

It may have been a struggle, the past several days, to get ourselves into the right mood for the pain and sorrow of Holy Week, because we already knew that today we would be celebrating. It's resurrection Day, and time for rejoicing. And sure enough, we've had fellowship, we've eaten, and laughed together. We could leave right now- if you weren't waiting so eagerly for the sermon- and it would have been a good day, and a holy day.

No doubt this is the best day on the church's calendar. "A day of light, with no darkness in it," someone once described it. I often wonder what it must have been like for those closest to Jesus to hear the report of his returning, and then to see him. Because it isn't the same for us. For us, resurrection is an old story; we've heard it every year, we are reminded of it every Sunday, and, we hope, it guides the way we live and the ways we respond to events and how we interact with other people. But there is no way we can know the flood of emotions, the highs and the lows the disciples experienced in those few days. But we try.

Churches worship on Maundy Thursday, to remember our Lord's last night and the Last Supper with his followers; we observe Good Friday and maybe can feel some of the suspense and terror of that moment and of his suffering. But we've known

all along that “Sunday’s a-comin,” and so we won’t be brought down to the depths of despair they must have felt. We know ahead of time, great joy and good news are just around the corner.

But for all the surprise and joy the resurrection of Jesus must have given the disciples, it didn’t suddenly answer every question and make everything easy. There were still powerful people trying to silence the message of the Messiah, and trying to squash the news of his reappearing. There was reason still to be afraid, so they hid in an out of the way place in Jerusalem. It wasn’t until weeks later- when the story picks up again in Acts, when the Spirit descends and gives them insight and strength and courage- that they move into the open and speak out. But that’s a story for another time, and a story about the more timid and fearful disciples. For today, we have a tale about the very bravest and most selfless of all the disciples.

Because on the Sunday morning of our story, here are the female disciples of Jesus, defenseless against what might come and hurting from what has already come, but doing their duty to one they loved: they come to the tomb to anoint his body. Was it a dangerous act? Probably so, Jesus had made enemies of the rich and the powerful; and if the gospel accounts are correct, the city was on edge, the terror alert was set on high; and the religious and government officials were

watching closely. But the women- we don't even know most of their names- we don't have back stories for them, and for the most part they are forgotten. After today they will fade into the background and become lesser characters. But this is their finest hour.

Though their time is more than just an hour. While the men are hiding, or finding their way back to the safe house after running away on Thursday night, the women head for the tomb, to mourn and pay their respects and to honor the body of someone they loved. But the women were there all along, with him, as much as they could be: they followed him down from Galilee on his final pilgrimage to Jerusalem; they were there on Friday, at the crucifixion, and saw how it all happened; they stayed until the end and watched Joseph of Arimathea take down Jesus' body from the cross and wrap it in a linen shroud; followed him to the new tomb, and saw how Jesus was laid out inside. And then, they went home and got ready the mixture of herbs and spices and oils they would use to pour and rub on his body. Then, one last note from the final verse of chapter 23, "they rested on the Sabbath day," as the fourth commandment required. They are faithful in every instance: on Friday, seeing the suffering of Jesus and his death, maybe trying to take some of his pain onto themselves; obedient to the Law on Saturday; and on

Sunday morning, making care for someone else override their fear of being noticed or arrested.

And so, they are rewarded for their faith, they are the first ones; they see an empty tomb, two shining men come and stand by them, and they hear the strangest words, that the living Jesus would not remain here in this dead place. And they hear this command, “Remember what he told you.” *Remember*. And then they become the apostles. They hurry back to tell this remarkable story, which sounds to the men of their group like made-up nonsense, like hysterical woman-talk. I can’t help but think, this is male ego, dismissing the improbable account they tell as the imaginings of a few foolish girls with too much time on their hands. But we know by now, that the people we should always believe are those who have proven themselves faithful, who keep on going despite the horrors they have witnessed, or the pain they have suffered. The faithful ones. And in our story, it’s the women who lead the way, and who hear the commandment to remember; the women, who are faithful. They are the examples we should strive to emulate. The men, later on, as the story continues, yes I guess we would want to copy them, too; but then, you just know, that with them, every step of the way, were women. “Behind every great man is a good woman?” Well, just as often, women take the lead. This story

of Easter morning shows exactly that, women leading by faith and fearless perseverance. It's the story of our church, as well.

Which means for us in this congregation, and in all churches, in our community, and in all communities, we must keep on, working to build a sense of fellowship among all people. Where even the nameless, unimportant ones are loved and welcomed; people of both sexes, and all identities, of every color and every nation, and all levels of accomplishment. Where every person can find meaningful work to do- and is valued for doing it, where we are accepted and shown ways to create joyful and hopeful lives. Because the resurrection doesn't just get us ready for heaven; it makes sense of this life, and joins us together- binds us together- in hope and selflessness and compassion, to build kinder relationships and a better world, now. And the faithful women of our passage show us the way.

Sometimes we may forget that resurrection from the dead is not a natural event; we are so used to hearing the story, and so closely do we hold onto it as our hope.

Even though the disciples had been with Jesus every day, and had seen the raising of the widow's son and the little girl, and had heard legends of prophets raising people long ago, and Jesus himself had told them he would be raised after three

days, this was completely unexpected. It would surprise any of us. In human experience, dead means dead. But to the first believers, who saw Jesus and passed down the story, this day meant great joy, and a new hope where none was anticipated, so that the early church would speak in loud rejoicing these words, “Christos anesti!” “Christ is risen!” It is a shout of joy, and repeated down through the ages as the church’s confession in the face of hurt and war and persecution, and change and uncertainty. Let it be our happy cry this day, because if he is truly risen, then we have nothing to fear, and have everything to live for. If he is truly risen, then he has given us the foundation upon which we might begin making a better life for our planet and for one another. That would be our faithful response.