

SET FREE

TEXT: John 20:1-18

Christ is Risen! Christ is risen indeed! This has become the traditional greeting between Christians on Easter morning. Christ is risen! It is probably the one phrase that identifies us as the people of God. Along with “Christ the Savior is born!” it puts our faith out in front, from the birth of the Savior to his resurrection from the tomb. The Christ who came to us mysteriously in the night, has broken free – again in the mystery of the night. Our Easter message to the world is that as Christ has been set free from the bonds of death, so we too are set free from all the bonds that have shackled us. Set free from the chains of this world. Set free from all that would hold us prisoner.

This is the glorious message that comes to us at Easter. But I often wonder if we really understand what this means, not just on Easter Sunday, but in our day to day world of troubles, frustrations and calamities. From what are we set free? And what does this message set us free to do?

We know that Easter means resurrection, and that resurrection means that death is no longer the captive future that we so long believed was to be our fate.

But then Mary Magdalene came to the tomb. It was early on Easter morning and she needed to tend to the anointing of the body of the teacher who had set her free. She had met him in the darkest days of her life, when she fought the demons of mental illness; when she had been called all sorts of names because she had no way of fighting back. Jesus had set her free from the pain and stigma that came from a society that did not understand her despair. Now she was caught up again in despair, which only increased when she saw the entrance to the tomb was open. Despair turned to panic as she realized that the tomb was empty. All she could do was run to tell the disciples that her Lord was gone. She did not realize that he had been set free.

In much the same way my oldest son was set free. After years of fighting the demons of alcohol and drugs, sometime during the night the demons let go of their grip and he was released into death. It was his sister who first realized the depth of this happening, as she quietly said, “he is finally free”. God had said “enough” and had set him free.

Just two weeks ago Stephen Hawking, a man with a brilliant mind in a warped body was set free to fly to those places he had studied for so long. I don't think he ever thought of himself as trapped, but how glorious it must be for him to be set free to move in whatever way he chooses, to move on to new ventures that he never would have imagined before.

As Mary stood in the garden weeping, she felt helpless, hopeless. How often we sit in our garden with the sense that our world has caved in. Quietly, the angel asked, “Why are you weeping?” Mary might well have asked the angel, “Why not? If you're not weeping, you haven't been paying attention”. Don't you read the papers, listen to the radio, watch the evening news? Haven't you noticed? The principalities and powers of evil are running rampant. Sometimes the only choice seems to be to play the world's game. When all hope appears to be lost, what can one do but weep? When you're held captive to technological tyranny, crass consumerism, nationalistic militarism... When you are suffocating in the tombs of corporate advancement, personal achievement, self-gratification... There seems to be no choice left but to join in the world's game – and weep.

Fortunately for Mary, and for us, the story does not end at the tomb. Mary realized she was not helpless. There was something she could do. She moved from weeping to witnessing. “I have seen the Lord!” Mary discovered new purpose, new possibility. The disciples no longer had to play by the old rules. In raising Jesus, God broke the bondage of evil. And so we are set free for life! Set free to imagine the world in a whole new way.

Jesus sets us free to fill our lives with God's love, with Jesus' redemption, with the Holy Spirit's gift of compassion and grace. We are set free to run, as Mary Magdalene did, and to tell the world how Easter has changed our lives from despair to hope, from aimless wandering to focused love and grace and caring for each other.

As Mary ran weeping with joy from the garden to tell Peter and John of the miracle she had witnessed, she was set free to share her joy. She was set free from the darkness that had shadowed her life for so long before she met Jesus. Right then, when Jesus called her name, when she encountered the risen Christ for the first time, she was able to see Jesus for who he was, and it changed everything for her. When she tried to hold on to him, he told her that she must set him free, that it was time for her to let go. It was now her story to tell

We too are set free to share the joy of the resurrected Christ, who comes to us, not just on Easter, but in the dark and light areas of our lives. When the storms of doubt and illness seem to overshadow us, Jesus is there, often unseen, bidding us to come out from the shadows, setting us free from those things that would hold us captive. When we are confronted with resurrection, really, personally confronted, when the resurrected Christ calls our names, everything changes. The good news of resurrection is that Jesus called Mary by her name and offered her the opportunity to follow the living God, out of the dark despair of that morning into new and life-giving light. God called her name, and God calls our names. Jesus is calling our names – you, and you and you and me – calling us to live as if the Gospel matters, calling us to practice resurrection every single day of our lives.

The hope of the resurrection is that this world is not just where Jesus died. This world is where Jesus lives! And because Jesus lives, because God has broken the power of sin and death, we have been set free to live as well. Sometimes that is hard to believe. The principalities and powers of evil often appear to be in control. Some days it is hard to see with eyes of faith. That is why we need the church, so that in those times when our sight is blinded by tears, we can hold on to another's faith. This is why we need the meal

we call The Lord's Supper. The sacraments might seem unreal to us. Eating bits of bread, drinking sips of juice – to a casual observer it would appear a harmless tea party. But when we look with eyes of faith, when we listen with ears of hope, in this bread broken, this cup poured, we discover anew Mary's gospel: I have seen the Lord! When we eat this bread and drink this cup, we dare to imagine a different world, a world not imprisoned by the powers of sin and death, but set free, set free for love, justice, peace.

This is a day to celebrate, to share the victory feast of our God! We have been set free! So even though the tears may be streaming down our cheeks at the atrocities of this world, we can get up from the table and follow our leader, running through the streets, the Pentagon and the Capitol, the board room and the back alleys, thumbing our noses at death. For Christ is risen. Alleluia! Amen.