

“7 For Life”

Pastor Ed Harkey

Easter 2023

TLC Keene, NH

[OPENING SLIDE]**“Better than Words!”¹**

Then Simon Peter came, following [John], and went into the tomb. He saw the linen cloths lying there, and the face cloth, which had been on Jesus' head, not lying with the linen cloths but folded up in a place by itself. Then [John], who had reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed.” (John 20:6-8)

MAIN THOUGHT:

From the recesses of a cavernous crypt resounds an exact and enduring Word: “He is risen! Hallelujah!” Such a Word resounds and reverberates, reflecting salvation and hope. As the redeemed of Jesus now live in the light of these Words, our own “Hallelujahs” now take flight. “Christ is risen! [He is risen, indeed!] Hallelujah!”

OPENING PRAYER:

“Christ, who broke the bonds of death; You could not wait! Before the sun had even risen, while the birds were still silent, in the early morning darkness, as the world still slept You shook the foundations of the earth [and of our lives], and rose, triumphant, from the grave. ... May we so rise, each morning, with such anxious anticipation of all that You will accomplish through Your true disciples! May we live, each day, in resurrection joy!” Amen.

INTRODUCTION [Skit Guys: “Peter and John”]

The story is told of a college drama group that presented a play in which one character would stand on a trap door and announce, “I descend into hell.” A stagehand below would then pull on a rope, the trapdoor would spring, and the actor would drop from view. The play was well received. However, when the actor playing the part became ill, another actor, who was a bit heavier, took his place.

The dramatic moment came. The new actor announced, “I descend into hell!”

At which point the stagehand pulled the rope, and the actor began his plunge, only to find himself hopelessly stuck in the opening. No amount of tugging on the rope could make him descend. At which point, some student from the balcony jumped up and shouted: “Hallelujah! Hell is full!” 😊

¹ Portions of this sermon are adapted from Arden Mead, *Words that Last Forever: A Series of Special Services for Lent*, Creative Communications for the Parish © 2010, 264-269

[SLIDE #2] So the theme of the day, captured in the ancient greeting: [*Christos anesti; aleithos anesti!*] “Christ is risen, indeed! **Hallelujah!**” A fitting final Word to our meditations throughout this past Lenten season – on Jesus’ seven last/lasting words from the cross. Where, in truth, they aren’t really Jesus’ *last* words. He will still have plenty to say before He ascends to the Father ... with each Word, like “Hallelujah” – our Lord inspires one kind of response or another to His resurrection from the dead.

[SLIDE # 3] For some, RATIONALISM kicks in – resurrections, after all, aren’t reasonable. For others it might be DOUBT, or one step removed, outright UNBELIEF, where, even Jesus’ own followers expressed both of these.

[SLIDE #4] For others, it’s INDIFFERENCE ... or maybe even IGNORANCE [the distinct possibility some folks just haven’t heard].

Most? They will simply MINIMIZE the resurrection, adorning the day with bunnies & “peeps” – as a portal to spring, or something else pagan.

[SLIDE #5] Still for others, Jesus’ resurrection will be met with outright HOSTILITY, where the 2nd century church Father, Justin Martyr, reported 150 years later, religious leaders were still fanning out across the Roman Empire, with the story that the disciples had stolen Jesus’ body [which, if the tomb wasn’t empty, why go to all the trouble?]

What inspires our Lord’s “hallelujah” in you? Yes, why do you sing these hymns of joy? Why adorn the sanctuary of God in such color?

“Hallelujah!” In either Hebrew/Greek, it’s the same: “Praise the Lord!”

[SLIDE #6] Yes, “Hallelujah!” Easter rings out!

“Yes,” God cries, and the earth trembles.

“Yes,” God cries, and Caesar’s sepulchral seal is shattered.

“Yes,” God cries, and all of the questions, asked in wavering whispers with trembling lips and downcast eyes, are forever answered in that one glorious, resounding “Yes.”

“Will there be mercy?”

“Yes!”

“Will my debt be paid?”

“Yes!”

“Is the dreadful doom of death now declared ‘dead’?”

“Yes! Yes!” And again, “Yes!” (Based on a prayer from Mead, *Creative Communications for the Parish*)

[SLIDE #7] Our “*Hallelujahs!*” resound. For the cross was not the end, but the beginning. The past is finished, forgiven, “crucified, dead and buried” – but (and this is best part) *only* to make way for God’s original plan, His new beginning.

And yet, how often, the Hallelujah chorus is not so readily sung ... muted, as it were, for life at times in this world. A thought at which musical artist Amy Grant arrives in her soulful song *Better than a Hallelujah*:

*We pour out our miseries, God just hears a melody.
Beautiful, the mess we are, the honest cries of breaking hearts
Are better than a Hallelujah.*

Wherein, just as the Savior’s Words had deep meaning for those on that first Good Friday, they resonate still with us ... in our need for forgiveness, our sometimes longing for compassion and companionship, our feelings of abandonment or emotional thirst.

[SLIDE #8] Yes, what is it that mutes your own “hallelujahs” this day?

For Mary Magdalene, it is her grief, and the deep sense of loss. She had been at the cross. She had seen the worst that sin could do to her Lord. What grieves *you* today?

Or for Peter, locked up tight in his shame, still nursing the open wound from his moment of weakness. What sin or shame do *you* bear this day? Where have *you* stumbled? What crisis seeks to mute *your* own assurance of Christ’s love?

Child of God, Jesus would meet you there. Indeed, He will meet you *wherever* you may be on this Easter Day.

[SLIDE #9] Yes, child of God, rejoice! He is risen, indeed! Hallelujah!

For on this day He rose. Pilate’s watch and seal have been broken. The tomb is empty, save only the shroud and linen bands which enfolded Him. To be sure, “our hearts may be heavy with pain and torn with the memory of open graves, but the garden is still empty. There is no dead Jesus where they laid him. There is nothing, but an empty grave. Wherein, as it made all the difference then, it makes all the difference today – all the difference to doubt and fear, to pain and tears, and all the difference to eternity.
(Adapted from Kretzmann, *Hosanna in the Whirlwind*, 86-87)

And so, our joyful response!

Yes, how might our Easter “hallelujah” be expressed in the lives of the Lord’s redeemed?

One of my favorite commentaries puts it this way: celebrate the day by way of “Petrine boldness ... Johannine sublimity [and] Magdalenic fidelity” (Bruner, Matthew, 2:1073f)

Huh?! [C’mon Pastor Ed, it’s early!]

OK, simply respond as each of the characters in our Gospel reading respond:

† [SLIDE #10] Like Peter and John, rushing headlong into the grace of God, captured here in Eugène Burnand’s painting [that some of you read about it in your *Daily Bread* devotion yesterday]. Yes, dare this day [with the aged Peter] to believe the Lord’s Word of forgiveness. Anticipate with John, that it is most certainly true, as you are transported into the certainty of faith. “*Kiss the Son.*” Commune with Him.

† [SLIDE #11] Or, with Mary Magdalene, in the verses following our text this morning, come to a deeper devotion – more than just for a day – to your Savior and Lord. Worship Him. Sense Him. Share Him. Serve Him.

Yes, “what gain is it to celebrate [this season, this Day] unless you [intend to] imitate Him Whom you worship; unless you cross over from Egypt, that is, from the darkness of evil-doing to the light of virtue, and from the love of this world to the love of your heavenly home?” (Ambrose, *The Sunday of the Resurrection*)

“*Taste and see that the Lord is good ... that His mercy endures forever.*”

[SLIDE #12] You have now heard and seen it for yourself. Having done so, now go. In your going, tell!

CONCLUSION

[SLIDE #13] Famous last words!

Some are so well chosen that they have been preserved and remembered, quoted and repeated time and time again.

Here are a couple of examples ...

Nostradamus: “Tomorrow, at sunrise, I shall no longer be here.” He predicted correctly.

Marie Antoinette, accidentally stepping on the foot of her executioner, said:
“Pardonnez-moi, monsieur.”

The legendary Harriet Tubman sang: “Swing low, sweet chariot.”

Resonating with yours truly, blues guitarist Leadbelly said, “Doctor, if I put this here guitar down now, I ain’t never gonna wake up.” 😊 (*Last Words of Notable People: Final Words of More than 3500 Noteworthy People throughout History* <https://www.mentalfloss.com/article/58534/64-people-and-their-famous-last-words>)

Let not just the seven Words of Christ from the cross ring out and into our lives.
Rather, let all of His Words do so ... above all, His resurrection Word!

[SLIDE #14] “Hallelujah!” Easter shouts.

“Hallelujah!” God’s redeemed reply.

“Hallelujah!” echo the hosts of heaven.

“Hallelujah!” we shall cry, redeemed, renewed, restored forever and ever, and now ... rejoicing!

“Hallelujah!” A Word that lasts forever.

[SLIDE #15] For Easter is God’s great and final Word that GOOD FRIDAY WORKED! – That all of our Lord’s Words are not the final word after all, for a people who now live and proclaim them to eternity!

Christ is risen, indeed! Hallelujah!

Amen.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES:

Musical Adaptations: Beethoven, Dvorak, **Dubois**, Gounod, **Haydn**, **Skylark**

Literary Adaptations: Gerard Manley Hopkins – “7 Sonnets”