

Pastor Gregory P. Fryer
Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
4/5/2015, Easter Sunday
John 20:1-18

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

☐ Christ is risen! Alleluia!

☑ **He is risen indeed! Alleluia!**

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

³Peter then came out with the other disciple [John], and they went toward the tomb. ⁴They both ran, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first; (John 20:3-4, RSV)

Someday, John, the shoe will be on the other foot. Someday, what happened to slow-footed Peter will also happen to you. You will be outrun. A younger or fitter person will get there first. But because of Easter, that will be alright. Because of Jesus, it is not such a bad thing to become old and slow.

By tradition, St. John the Evangelist, whose statue we have here on the right side of our rear altar... by tradition St. John is “the beloved disciple.” He is the one to whom Jesus entrusted his mother, and he is the one who outran Peter to the tomb. But, in the natural course of things, John one day became old. Then younger and swifter people could outrun him as he outran Peter when he was young.

ST. JEROME

St. Jerome relates a note about St. John in old age. By then, the words of the mighty Evangelist had been reduced to just this simple sermon:

My little children, love one another.¹

His symbol is the eagle. Here, you can see it at the foot of John in our rear altar. John’s symbol is the eagle because of how elevated and how far-seeing his Gospel. But in old age, his words dwindle to these few words about love. And if someday I should slip into Alzheimer’s, I hope that I can retain these same few words:

My little children, love one another.

¹ Richard A. Burrige, *Lectionary Commentary on the Gospels*, page 546.

That would be a fine enough sermon for this old preacher. Jesus has loved you and continues to do so. Jesus has loved me and continues to do so. And always he turns to us and bids us follow his pattern: My little children, love one another.

Sometimes, when we become older, things become more clear. We have had much experience with the world. We have pondered alternatives, we have reckoned with counter-examples, we have contemplated exceptions, we have spent a lifetime trying to choose our words, to be precise, to produce long and complicated enough sentences so that we can take into account the various contingencies of life. But then an old person comes along and simply speaks a few words right from the heart. “My little children, love one another.” Thank God for the old ones who can get to the heart of the Gospel!

MOST OF US GET OUTFRAN

So, in our Gospel story, John outruns Peter to the tomb. That’s a human kind of thing. Most of us get outrun eventually.

When I was a boy, I thought I was the fastest boy around when it came to the sixty-yard dash at the May Day competitions. That’s because I had won that dash in third grade. But in fourth grade another boy — another John — beat me in that dash, which humbled me, which was probably good for me.

A couple weeks ago, Bishop John Bradosky visited our congregation. He joined Carol and me at the parsonage for supper, and we asked him about something we had heard: that a few years back, he had completed the Boston Marathon along with his son. Bishop Bradosky laughed and said, “Yes, I ran with him, for about a foot! Then he left me behind in the dust.” Well, partly that was because his son is a world-class athlete, who zoomed along and did very well in that Marathon. But another big part of the story is simply that the son was young and Bishop Bradosky is getting older. These things happen to us as we get older.

But it’s not so bad. It’s alright because of Jesus. Young or old, fast or slow, he loves us, each one. He is in charge of the universe. And he bids us to love one another:

My little children, love one another.

WE ALL STAND IN NEED OF SUCH LOVE

And we all stand in need of such love. Young or old, fast or slow, it is good news for each of us that Jesus is risen from the grave. The resurrection of Jesus means that this world is much better off than it looks, because it has Jesus fighting on our side, without even death being able to stop him anymore. His convictions, his way of life, his morality, his love, his peace — all of this is going to triumph in the end because no one and nothing on earth can stop him anymore. So, the Easter story is the best and most important story in the world. It is the story of reality. It is our story.

Young or old, fast or slow, you and I are part of this world Jesus died to save, and we each stand in need of this Savior. Some of you people in this congregation might be near the pinnacle of your strength, ready to head off to college, for example, to conquer that world, or ready to be leaders in your vocation, ready to marry and have children, ready for all kinds of adventures in life. But even you young and strong ones need a Savior. It is as Isaiah said long ago:

³⁰Even the youths shall faint and be weary, and the young men shall utterly fall... (Isaiah 40:30, KJV)

Easter is the good news that you young and fast ones have a Savior, even when you become faint and weary and utterly fall.

As for us old ones, the heart-felt prayer of the Psalmist shall certainly be fulfilled:

Now also when I am old and grayheaded, O God, forsake me not... (Psalm 71:18, KJV)

Altogether, each of us, children to old age, have a Savior, thanks to Easter. Because Easter means that Jesus lives to be on our side, and Jesus loves us all.

THE EPISTLES OF JOHN

I think it is interesting to note that in St. John's Gospel, the phrase "little children" occurs only one time. It is in what is called the "Farewell Discourse" of Jesus with his disciples. Jesus is gently trying to prepare them for his death. In Chapter 13, Jesus addresses his disciples with affection:

Little children, yet a little while I am with you. You will seek me; and as I said to the Jews so now I say to you, "Where I am going you cannot come." (John 13:33, RSV)

So, that's early in the story of Jesus, before his death and resurrection. St. John uses that phrase "little children" just this one time.

But in his *Epistles*, later on down the line, St. John uses the phrase "little children" or "my little children" quite often. These are affectionate and uplifting passages. Let me give you a few examples:

My little children, I am writing this to you so that you may not sin; but if any one does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous... (1 John 2:1 RSV)

I am writing to you, *little children*, because your sins are forgiven on account of his name (the name of Jesus). (1 John 2:12, NRSV)

And now, *little children*, abide in him, so that when he appears we may have confidence and not shrink from him in shame at his coming. (1 John 2:28, RSV)

Little children, let us not love in word or speech but in deed and in truth. (1 John 3:18, RSV)

If you were to do a concordance search on the phrase “little children,” you will find a good number of other verses too where St. John addresses his people that way.

It is as if the older St. John gets, the more affectionate he becomes, until at last we reach Jerome’s picture of him as an old man whose preaching is pared down to these few words:

My little children, love one another.

Perhaps this is a pattern you recognize. Like St. John, the older you get, the more simply you sometimes live and the more clearly you see some things. This dawned on me a couple years ago when I was thinking about my Bibles. Suddenly I said to myself, “How many more Bibles am I going to need in my lifetime?” I have lots of Bibles. I have beautiful leather-bound King James Bibles with gold edges on the fine paper. I have mother’s old King James Bible. I have my own King James Bibles in various sizes. I have plenty of modern translations. I take good care of them all. So just how many more Bibles am I going to need in this life of mine? How many more pairs of hiking boots will I need? How many more suits. I already have me a suit. How many more do I need? And so as time goes along, I find myself acquiring fewer things. Life is paring down, becoming simpler.

And if my words themselves should one day be reduced to those few words of old St. John, well, that will be fine. Easter means hope in this world. Jesus means that we can rest in him. And Jesus means that we can afford to pour out our lives in goodness:

My little children, love one another.

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

At the end of the sermon, the minister repeats:

☐ Christ is risen! Alleluia!

☑ **He is risen indeed! Alleluia!**