

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

At the start of the sermon, the minister says and the people answer:

☐ Christ is risen! Alleluia!

☑ **He is risen indeed! Alleluia!**

¹But on the first day of the week, at early dawn, they went to the tomb, taking the spices which they had prepared. (Luke 24:1, RSV)

“My, what strange doings these are!” thinks the gardener to himself. Our text from St. Luke does not actually speak of a gardener, but the Easter story in St. John does¹, and in any case, it is natural that there should be a gardener, for that is the way of cemeteries. There is much tending of the ground and trees and bushes to be done. So, let us imagine a gardener to be present and to have noted the women at the tomb of Jesus.

There are at least five women there -- five holy women. Our text gives us some of the names:

¹⁰Now it was Mary Magdalene and Joanna and Mary the mother of James and the other women with them who told this to the apostles; (Luke 24:10, RSV)

So, there were these three by name, plus “the other women.” That’s why I figure there are at least five of them, all told. There’s a little church there at the tomb: holy women who come seeking Jesus. In the preceding chapter, St. Luke tells us that these women had been followers of Jesus from his home territory, Galilee. Brave women, these. They had stayed near enough to Jesus to see him on the cross, when his more famous disciples had abandoned him and fled:

⁴⁸And all the people that came together to that sight, beholding the things which were done, smote their breasts, and returned. ⁴⁹And all his acquaintance, and the women that followed him from Galilee, stood afar off, beholding these things. (Luke 23:48-49, KJV)

In continuing affection for Jesus and loyalty to him, they had accompanied the body of Jesus to the tomb in which Joseph of Arimathea placed his body:

¹ John 20:15

⁵⁰Now there was a man named Joseph from the Jewish town of Arimathea. He was a member of the council, a good and righteous man, ⁵¹who had not consented to their purpose and deed, and he was looking for the kingdom of God. ⁵²This man went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus. ⁵³Then he took it down and wrapped it in a linen shroud, and laid him in a rock-hewn tomb, where no one had ever yet been laid. ⁵⁴It was the day of Preparation, and the sabbath was beginning. ⁵⁵The women who had come with him from Galilee followed, and saw the tomb, and how his body was laid. (Luke 23:50-55, RSV)

The gardener had noticed them then, on Friday night, that awesome Friday when there had been darkness at midday. It was the day of the three crucifixions. These women from Galilee had accompanied the body of one of those poor crucified malefactors - someone named Jesus - to the tomb. They had seen the tomb in which he was laid. That's how the gardener knows that these women who have gathered this morning, Sunday morning, are not confused about the tomb. They have not gathered at the wrong place. They are not in needless consternation over an error. No, if they seem troubled and confused, as if unable to find the body of Jesus, it cannot be that they have simply come to the wrong tomb, because they were already here. They know the place where this Jesus was laid. If they seem troubled now, the cause of their perplexity cannot be that they've come to the wrong place.

Truth be told, this gardener is a bit perplexed too. For one thing, he sees the gathering of the five holy women off in the distance, but he seems to behold something else too, something radiant. Though the morning sun is shining, there seems to be two points of light in the midst of those women, two figures of light vying with the light of the sun itself. They seem to be two men "in dazzling apparel." Why, no fuller on earth could produce robes so white as these! These radiant beings are speaking with the women. "I must go too," thinks the gardener to himself. "I must enquire about these things, for I sense that something unusual is afoot, something spectacular!"

So, he goes over and speaks to the women. The angels are gone. The women too will soon be gone, for they are on their way in excitement to tell some news to the disciples of this man, Jesus.

He asks the women what excites them so, and they give an amazing answer in reply. They speak of the two angels, the men in dazzling garments. They report on the soul-searching question the angels have asked. It is a question overflowing with hope, bursting with excitement. The angels had asked them about "the living":

And as they were afraid, and bowed down their faces to the earth, they said unto them, Why seek ye *the living* among *the dead*? (Luke 24:5, KJV)

That Jesus had been dead, they did not doubt, much to their sorrow. They had seen his crucifixion. They had heard the hammer blows of the spikes into his flesh. They had heard his last words, entrusting himself to God:

⁴⁶And when Jesus had cried with a loud voice, he said, Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit: and having said thus, he gave up the ghost. (Luke 23:46, KJV)

They had witnessed the falling of his head upon his chest, the way his limbs lay limp. They had flinched when the soldier had thrust his spear into the side of Jesus angling up toward the heart. They had flinched, but Jesus had not, for he was dead. He was cold dead. They remember his skin was so very pale, so very white from pain and from the draining of the blood away from his face and chest, settling in his legs. They could not get the image of that red-on-white out of their minds, the blood of the thorns on the poor pale face of their dead Lord.

Oh! That he was dead, they knew. It was a society that did not hide death away. They were well-acquainted with death.

Furthermore, they knew that his dead body had been placed in this tomb. Yet he is not here, and the angels have perplexed them with their question about “the living”:

Why seek ye *the living* among *the dead*?

“The living.” What a sweet word! What a wonder it would be if their Jesus should be alive again. What a wonder if the blood should have begun its accustomed flow again, coursed again through the veins and arteries of Jesus. His breath! Suppose it had started to move again in his lungs. Imagine the electrical impulses flowing again throughout his nervous system.² And best of all, imagine his eyes looking upon us again with his look of love and imagine his good words once again flowing from his lips straight into our hearts again. Would not this old world suddenly be good again?

So, I imagine the holy women heading off to tell the disciples about this strange angelic saying about “the living” not being among “the dead,” and about the words of the angels that Jesus had risen from the dead on the third day.

Off they go then, these women, to tell their story to the apostles. But let us linger with the old gardener. In his own way, he cherishes life. That was why he had become a lowly gardener in a cemetery. He loved life so much that he was content to spend his working days tending to the very ground and tombs where

² The sheer physical side of the resurrection, with the restarting of Jesus’s bodily systems -- this is an image I got from Spurgeon, I am quite sure, though I do not now know where.

people lay, as if unwilling to abandon them, but rather to care even for their dead bodies.

And not only that, let us imagine him too to be a devout child of Israel. Let us picture him as kin to old Simeon in the Temple, back when Jesus was but a wee infant.

²⁵And, behold, there was a man in Jerusalem, whose name was Simeon; and the same man was just and devout, waiting for the consolation of Israel: and the Holy Ghost was upon him. ²⁶And it was revealed unto him by the Holy Ghost, that he should not see death, before he had seen the Lord's Christ. (Luke 2:25-26, KJV)

If this be so, then this gardener is someone with the Bible rattling around in his head and in his heart. He waits, as old Simeon had waited. He waits for the consolation of Israel. He waits and hopes for the fulfillment of ancient promises.

In fact, there is something about this particular morning, with the two angels in radiant garments and their word to not expect the living to be among the dead, that puts him in mind of one our Bible Lessons for this day, Easter Sunday. The old promise is found in Isaiah Chapter 65:

¹⁷...I am about to create new heavens and a new earth; the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind... ¹⁹I will rejoice in Jerusalem, and delight in my people; no more shall the sound of weeping be heard in it, or the cry of distress. ²⁰No more shall there be in it an infant that lives but a few days, or an old person who does not live out a lifetime... ²⁴Before they call I will answer, while they are yet speaking I will hear. ²⁵The wolf and the lamb shall feed together, the lion shall eat straw like the ox; but the serpent--its food shall be dust! They shall not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain, says the LORD. (Isaiah 65:17-25, NRSV)

And once the gardener starts down this path of remembering the ancient promises of Isaiah, it is not long before he recalls one of the promises that seems the perfect one if what the angels say is true, that this Jesus is not dead, but is raised to life. That old promise goes like this:

⁷And he will destroy in this mountain the face of the covering cast over all people, and the vail that is spread over all nations. ⁸He will swallow up death in victory; and the Lord GOD will wipe away tears from off all faces; and the rebuke of his people shall he take away from off all the earth: for the LORD hath spoken it. ⁹And it shall be said in that day, Lo, this is our God; *we have waited for him*, and he will save us: this is the LORD; we have waited for him, we will be glad and rejoice in his salvation. (Isaiah 25:7-9, KJV)

“Could this be the day?” the gardener wonders. “Could this be the day when the Lord begins to ‘wipe away the tears from off all faces’? Look at those holy women. Their tears have certainly been wiped away! Right there at the tomb, their tears have given way to excitement. I do believe that I have witnessed the start of a new day on this old earth. I do believe that I have been in on our Lord’s new creation.”

My dear brothers and sisters in the Lord here at Immanuel Lutheran Church: some of us have made that sad journey to the cemetery. It is indeed a sad journey. Unless our heart is a stick or a stone, it is natural to grieve for our loved ones and to miss them terribly. But my! How much sadder such a journey would be if it were not for that first Easter morning! It is because of the resurrection of Jesus that we can entrust our loved ones into the hands of our Maker. Not a cell of their body shall be lost, not the smallest atom of them shall be left astray. Jesus can do for our loved ones what happened to himself on that first Easter, that life began again in him. Only this time it is life eternal, never to be snatched from him again. And so it will be for us too: eternal life is in the hands of Jesus, and his heart is so gentle and kind that even the very worst of us here, even the very worst of us anywhere on this old globe, has hope in him.

And the visit to the cemetery is but the tip of the iceberg of the good news of Easter. The journey to the cemetery is but the inevitable progression of all of life’s sorrows, which are many, too many, before we reach our end. And for every one of those sorrows, Jesus is risen. He is counting each one, working even now, even this moment to turn it all around for you. Because of Easter, this world is better than it looks. It is much better. Indeed it is on its way to salvation, through the grace and merits of our Lord Jesus Christ, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.

At the end of the sermon, the minister repeats:

P Christ is risen! Alleluia!

C He is risen indeed! Alleluia!