

Christ is risen! Easter is a time of rejoicing. It is filled with signs of joy, things like family and the fresh blossoms of spring. And it is that time of year when we celebrate our savior's victory over death. Christ is risen!

But daily we confront conflict and endless frustrations: Our health is poor, our work is bad, a relationship is on the rocks, the car won't start, and on and on. So we savor times like this when we can forget even for a moment all our troubles.

This morning, I want to talk about how our Easter joy can be the center of our day-to-day walk with God and with one another, finding ourselves in the very heart of the resurrected Christ.

OPENING PRAYER

LUKE 24:1-12

But on the first day of the week, at early dawn, they went to the tomb, taking the spices they had prepared. And they found the stone rolled away from the tomb, but when they went in they did not find the body of the Lord Jesus. While they were perplexed about this, behold, two men stood by them in dazzling apparel. And as they were frightened and bowed their faces to the ground, the men said to them, "Why do you seek the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen. Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, that the Son of Man must be delivered into the hands of sinful men and be crucified and on the third day rise." And they remembered his words, and returning from the tomb they told all these things to the eleven and to all the rest. Now it was Mary Magdalene and Joanna and Mary the mother of James and the other women with them who told these things to the apostles, but these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them. But Peter rose and ran to the tomb; stooping and looking in, he saw the linen cloths by themselves; and he went home marveling at what had happened.

In the Gospel, we read about how there were many women who went to Jesus' tomb to venerate his body for burial. But the most striking part of this account is how Mary Magdalene is mentioned first. In fact, as we read in Matthew's account

she was the first person to visit Christ's tomb. Let's let that settle into our hearts for a moment. What was it about Mary's relationship with Jesus that inspired her devotion? Perhaps it was Christ's ministry to her three years earlier.

Remember? Mary Magdalene had been possessed by seven demons, and Jesus delivered her. I don't know what it's like to be possessed by seven demons, but I'm sure it's worse than a bad hair day! Jesus had saved her life, and she was thankful. But let's go deeper. I think there's more to her story than that.

Jesus taught earlier, **Matthew 12:43-45**, "**When the unclean spirit has gone out of a person, it passes through waterless places seeking rest, but finds none.**"⁴⁴ **Then it says, 'I will return to my house from which I came.'** **And when it comes, it finds the house empty, swept, and put in order.**⁴⁵ **Then it goes and brings with it seven other spirits more evil than itself, and they enter and dwell there, and the last state of that person is worse than the first."**

Imagine that you own a home which you rent out. In order to keep the money flowing in and to keep the vandals and vagrants out, you work hard to keep the house occupied as much as possible.

When Jesus said that, "**When the unclean spirit has gone out of a person, it passes through waterless places seeking rest, but finds none. Then it says, 'I will return to my house from which I came,'"** he was saying that one's heart is a spiritual house which is occupied by God or by things which are not God. If one's heart is emptied, it will not remain empty for long.

Some believe Mary Magdalene had been a prostitute, or maybe the anonymous adulteress in another story, or perhaps she had been a medium. Whatever her situation had been, after Christ's ministry to her, she had a clean slate, and it would've been easy enough for her to believe that she could take care of herself the second time around, that she didn't need anyone's help.

But she did not go that route. Instead, she refurnished her heart with the love of Jesus.

When Jesus ministered to Mary Magdalene, he delivered her from the things that had created her crisis. He gave her open heart surgery, a spiritual angioplasty; he

removed everything inside of her that wasn't supposed to be there. And then she chose to follow him, and he filled her with his joy, with his peace, with his love.

My first job out of college was as a youth minister in a church in Oregon. I lived in the basement of a church member, which cost nearly nothing, which was good, because I made nearly nothing.

My couch was a double bed on the floor with a quilt on it. I had a 9-inch black and white TV that sat on a steamer trunk, a.k.a. coffee table. The apartment was dark and sometimes damp, and a little depressing. So if I wanted to get out of the house and go for a spin, I would just jump into my good ole Ford Pinto! You're getting the picture.

One summer a couple from my church asked me to house-sit for them for a couple of weeks. They had the house on the hill complete with pool, jacuzzi, vaulted ceilings, cable TV, antiques, flower gardens, and a kitchen with a nook with a view of a lake. And they let me drive their brand new S-Series Mercedes Benz.

I quickly adapted.

I hadn't done anything to earn this experience. I simply said yes to my church member's offer to housesit and moved in. And my life was instantly transformed. The sense of life in that home had a dazzling effect on my sense of well-being. It was refreshing. Even the gas station attendant treated me special, running over to fill-up the Benz when there were customers at other pumps ahead of me.

I think Mary's experience was similar to mine, but better! Without contributing anything, Mary received a replacement of what was dark and pain-filled in her heart with Jesus' **light, love, and life**. It was free. She said yes, and her life was transformed instantaneously.

Mary's emptiness had been profound, deeper than anyone of us can ever imagine. But Jesus gave her his life, and she became full, full of confidence, full of joy, full of love.

We learn in the Scriptures that upon her conversion, Mary provided for Jesus and his disciples from her own means. Jesus had made her whole and then she shared what she had so that others might also have the opportunity to know Jesus and be made whole too.

From time-to-time someone tells me about how they have problems but they don't want to bother the Man Upstairs.

This sounds very humble and pious, but what if Mary had felt that way? What if she had thought that she was responsible for getting her own house in order before she bothered the Man Upstairs? That would've been like standing at the second story window of your house as it burns down around you, and you holler down to the firemen that you'll be okay because there's plenty of wood and you have a hammer and nails and you'll just build a ladder for yourself. No worries.

No one can deliver himself from anything. We need help. Whether it be fear or heartache, anger or depression, or even evil spirits as was the case for Mary Magdalene, we need Jesus.

Jesus' death on the Cross must've been unbearable for Mary. How could she let him go? In another account of her visit to the tomb, she wept, and an angel asked her, "**why are you weeping?**" And she said to him, "**They have taken away MY Lord**" (John 20:13).

With Jesus' death, Mary must've sensed the demons beckoning her again, the dark shadows from the valley of despair and death rolling in on her.

But then he met her at the empty tomb and he said to her, "**Do not be afraid!**" In that moment Jesus completed his work in her heart, and she would never be afraid again.

Martin Luther said, those who accept the Gospel of this true life, the life of Jesus, as their own life are the Mary Magdalenes. One who desires to be where Jesus is, this is a Mary Magdalene. One who knows he or she will find Jesus in their weakness not in their strength, this is a Mary Magdalene. One who allows Jesus to be God and to take authority in their life, this is a Mary Magdalene.

Just as he did for Mary, our Lord Jesus offers to heal whatever is broken in us, to be our heart surgeon, giving us his own heart to dwell within. Here, in this life in Christ, there is no fear, no shame, and no regret. For our troubles have been wiped away as Jesus' life has become our own.

This is the power of Jesus' resurrection from the dead. He dwells in your heart by virtue of Holy Baptism and he keeps on dwelling there. St. Paul talked about the power of Christ's resurrection in our lives when he wrote, **Colossians 3:1-4: If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. ²Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. ³For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. ⁴When Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.**

Brothers and sisters, you and I have been given Jesus' heart just as Mary Magdalene was. Mary sought out the things of Jesus because she had seen so very clearly that the other things, the things of this world, did not matter to her anymore. Mary had been brought low by evil spirits, but her Lord set her free, raised her up, and he hid her in his own heart. The Lord has done the same for you and me, hiding us in his heart forever.

Christ is risen! (He is risen indeed!)

I don't know where you are at in your relationship with God, but I do know this: The Lord cares about everything you hold in your heart that tears you apart. Friends in Christ, nothing is too great nor too small for him to heal, to make whole.

I also know that Jesus wants to work inside of your heart, delivering you from heartache and depression, rage and hurt feelings, the fear and the turmoil you're experiencing in family and work or school, and he wants to give you a whole new life experience, from the basement apartment to the house on the hill!

And I know that just as Mary found Jesus in her weakness, so too we find him in our weakness, and that just as she was made whole, we too can be made whole. And I know that as she gave thanks and was a blessing to others, we too may give thanks and be a blessing one to another and to our neighbors.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, as we meditate on the Resurrection of Jesus two millennia ago, let us consider the work he's already doing in our hearts today.

Let us fill our minds with thankfulness for everything the Lord has done and is doing on our behalf.

And let us take the opportunity to share this Good News with another person who really needs to hear it, in the name of Jesus. Amen.