earthly ministry began: seeking those who are willing to follow him and be his disciples. Mary effectively becoming the first disciple of the Risen One. The one who will lead the charge in proclaiming the good news of the resurrection. What is remarkable about this is that this time, the first one he calls to follow him is a woman. One who would, at best, be considered on the margins of society; and more likely one considered unworthy of his time or attention. And yet, she is who the Risen One chooses to invite to follow him into this new life post-resurrection. That all who are on the margins and viewed as lesser by society are worthy and invited in this new life post-resurrection.

Mary does not yet recognize who this is before her. Only when he calls her by name, "Mary," does she recognize him. An indication that even when we may not know or recognize the Risen One, he knows us. Even if we may not know or recognize him, he knows us and calls us each by name. He invites each of us by name to follow him in this new life post-resurrection.

What follows is a tender moment of reunion between Mary and her beloved friend and teacher. We don't know what exactly transpires between the two, but Jesus cautions her, "Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father." Of course, theologians have attempted to speculate what deeper meaning this statement might have had. Although anyone who has been reunited with a loved one can understand. Mary would have naturally wanted to hold on to Jesus, to stay with him. She had lost him a couple of days before, and against all hope, had gotten him back. Of course she wanted to hold on and not let him go. But Jesus' saying "do not hold on to me" does not so much imply that Mary holding on to Jesus would inhibit him from doing what he was destined for—for his ascension. Rather, this is more about Mary needing to let go of Jesus so she can get on with the work SHE is destined for. To go proclaim the Risen Lord. To share her experience and to let others know that Christ had indeed been raised as he told them.

Which is exactly what she does. Undoubtedly with reluctance, she leaves Jesus and announces to the disciples, "I have seen the Lord." The first proclamation of the Risen Lord. The first witness to the good news of the resurrection and impending ascension. Words that have earned Mary Magdalene the title of "Apostle to the Apostles." Serving as a model for the rest of us. To be open to meeting the Risen Christ when he comes to us—regardless of who we may be—and calls us by name. And that we likewise are to be open to sharing our own experiences of the Risen One so that others may similarly come to believe. That others may come to be share in this new life post-resurrection.

Our first reading from the Acts of the Apostles recounts the story of the first Gentile, the first non-Jewish, converts to the Christian faith. Cornelius, a Roman centurion, and his family. The backstory is a fascinating one—one we don't have time to go into here. But suffice it to say, it is not just about Cornelius' conversion, but also Peter's conversion in his understanding of what it means to truly follow the Risen Christ. That Peter comes to recognize, as he says "that God shows no partiality." That God welcomes all into this new life post-resurrection. That God welcomes all into the Body of Christ, the family of God. Regardless of who they are. In this case,

even a member of the imperial occupying forces that have oppressed the Jewish people. Who have oppressed God's Chosen People. And yet, Christ's death on the cross—at the hands of those same Roman forces—and his subsequent resurrection, was not just for the select few that were God's Chosen. Through the actions of Good Friday and Easter Day, God demonstrated that his love, that the saving act of Christ's death and resurrection, that the forgiveness of sins and new life are for all people. For ALL people. That all are invited and welcomed into this new life post-resurrection.

Our second reading from the First Letter to the Corinthians is a reminder to the Church in Corinth of Paul's foundational preaching about the resurrection. Paul began ministering to an eclectic community of converts to the Christian faith approximately 20 years after the events we commemorate this day. The community had its struggles, like all communities. They periodically needed to be reminded of the core teachings of the faith and what it means to be Christians. In the passage we heard today, Paul writes, "I remind you, brothers and sisters, of the good news that I proclaimed to you, which you in turn received, in which also you stand, through which you are also being saved, if you hold firmly to the message that I proclaimed to you."

Paul goes on to give a summary of the Easter event: "For I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures." He goes on to cite the varied encounters others had with the Risen Christ, concluding with a summary of his own conversion story: "Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me. For I am the least of the apostles, unfit 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 has not been in vain." How he, even though he had heard the stories of Christ and his resurrection, initially chose to disregard those stories. In fact, he actively persecuted—arrested, and even condoned the death of—those who believed those stories, those who chose to follow the Risen Christ. Despite all this, the Risen Christ came to Paul and invited him to follow him. An experience that was so overwhelming, Paul had a change of heart, a change in his perspective. To become one of those whom he had previously condemned and persecuted. He chose to proclaim the reality of the Risen One. Although not to his fellow Jews but to Gentiles. To those he previously considered to be "other."

Paul's writing to the Corinthians exemplifies once again how God invites all people into his loving embrace. How the Risen Christ invites all people into this new life post-resurrection. Even those who might have once actively denied this reality. In telling his own story, Paul is, once again, reminding the Corinthians of who they are and what it means to be followers of the Risen Christ. Sometimes, we all need such reminders. Which is part of why the Church exists as an institution. To provide those occasional—okay, those ongoing—reminders of who we are and whose we are. Of what it means to be those invited into this new life post-resurrection.

On this Easter Day, we stand shoulder-to-shoulder with others who, like us, rejoice at the good news of the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. As such, this day is not just about rejoicing and celebrating Christ's victory over sin and death. This day is not just about rejoicing and celebrating God's unbounded love demonstrated through our forgiveness and the promise of

new and eternal life in him. This day is also about celebrating and rejoicing in the fact that ALL, regardless of who they may be, are invited into this new life post-resurrection. That all are welcomed into this new life post-resurrection, unconditionally.

Alleluia! Christ is risen!

*The Lord is risen indeed! Alleluia!*