

**Message Delivered at Christ Church
Easter Day 2009
TEXTS: Isaiah 25:6-9; Mark 16:1-8
Delivered by Paul A. Johnson**

Happy Easter, everybody. This is the day the Lord has made. We're going to rejoice and be glad in it! It's a Happy Day!

Here's why--because the shadow of death that covers all people has been taken away; the power of fear has been vanquished; and the kingdom of God has proven itself greater than the kings of this earth; and we're the ones privileged to pass on the blessing...

It's Easter Day, and hope wakes up this morning as sure as the sun rises. All around the world today, Christians of every stripe gather to proclaim what we've said a bunch of times already this morning: "Alleluia! Christ is Risen!" In big churches and small churches; inside and outside; where the faithful can worship boldly, and where our brothers and sisters can worship only in secret.

People of different colors and races; children and adults; Baptists, and Catholics, and Episcopalians, and all the rest. Our Orthodox friends will come along next week. But today, there will be celebrations everywhere, among all peoples. Most of the words said in most of the celebrations today we wouldn't understand...except, maybe this one: "Hallelujah." That one we'd recognize in any language...

"Hallelujah" is a word that means, most literally, "praise God." "Hallel" is Hebrew for praise. "Jah" comes from "Yahweh." There are seven different words for "praise" in Hebrew because there are different ways for us to praise. Sometimes the way to praise God is in quiet and on our knees. Sometimes, it's standing still with our hands outstretched. But "Hallel" praise is let-out-all-the-stops; shout-from-the-rooftops; dance-in-the-streets; make-a-joyful-noise; be-a-little-bit-crazy kind of praise.

Because the news is that good. For everybody. Today and always, the news is that good. Christ is alive, and the love and life of God prevails.

It is, of course, an odd beginning to that declaration. Three women whose love for Jesus exceeds their faith in him go to his tomb. We know they loved him immensely because they showed up even though they have no idea how that stone will ever be moved. They may never get to that body. But still they show up. That's how much they love him.

But we know they really didn't believe all that Jesus said about himself because they show up to prepare a corpse for burial, not celebrate a resurrection. You don't bring spices to dress a body if you think the one who is dead has been raised. You bring spices to dress a body because you're convinced he's still dead.

If you ever wonder about your faith; if you ever wonder whether your trust in the Lord is enough; if you are sitting here in worship, but aren't sure you really believe; or if you're just in one of those places today where it seems so

hard...take heart that it is to these three women who weren't sure and didn't quite fully believe that the Good News came first.

And when the man explains to them why there's no body there...that God raised him, just the way Jesus said he would...you'll notice they don't shout "Hallelujah!" They don't skip off to meet Jesus in Galilee with the others. They don't run to spread the news like they're told to. They just run away...literally, they abandon the place of the empty tomb the way the others abandoned Jesus at the cross. They're fearful. So they don't do what they're told to do. I guess, maybe they go home, instead. If we have ever been afraid and because of our fear chosen not to do something we know how those chosen women felt.

It is a messy beginning—where the characters aren't perfect, and things don't make sense, and the ending isn't at all tidy. Three scared women who don't quite believe and don't do what they're told to do.

And it is to them that God first entrusts the news that Jesus has been raised. God's plan is certainly inscrutable. But that it is **God's** plan and not **ours** is certainly revealed by how the news starts to spread, and who gets to spread it.

And now, God entrusts this news to us...a stone rolled away; an empty tomb; he has been raised; now, go and show it to the world... All of it entrusted to us—and the brothers and sisters beyond this place—as frail and fearful and cowardly as Mary, Mary, and Salome. Just like them. We're the ones who carry the message of the Resurrection.

If, on this Easter Day, you are grieving the loss of someone you love...and that **is** who some of us are today. If you wonder whether this is all there is. I'm here to tell you—again—that death does not get the victory. Jesus is raised, and the same God who raised him raises us. I don't know how; I don't know what it's like; and I can't prove it to you.

But if you gave me a little more time than we have today, I could give several lifetime's worth of evidence that the resurrection and the resurrected life is real—a bunch of others in this congregation today could, also--and that the certitude that life is victorious is like the certitude that eventually spring **will** come and the trees **will** bloom. Death is not something we need fear. And we can say that because of Easter. The bonds are broken; the shadow of the grave is removed; the stone is rolled away; and a heavenly banquet table is set filled with rich foods and well-aged wines...because of Easter.

That's part of the message...

And if on this Easter Day you are fearful—because there are some things that make us afraid right now; you know the litany, and for some of us it is very real—if fear is **messing** with us this day, it need not **possess** us this day; it need not own us.

It says they were afraid and kept quiet. But at some point, they **must** have told somebody...or we wouldn't be here. There wasn't anybody else at the tomb. In other words, at some point they must have decided their fear need not define them. At some point they decided their fear need not determine what they **did**. So they do it. God gave them the courage to take the next step; and we're the evidence. There's a reason this story we heard today begins in the morning. Because it is a **new** day. It is **always** a new day. There is **always** another chance,

there is **always** more promise; what makes us afraid does not govern our lives. That's the economy of the universe that Easter declares.

And that is the message we bear...

And if on this Easter Day you look around and see war, and injustice, and poverty, and slavery, I remind you that the declaration of Easter is that the powers of this world are not the final answer. They may win a battle...they may put a body in a tomb...but they do not keep the body in a tomb...and they do not win the war. It's the Roman government that puts him on the cross. That's what all the Roman governments have done across the ages. What those powers dish are Good Fridays. What God dishes are Easter mornings. The kingdoms of this earth use violence and force to get their way. The kingdom of God uses resurrection and life and love and mercy and grace; and I remind you it is **God's** kingdom that is the coming kingdom.

And that is the message of Easter...

And if, on this Easter Day, we think the Hallelujah stops here; that it is intended to stay only in these four walls; that it is just for us...I want to challenge that assumption this morning...

Jesus was raised for the **whole** world, not just for us. And the man at the tomb tells us to go, the same way he told the women. We take this Good News and live it out the best way we know how—if not forever, at least for this day.

I hope there is blessing for you this day. I hope this morning—in the table, or the music, or maybe the Word—there is grace for you. I hope today is true Sabbath. I hope later on there's a good meal, and then a good walk outside; that the blessing continues all day, for it is a good day to be saying "Hallelujah."

And when we take that walk, let's pass the blessing on to someone else; let's pray a word of blessing over somebody today; actually bless somebody because of Easter; anybody; some complete stranger because probably, they need it. If we feel adventuresome, tell them that you are blessing them and praying for them. Say the words "may the Lord bless you this day" with a smile and see if a little new life doesn't pop into their eyes; and one more person knows the love of God even if they can't name it as the love of God; and see if the day doesn't become even brighter for you.

And if they ask us why, we just tell them that we are a blessed people of blessing, and because we're so let-out-all-the-stops, Hallelujah happy today we just got to pass it on...with no strings attached. The Lord is risen; the shadow of death is removed; fear has lost its power; the kingdom of God has broken into the world through an empty tomb. Blessed like that, how can we not give it away?

Happy Easter, everybody; and blessings to you. Alleluia! The Lord is Risen!