

“The Dance of the Merrymakers”

Jeremiah 31:1-6 • Psalm 118:1-2, 14-24 • Colossians 3:1-4 • Acts 10:34-43 • Matthew 28:1-10

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April 9, 2023

Resurrection of the Lord • Easter Day

So there is this expectation many people have that pastors are supposed to have something *really profound* to say on Easter Sunday. Something *uplifting*, something *inspirational*, something *new* and *insightful*. Ideally, the *best* sermon they have ever given. It puts a lot of pressure on us, you know, coming on the heels of a very busy Holy Week, to face the largest crowd we are likely to see all year, to be expected to have something *that meaningful* to say. Well, here's what I've got: *CHRIST IS RISEN!!!*

There, we're done; we can all go home now! Right? Or ... perhaps ... you want *more*?

Okay. Well, if you want more, we need to take a few steps back. I could stand up here for the next fifteen minutes or so and wax poetically about the meaning of the resurrection and why it matters and so forth. I could pull out some really solid biblical exegesis and some really sound theology, and try to weave together a cogent message that would speak to your minds, but maybe not your hearts. I've done that periodically in the past, on previous Easter Sundays. But honestly, right at the minute, that feels a little *bland*. A little *stale*. Because the reality is that Easter is *personal*. It's not just the grand, cosmic, climactic event in the Gospel story, although it is definitely that. It's also one of the key cornerstones of our *personal* identity as Christians. It is *foundational* for who we are. We wake up every morning knowing that we are deeply and profoundly loved by a God who went *all the way to the grave for us* – and came back! – so that we could live in *his* Way in this life, and live *with* him in the next. That's no small thing. So because Easter is *personal* – well, I need to talk a little bit about *me*.

I had lunch a few weeks ago with some of my most trusted colleagues and friends. These are people I have known for about fifteen years now. We have talked together, laughed together, cried together, prayed together, shared communion together. We've been through a *lot*. Over lunch, one of my colleagues made the comment that seminary *never* prepared us for ministry in today's world. Now, most every pastor I know has long felt that seminary failed to adequately prepare them for the realities of pastoral ministry. But something has shifted in the last few years, something *seismic*. My colleague said something like this: *nothing* in our training prepared us for a global pandemic, or the massive political polarization that exists today, or the widespread, systematic collapse of many churches that is happening in our time. I know far too many churches that are dying, and far too many pastors who are having to go to part-time ministry or retire early, because their congregations just can't make it work financially anymore. Indeed, some of my colleagues and friends are facing that dire situation *right now*, this very year. As my colleague made that comment, all the rest of us at that table were nodding our heads in vigorous agreement. There were six of us there that day. Combined, we have a total of about 150 years' worth of pastoral ministry under our belts. And we all basically feel like we don't know how to do this job anymore. The world has changed *drastically* in a short time. I'm sure

we're not the only profession that is struggling. Teachers, health care workers, I'd wager that virtually anybody who works in the public sector has been feeling similar strains. A recent study at the U of M revealed that about 39% of nurses in Michigan are planning to leave their profession in the next year. We're already facing a shortage of teachers; now we're facing a shortage of health care workers, and clergy are not far behind. It's all just gotten too hard. You know it; I know it; we can *all* feel it.

Now, we have been *very* blessed here at Mason First Presbyterian Church. *Very* blessed. We are on very solid ground. Financially, we're not only stable, we've been able to give *more* money away to needy organizations these past few years than we anticipated. *A lot* more. We have some 20 people standing up here in our choir, week after week, lifting our hearts to God. We're actively ministering to a couple dozen children and youth, twice a week. We've been receiving a steady stream of new visitors lately, many of whom have chosen to stick around, six of whom will be joining the church in a couple weeks. Later this spring we'll be confirming several of our youth. I know *so many churches* who want what we have here. We have been very, *very* blessed. So when I get together with my colleagues, and I hear the very real, painful struggles many of them are facing in their ministry – a shortage of money, no kids, an ailing and often empty building, very hard decisions to make – I sometimes find myself at a loss for what to say. How do I comfort them in their pain and loss, when we've been *so blessed*?

Why do I bring this up on Easter? Well, two reasons. First, you need to know that things are *really good* here. Those of you who are around week after week probably sense that. But it's Easter, so I know there are some people sitting out there today whom I haven't seen since Christmas, and probably won't see again till Christmas, people who choose to come to church only a couple times a year. I'm not trying to lay a guilt trip on you. I just want you to know, *you are missing out on so much*. So much! There is so much more that happens around here that is *really good*, that you don't see if you only show up a couple times a year. This past Friday, our choir moved me to *tears*. They were *that good*. Last month, there was a children's sermon about apples, that was not only a *really great message* for the kids, but it also left us all in stitches. Over the past few weeks we collected 187 pounds of food and donated them to the Mason Food Bank. And me, I try really hard to give you some *solid spiritual meat* every Sunday, not just "Christian fluff." I might not always succeed, but I will say that last week, at least a dozen people thanked me for my sermon, many of them with comments like, "I've been going to church my whole life, and nobody *ever* explained that to me before." I'm not trying to toot my own horn, and I'm sincerely not trying to make anyone feel guilty, but I do want to extend an invitation. This church is blessed, and it is a blessing. God is doing some *amazing* things here. Is what you're doing on Sunday mornings so much more important than what we do here?

The second reason I bring up these blessings is because, well, *Christ is risen!* Seriously. I see here *manifestations of the resurrection life*. The church of Jesus Christ is going through some seismic shifts in these turbulent times. Some congregations are not going to survive. Some beloved church institutions – like our Presbyterian Young Adult Volunteer program – may simply not exist in a couple more years. Seminary enrollment is way down. Some denominations are going through major splits. More and more people are choosing not to identify as "Christian," many of them because of pain or judgment that they have experienced firsthand at a local church. I will freely admit, we are not perfect, none of us are; there is no such thing as a perfect church anywhere on earth, including this one; we are all full of fallible people, and every pastor, including me, sometimes makes mistakes or doesn't handle things as well as we could, regrets them afterwards, and hopefully tries to make amends. There are also times when people in church are just flat-out *mean*. They don't see the hurt they cause, or if they see it, they don't care. Other people come to church with racist or bigoted attitudes, attitudes that have absolutely no place in the church of Jesus Christ. Some people get their

ideology more from the pundits on TV than from the sacred scriptures and the teachings of Jesus Christ. The church can be a messy place, because it's filled with messy and messed-up people – by which I mean, *all of us* – and sometimes people get really, *really* hurt. I walked away from the church when I was a freshman in college, hurting and in pain, and I swore I was *never* going back. God obviously had other plans for my life, and slowly but surely, God brought me back – kicking and screaming, at first. Eventually I got to the point where I could say, “Okay, fine, God, I will do anything you want, except I *will not* become a pastor.” I *meant* it. And, well – you can see where *that* got me!

So my point – my point is this: *Christ is risen!* I see that in real life here. Even if many of our churches are withering on the vine. Even if *this* congregation, which is so richly blessed, is still full of flawed and imperfect people. Even if *none* of us have fully *arrived* at spiritual maturity. See, that's the thing. *None* of us have reached perfection. I haven't, you haven't, *none* of us have. If there's anyone out there who thinks they *have*, if they think there's nothing they need to address in their personal life or their relationships with other people, well, I've got news for you, bud – look back at the scriptures. There's *nobody* in there who is perfect! Every single one of them is flawed! Every single one, except ... Jesus. He's the *only* one. The only one who has reached perfection. The only one who *is* perfection.

Which is why it is so important that we follow him. *Really* follow him. Sit at his feet. *Learn* from him. *Let him teach you. Let him speak into your heart.* He's *alive*, I tell you; he's *alive!* It doesn't matter if you've been coming here your whole life, or if this is your first time ever in church, or if you pop in and out with a great deal of irregularity. *Jesus has things he is trying to say to you.* A *lot* of things, really. Some of them may be hard to hear. Some may need to be studied, digested, processed, explained, interpreted. What do you think I'm trying to do up here every week? Shoot the breeze?

One other thing you need to know about me. I spend *hours* each week in my Bible and in prayer. Literally, *hours*. It's pretty much the first thing I do most every morning, before the sun comes up, and I'm often at it for a *quite* a while. Almost every day, I hear little messages about things I need to do, either here at the church, or in my personal life. Some of them are quick and simple. Others require changes that are *really hard*. If you're reading a devotional, and reading it doesn't result in you hearing little messages from God about changes you need to make in your personal life, then you need to find a better one. Your devotional shouldn't be *telling you* what to do. It should be creating space for *God* to tell you what to do. If your devotional isn't doing that, *chuck it* and find a different one!

Christ is risen. And the risen Christ calls us to *new life*. Paul writes: “If you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on the things that are above, not on the things that are on earth.” That's what I try to do in the mornings. God shows me what I need to do to experience new life. It's what keeps me going. Truly.

What happens when actively pursue that *new life*? When we truly *follow* the risen Christ? Here's how Jeremiah describes it: “I will build you, and you shall be built, O virgin Israel! Again you shall adorn yourself with your tambourines and go forth in the dance of the merry-makers.” God wants to take our lives – however broken and battered we may be – God wants to take our lives, and *lead us* to joy and gladness. To give us *tambourines*. To inspire us to *dance* ... again, or for the very first time.

It's Easter. Christ is risen! And so are we – when we actively seek that new life, *seek the things that are above*. That's a long process that requires hard work. The ones who do the work will find *joy*. They will raise their tambourines. They will join the dance of the merry-makers. *Christ is risen!*

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