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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
4/8/2007, Easter Sunday
John 20:1-18

Pastor Christ is risen! Alleluia!
Congregation He is risen indeed! Alleluia!

In the Name of the Father and of the + Son
and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

My text for this morning is that glorious
conversation between Jesus and Mary
Magdalene — an exchange teeming with
excitement and hope for humanity:

¹⁶Jesus saith unto her, Mary... go
to my *brethren*, and say unto them,
I ascend unto my Father, and your
Father; and to my God, and your
God. (John 20:16-17, KJV. My
emphasis.)

One of his disciples had betrayed Jesus,
one had denied him. All, except for the Holy
Women and the Beloved Disciple, had
abandoned him and fled. Yet when he is
resurrected on that first Easter morning, he
leaps to call his disciples “brothers.” They
have not been saints, just people like you and
me, but Christ still counts them friends, even
kin to him.

All you who love humanity, all you whose
hearts are tender toward people, who are able
to delight in their accomplishments and to
grieve at their suffering, let each of us be
happy on Easter morning, for Jesus is willing
to count our human race as brothers, as
sisters, as children of the heavenly Father
along with him.

Long ago, as in prophecy, King David had
sung of the strange, dignity our Maker assigns
to human beings:

³When I consider thy heavens, the
work of thy fingers, the moon and
the stars, which thou hast ordained;

⁴What is man, that thou art mindful
of him? and the son of man, that
thou visitest him?

⁵For thou hast made him a little
lower than the angels, and hast
crowned him with glory and
honour. (Psalm 8:3-8)

Easter is the vindication and strong
establishment of David’s psalm. What high
dignity is granted to humanity that Jesus
Christ, only begotten Son of the Father from
all eternity, should count us friends, even after
he dwelt among us and was treated so roughly
by our race that we killed him. Even so, he
retains his humanity in his resurrection, and he
continues in love toward our kind. He must
see something great in us! He must delight in
us and see great potential in us.

Better dead?

This contrasts so very much with the
opinion that we ourselves sometimes have
concerning our human race. As an example of
the low opinion of ourselves of which we are
capable, I refer to the recent, passing story of
“Knut the Cute.” It’s the story of a polar bear
cub in the Berlin Zoo.

This cub is just as adorable as he can be.
You might have seen pictures of him in the
newspaper or on t.v. The cub was born at the
zoo on December 5th, five months ago, and he
recently made his public debut at the zoo.

Knut, it is said, had already captured the hearts of Berliners through his own video podcast and TV series. Many citizens of the city, including children, were eager to see this cub at the zoo. “We want Knut! We want Knut!” chanted a group of third graders who came to the zoo to see the cub.

The thing about Knut is that he was raised by the zookeepers because his mother rejected him and his brother shortly after their birth. The other cub later died.

Now, here is the illustration I am driving at — the low opinion of humanity we ourselves sometimes have. It turns out that a controversy developed over Cute Knut when an animal activist insisted that the cub would have been better off dead than raised by humans!

Some of you folks of my generation might remember the anti-Communist saying, “Better dead than red!” This animal activist seems to believe, “Better dead than around humans.”

The zoo flatly rejected the idea.

“If you see the little bear, you’ll see it’s stupid to say something like that,” zoo curator Ragnar Kuehne said.

However that animal rights issue might be, at least Easter permits us to say this: Our Maker did not count it unworthy of himself that he should be around humans — indeed that he should become human! Even in his resurrection, he does not lay aside his humanity, as if laying aside a costume, but rises as a man — a man who counts disappointing disciples as his brothers and who is glad to count you and me as his kin, children of the same heavenly Father.

It so happens that there is a passage in the Bible that speaks of the Lord’s people as if they were abandoned infants, like the polar bear cub. Ancient Israel did not practice infanticide, I am quite sure, but other ancient

people did, and Israel seems to have known about such practices, and to have been horrified by them. The ancient Spartans, for example, abandoned newborn babies on the mountainside if they judged them weak.

There is a tender passage in the book of Ezekiel in which the LORD compares Israel to an abandoned baby girl, on whom he had compassion and rescued her. The Lord recalls how helpless Israel was:

⁵No eye pitied you, to do any of these things to you out of compassion for you; but you were cast out on the open field...(Ezekiel 16:5)

But the Lord comes upon the abandoned infant, like the Good Samaritan coming upon the man who has been robbed and beaten and left for dead, and the Lord’s compassion grows warm, for that is his nature, and he says to the child: Live!

⁶“And when I passed by you, and saw you weltering in your blood, I said to you in your blood, ‘Live, and grow up like a plant of the field.’”

Not only that, but when the child has grown, the LORD himself marries her:

yea, I plighted my troth to you and entered into a covenant with you, says the Lord GOD, and you became mine.(Ezekiel 16:8)

Thus, the child abandoned and left in desperation becomes bride to the very King of the Universe. It is as if the polar bear cub is protected and grows up to become governor of the world and the highest of royalty. Good for Knut!

The story of Jesus, which reaches its pinnacle on Easter Sunday, is the story of

God's tender compassion on humanity. That is why I say to you, Come, all ye lovers of humanity, come and rejoice on Easter morning!

For when we were abandoned on the mountainside and were left helpless, with lion and bear and wolf roaming around and drawing near, then our Maker himself drew near and rescued us.

And why do I speak of lion and bear and wolf? Humanity's actual enemies were much more fierce, much more bent on our destruction, for I speak of sin, death, and the devil. On a bad night, you will hear their whisper to this very day, discouraging you, claiming that you are of no account, that your years are passing and that you will have lived in vain.

But when humanity was abandoned on the mountainside, then Jesus Christ did not count his equality with God as something to be grasped (Philippians 2), but set aside his glory and rushed to save us. He fought off the bear, the lion, the wolf — Good Shepherd that he is. He fought off sin, death, and the devil, though it cost him his life. And now, on Easter

morning, he is raised up to eternal life, never to be hampered any more in his protection of us.

Indeed, he has "pledged us his troth" to us through the blessed sacraments of Baptism and Holy Communion. Jesus *sees* something in us that the ancient Spartans and all haughty people could never see: He sees us as precious, worthy of his body and his blood, worthy his last breath, and worthy now of his everlasting life.

If you should need it, he is the One who can get your life back on track. He is the One who will protect you from all your skeptics, replacing their insults and hard words that cause the heart to sink with his tender assurances of love. He is the One who will protect you from the traps and wasted years of life by leading you along paths of righteousness for his name's sake and for your flourishing.

He is risen, and this makes all the difference in life.

To him be the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.

Pastor

Christ is risen! Alleluia!

Congregation

He is risen indeed! Alleluia!