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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY  
4/1/2018, Easter Sunday  
John 20:1-18  
Rejoice, All Manner of Folk!

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

P Christ is risen! Alleluia!
C He is risen indeed! Alleluia!

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

Dear friends, I call this sermon, “Rejoice, All Manner of Folk!” It is about the wondrous variety of people the risen Jesus is glad to see. We vary from one another in ways too numerous to count. But if we should all run to Jesus, he is glad to receive each one of us — each and every one.

So, my opening text speaks of Peter and John running to Jesus at different speeds. The passage goes this way:

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

I figure the beloved disciple is fleet of foot. Maybe he is younger than Peter. Maybe he simply has a build that suits him for running. Perhaps he has the heart and respiratory system that could make him a Marathon runner, like some of the people in our congregation, God bless their souls! So, John and Peter both run to the tomb of Jesus. Mary Magdalene has told them that the tomb is empty. So off they dash to see for themselves. They both run, but John runs faster. He gets there first.

Meanwhile, Peter is running along too — probably as fast as his legs will carry him, but he just can’t go that fast, as fast as John. Peter has a career as a fisherman behind him. I picture him as having muscular shoulders and arms from hurling the fishing nets and dragging the nets with their catch. He has strong arms for fishing and rowing, but there is not much space for running on a boat. Not much space for running when you are tethered to your fishing net. So, Peter is not a fast runner. The other disciple gets there first. But this one thing I know: the resurrected Jesus loves them both and is glad to see them both.

It is the same with us too: When we come forward to the Blessed Sacrament this morning, our resurrected Lord Jesus will be glad to see us, each one. Some of us are fast, some slow...
some young, some old
some well-to-do, some poor
some honored, some ignored
some beautiful, some plain
some smart, some regular
some full of energy and plans for the future, some tired.

Some of us might have balance problems as we walk up the center aisle. We will walk rather slowly and carefully. Some are young and could skip up the aisle if they wanted. Some of us might be children or babes in arms. Some might be grey-haired, filled either with gratitude for the past or with regret. But this one thing I can say to us all: We constitute a wonderful variety of people, but Jesus is glad to greet each one of us. He wants us to know, and I am privileged and commissioned to say the words on his behalf, “I did it for you! My body, my blood, I gave them for you!”

It is his good nature! It is what he is like. Let me give you four fairly quick examples of our Lord’s delight in people, and so, his delight in you. I could give you lots of examples in sacred scripture of Jesus welcoming people. But to suggest the variety of people Jesus welcomes, let me speak of these four, two women and two men: an honored teacher of Israel, a shy woman, a grieving woman, and a thief dying on a cross.

First, an honored teacher of Israel: I mean Nicodemus. He is the one who came to Jesus by night, and Jesus told him that he must be born again (John 3). I begin with Nicodemus because there is someone in this world I do not want to overlook—a group of people I do not want to forget at Easter time. I mean the one who is honored and carries much responsibility. Nicodemus was such a one. This is New York City. It is with us as it is in many towns that there are people among us who are respected and carry authority. They are captains of industry or partners in law firms or heads of academic departments or governmental leaders or physicians who mentor younger doctors. There are people in our town who make decisions that affect many other people, sometimes even people across the land. They make their decisions as best they can. Sometimes they have to decide quickly, and they can only pray for God’s mercy that they have not made a mistake, and that if they have made a mistake that the Lord will repair it and turn it around for the good. They make their tough decisions and hope that their colleagues will pick them up where they are weak, and by and large, they are well rewarded for the responsibilities they bear. Nicodemus was that kind of person. He was like a United States Senator or a Supreme Court Justice. He was a BIG DEAL in Israel. So I want to note that when Nicodemus comes to Jesus, our Lord in no wise casts him out. Jesus does not say to Nicodemus, “You do not understand. My movement is only for the poor and downtrodden. My heart is with them. I
have no room for you—a well-to-do leader of society.” It was not so. Rather, Jesus received Nicodemus, lingered with him in conversation, and shared with him one of the most beloved teachings of the whole Bible, John 3:16-17:

16For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life. 17For God sent not his Son into the world to condemn the world; but that the world through him might be saved. (John 3:16, KJV)

This precious saying was spoken to a well-to-do man, an honored man. And in speaking of God’s love for the world and his desire that none should be lost but that all should be saved, we can well imagine that Jesus was looking into the eyes of Nicodemus and would have that man understand that he is included. It is no wonder that as time went by Nicodemus came to love and follow Jesus. Let it be so for us too, whether we are rich or poor, honored or ignored. Let us each one follow Jesus and he will in no wise turn us away.

So that is Nicodemus—a well-to-do man with much going for him in this world. Now let us consider a woman who has a hard time in life. We read of her in Luke Chapter 8. I mean the woman with what must have been an exhausting and weakening flow of blood for twelve years. That is a long time in a human life. St. Luke tells us that she had “spent all her living upon physicians, neither could be healed of any…” (Luke 8:43). That’s how he puts it, “neither could be healed of any.” She has done what she could, she has gone to the physicians, spent all she had, and remains suffering. She is a beaten-down woman, too bashful now to approach Jesus in a forthright way. But, God bless her, she senses that if she can simply touch the hem of his garment, he will be merciful to her, a poor woman. And so it is. Jesus knows about her touch of his garment, he knows that he has healed her, and he publicly blesses her and lets her go in peace.

In our city and in this congregation there are people who have a hard time of it. Their hearts are weak, or they have cancer, or their legs or back or knees hurt terribly. They have become almost prisoners in their apartments, especially if they live in walk-up buildings. There are people who have gone to many doctors, spent much money and time, and are still not much better. In spite of the wonders of modern medicine, there are people in our town who conclude that things just are not going to work out for them. They recognize that they are fighting a losing battle. So it was with this woman with the twelve-year flow of blood. The doctors cannot help her, but our “Great Physician of body and soul” can! He can heal her. She was so beaten down that she could not bring herself to boldly approach Jesus. So Jesus approaches her and blesses her. We are happy on Easter morning because this same Jesus
has conquered death and is bound and determined to come to us too, with healing in his hands and in his words.

Next let us speak of a woman in grief. She has lost her only son. Not only that, but she is a widow (Luke 7). Besides her sorrow, the death of her son leaves her nearly defenseless in a hard world. St. Luke tells us that Jesus approached the bier of the dead man and said these wonderful words to the woman, “weep not.” (Luke 7:13). Weep not! There is much in this world worth weeping over. But Jesus has power over life and death. He raised the man back to life and restored him to his mother. Then her tears were replaced with joy.

Grief touches all manner of humanity, young and old, rich and poor, whatever the usual distinctions. Grief is democratic. There are people in our city who are grieving and there are people in our congregation who do so likewise. This story of Jesus raising up the dead man and giving him to his mother is a story that is quickly told in the Bible. Just a few verses. But it is a story that can really lift our hearts on Easter morning. Easter means that the one who can raise up our loved ones is alive, triumphant over death, an inexhaustible source of life for us!

So that is the grieving widow. We have spoken so far of an honored fellow flourishing in life, of a poor lady struggling to get by, and of a grieving mother. Now let us speak of a wicked man. I mean the thief on the cross. There is no indication that the man is being treated unjustly or that he is a victim of some judicial error. In fact, in St. Luke’s version of the crucifixion story, the man of whom I speak admits that he is receiving but what he deserves. He argues with the other malefactor—the one who is mocking Jesus. He confesses his guilt in these words:

40But the other answering rebuked him, saying, Dost not thou fear God, seeing thou art in the same condemnation?
41And we indeed justly; for we receive the due reward of our deeds: but this man hath done nothing amiss. (Luke 23:40-41, KJV)

In these modern days of violence, including violence in schools, it could make us tremble to think of the wickedness this man might have committed that he should end up being crucified. We are dealing with no saint here. But we’re also dealing with a man who finds himself in the presence of Jesus, and that makes all the difference in the world. Who knows what the Last Judgment shall be like for this thief dying on the cross? St. Paul speaks of that great
judgment as going through a purifying fire, and that does not sound fun. But the one thing we know about this thief dying on the cross is that soon he will be with Jesus in paradise. Jesus promises the man that it shall be so, and Jesus never fails. For this thief on the cross, there was not much time for repentance and amendment of life. He had little time left to improve his act. But Jesus promised him paradise and it shall be so. If Jesus can deal so graciously with this sinner at the end of his life, so our resurrected Jesus can deal graciously and wisely with us. And we will be better men and women, boys and girls, because of it.

You and I, I bet, fit somewhere in this mix. Somewhere, among the honored Nicodemus, the woman with the flow of blood, the grieving mother, and the wretched malefactor dying on a cross... somewhere in there, we belong. Maybe in more than one place. And now we get to get up from our pew and move forward to our resurrected Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament. “Come unto me, all ye that labor and are heavy-laden, and I will give you rest.” So Jesus preached long ago, and so he preaches still. Let us come to him with joy, and let us live for him henceforth, 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!

1 ...each man’s work will become manifest; for the Day will disclose it, because it will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test what sort of work each one has done. 14 If the work which any man has built on the foundation survives, he will receive a reward. 15 If any man’s work is burned up, he will suffer loss, though he himself will be saved, but only as through fire. (1 Corinthians 3:13-15, RSV)