

A Sermon for Easter Day, March 23, 2008
Immanuel Episcopal Church, Hanover County, Virginia
by The Reverend David Knight, Interim Rector

This is the feast of victory for our God.
Alleluia, alleluia, alleluia!

The angel said to the women, “Do not be afraid; I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. He is not here; for he has been raised, as he said. Come. see the place where he lay. Then go quickly and tell his disciples...”

How different that first Easter was for those who made their way to the tomb where the body of Jesus had been placed after it was taken down from the cross on that Friday afternoon. We now know what the women could not have known. We have now experienced what they could not have experienced. We now believe what they could not have begun to imagine. They went to the tomb with heavy hearts to grieve and then to prepare the body of Jesus for its proper burial. We come here today and the spirit of the risen Jesus permeates this sacred space as we sing

The powers of death have done their worst,
but Christ their legions hath dispersed;
let shout of holy joy outburst. Alleluia!

But how different, how very different it was for Mary Magdalene and the other Mary on that day after the crucifixion. They did not know, they could not know what had happened. Their hearts were filled with grief over the death of the one whom they loved, just as are hearts become filled with grief when someone we love has died. The joy that fills this day for us did not enter their minds and hearts because they were in the midst of unbearable grief. We have reason to believe that it was Mary Magdalene who got to the tomb first. Her whole world had crumbled. She had witnessed the cruel execution of the one in whom she had placed her trust and hope. In John's Gospel we see her running to Simon Peter and the other disciple crying out, “They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him.” But then, as we heard in the Gospel just now, an angel of the Lord who seemed to descend from above met the women in their grief. The angel said, “Do not be afraid... He is not here; for he has been raised...” So they left the tomb quickly and with great joy, and ran to tell his disciples. We have no way of knowing, but we can only imagine that it took a while for the reality of the Resurrection to set in. We can only imagine that the angel of the Lord continued to minister to them.

That angel of the Lord who brought hope to the women on that day has been there to minister to countless souls for who the hope of the resurrection has finally become a reality in their lives. Here we are at Immanuel some 2000 years later even though Easter seems a bit early this year. We sing the joyful Easter hymns. We hear the story of the Resurrection once again. We are dressed in a mood of celebration. At the same time, however, we bring who we are and what we have experienced in life to this Easter celebration. WE bring our joys, of course, yet we, like the women at the tomb on that day, bring our sorrows as well. We bring our losses. Perhaps it is the loss of a loved one. It could be a recent loss. It could be a loss that took place years ago yet which still leaves an emptiness within us. Perhaps we are bringing our disappointments. Perhaps we, like Jesus himself, bear the wounds of pain that have been afflicted upon us by others, or even the guilt caused by the pain we have afflicted upon others.

Perhaps we bring the feelings of loss that are the result of physical ailments.

We bring all that we are, all that has happened and is happening to us to our Easter celebration today. And who is here to meet us where we are at this moment? It is the same angel of the Lord who met the women at the tomb of Jesus. That angel of the Lord is the Risen Jesus himself. We come here today for as many reasons as there are people here. But a common thread that brings us together is that you and I are looking for hope in the midst of all that life brings, and there is something that compels us to believe in the Resurrection, if even we cannot fully comprehend it. It is the angel of the Lord who continues to minister to you and to me, and to all who face life's joy and sorrow. It is the angel of the Lord who gives us glimpses of hope when we need it most. It is the angel of the Lord who says to us as he said to the women at the empty tomb, "Do not be afraid... He is not here. He has been raised..." Like those at the tomb, you and I have the risen Jesus who understands. You and I today, and in the days to come can place all that we are at the feet of Jesus. We can place our joys at his feet and rejoice. We can place our grief at his feet and know that not only are we not alone, but that hope will come once again, and that you and I need not be afraid.

That the resurrection happened is at the core of our faith. How the resurrection occurred is a sacred mystery. But it happened and we are here today to give our thanks and to hear his voice empowering us to live our lives in such a way that we too can be to one another vessels of hope. The angel said to the women, "Do not be afraid; I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. He is not here; for he has been raised, as he said. Come. see the place where he lay. Then go quickly and tell his disciples..." for indeed

The powers of death have done their worst,
but Christ their legions hath dispersed;
let shout of holy joy outburst. Alleluia!

And now, in the assurance of eternal life given at Baptism, let us stand and proclaim our faith as we say together,

We believe...