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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
4/16/2017, Easter Sunday
John 20:1-18

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

- ☐ Christ is risen! Alleluia!
- ☑ He is risen indeed! Alleluia!

My opening text is the message Jesus gives to Mary Magdalene to bring to the disciples. Those disciples! By this time in the story they have made themselves into a disreputable lot. One denied Jesus, one betrayed him, and St. Matthew says that when Jesus was arrested, “Then all the disciples forsook him, and fled” (Matthew 26:56). So they have been a major disappointment to Jesus, in my opinion. And yet, on Easter morning, Jesus sends this tender message to them:

...go to my *brethren* and say to them, I am ascending to my Father and *your* Father, to my God and *your* God. (John 20:17, RSV)

Never before in John’s Gospel had Jesus referred to his disciples as “my brothers.” He has called them “my disciples,” but not the more intimate term, “my brothers.” And, judging by my concordance study, never before had Jesus referred to *his* heavenly Father as *their* heavenly Father. All along Jesus has spoken of *my* Father or *the* Father, but now he speaks to the disciples of *your* Father. They had let him down in his arrest, suffering, and crucifixion, yet on Easter morning, he sends them this most gentle message, speaking of them as brothers.

I know a father who once found himself very frustrated with his four-year-old son. And it was all over a rather trivial matter — an everyday affair of helping to put some clothes on the child. But the father was tired and preoccupied and becoming more and more annoyed with his son, because things were not going along perfectly. And the child knew the father was upset, and then suddenly, the child burst into tears, threw his little arms around the neck of his father, and cried out, “But, Dad, I love you more than anything in heaven or earth!” And that was a stunning thing! Oh, if only we could realize that that is how Almighty God himself loves you and me, like an innocent child who gives his heart away!

When the arms of Jesus were flung up there on the Cross, he embraced us all, though his heart might have been breaking! He took us all in, as if to say,

even to us, “But, all you people here at Immanuel Church, I love you *more* than heaven and earth!

“More than heaven”, because he did not consider his divinity a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself for our sake. And more than earth, because he surrendered everything this earth can offer, even his life, for us! His saying at the Last Supper just a few days earlier had become literally true: he had given his body and blood for his people. And believe me, he wants you and me to be among “his people.”

Such sacrifice was not meant merely for our forgiveness. It is possible to forgive someone and then dismiss them — let ‘em go. Let them proceed in life on their own, while we get on with our own lives, putting the one we’ve forgiven out of mind.

But Almighty God has undertaken something greater than that. Alleluia! Jesus is risen! And when the heavenly Father raised up Jesus of Nazareth, he did it knowing full-well that Jesus gives his heart away to folks, even to sinners. Jesus is the kind of man who is ready to count the likes of you and me as his dear brothers and sisters and friends. In raising up Jesus of Nazareth, the heavenly Father placed himself in the situation where his only begotten Son, Jesus Christ, is continually bringing home his friends and making them part of the family. And that is fine with our Triune God. They are united in their love for our human race.¹

The resurrection of Jesus is not just the brief reappearance of a dead person.² Rather, it is the mighty act of God to vindicate Jesus and his ways, and to *unleash* him again upon earth. God has let loose such love on earth again — such wondrous love. And as Jesus was in the days of his Twelve disciples, so he is today. He wants disciples! He wants you and me! He wants us to walk with him. He wants us to follow his ways of love. He wants us to learn of him and come to him, for he is meek and lowly in heart and we will find rest for our souls with him. (Matthew 11:29).

Jesus was like a refreshing wind blowing through an arid land. Where he went, things became better. The lame one could jump up and dance, the blind could see, the leper could be cleansed, the deaf could hear, the dumb could speak, the crazed could sit down in peace and become good neighbors again. So, *things* became better, and *people* became better too. When fishermen left their nets and followed him, they became fishers of humanity, they became

¹ This scene about the child throwing his arms around the neck of his father and the first few paragraphs (which I’ve changed a bit here and there) come from my sermon for Easter Sunday, April 19, 1992. That is what it is like to be an old preacher: you are tempted to think from time to time that you can take some image from an earlier sermon or some line of reasoning and preach it better this time! Hope so.

² Rutledge, Fleming. *The Crucifixion: Understanding the Death of Jesus Christ* (p. 64). Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.. Kindle Edition.

apostles, and they became a blessing to our earth. By fits and starts, by successes and failures, by loyalties and disloyalties for which they deeply grieved, Christ's disciples nonetheless became better people, for Jesus became the center of their lives and he is a good man!

This is what our risen Jesus wants for you too, and for me. He wants for us to permit him to make us better people. Plenty of people walked away from him in his Galilean days. And we are free in these days granted to us to walk away too. But for the sake of our families, for the sake of our work places, and for the sake of our own souls, let us *not* walk away. Instead, let us draw closer to Jesus by continuing to come to church, as you have done today, by learning of him in the Bible, and by using your precious gifts of mind and imagination to figure out day by day, situation by situation, what it means to be true to Jesus.

For example, as we have heard, the risen Jesus refers to his disciples as "my brothers." He was not speaking of saints. He was speaking of people who had let him down terribly. But he speaks gentle words of peace to them. He calls them "my brothers."

Some of you might have real brothers and sisters from whom you are estranged. Some of you might have real parents and grandparents, even your own children, with whom you have conflicts. You have let them down, or they have let you down. But Jesus calls such ones, "my brothers, my sisters." And he speaks gently to them. To walk with him means that we should do our best to be brotherly to people who have disappointed us, whether at home, in the workplace, or even in the body politic. We need more gentleness on earth akin to that of Jesus.

With Jesus we are safe. With him the disharmony of our lives, like an ill-struck bell, moves back into harmony. With Jesus, the blurry nature of our efforts achieves focus and clarity. With Jesus, we swim more in the true current of the universe toward love.

Recently I have been building my private prayers on Psalm 119. The traditional idea about the Psalms is that they are the prayers of Jesus. When Jesus would spend the night alone on the mountain in prayer, the Psalms give us some insight to his prayers. This seems especially so for a verse I noticed in Psalm 119. Verse 136 goes this way:

My eyes shed streams of tears,
because men do not keep thy law. (Psalm 119:136, RSV)

Why does Jesus cry? Why do his eyes shed "streams of tears?" Well, it is because humanity does not keep the holy law of God. But what is so troubling about that for Jesus? Why does he grieve over human disobedience? I do believe that Jesus weeps for us because he sees the chaos and the hurt that sin brings. He sees the injury in our families, in our jobs, in our land, in our

hearts, and he would spare us from that! Jesus is risen in order that he can walk by our side and lead us into health. With him, we are safe, and so are those around us.

Easter means that Jesus is risen and therefore can throw his arms around our neck and remind us of good things in life. This is the gift of Easter. Our resurrected Jesus gives his heart away to us, oh, so easily — more than we can comprehend in a life time. Let his friendship with us be the center of our lives as we leave this place and go out into a world that needs and awaits the children of God. In the name of our resurrected Saviour Jesus Christ, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.

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☑ He is risen indeed! Alleluia!