

“But on the first day of the week, early in the morning, they came to the tomb ...” (Luke 24:1)

That first day was a New Day, a totally different day than two days earlier. As we gather on this Easter Sunday, we gather for the climactic moment in God’s salvation story! Paradise - eternity with God forever is now offered to all, not only in eternity, but in this very moment to you and to me. Paradise is the final act because the stone was rolled away and the tomb is now empty. Christ is risen! Christ is risen indeed! Alleluia. The agony of the cross, the stench of death does not have the last word; it does not hold us hostage in a hopeless world where Paradise is lost. The message of Easter Sunday is that paradise is found and the abundant life in Christ is offered to all who would believe. We become the Hallelujah chorus as we collectively proclaim, “He is risen indeed! Alleluia!”

In 1799, Napoleon and his great army were camped in the hills just outside of the Austrian village called Feldkirch. The people in the village knew that Napoleon intended to capture the town. They met that night and agreed that as a village they could not defend themselves. Instead, the next morning, they would wave the white flag and surrender to Napoleon. The next day was Easter Sunday, and, as was their custom on Easter, all the church bells in that little town were rung on Easter morning. Upon hearing the loud bells ringing, Napoleon assumed the town was celebrating the impending arrival of the Austrian army. So, he chose not to march into the village and, instead, he and his troops withdrew.

Easter is ringing the bells, declaring victory and a new day! It is like saying, “Your enemies have withdrawn into the hills. They are gone. You have been given victory. Paradise is restored, the white flag of surrender serves to fully embrace the gift of this new day and our new life in Christ. The bells ring out and declare:

“Death has been swallowed up in victory, Where O death is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting? The sting of death is sin and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God who gives us the victory through our Lord, Jesus Christ.” (1 Corinthians 15:54b-57)

Fred Craddock says, “In light of the gospel, the unforgivable sin is to be dead.” We can ring the bell of victory or we can stay in the tomb and remain dead. Is God’s Church in this place filled with zombies or with people who are alive, open to God-infusing paradise into our lives? Why are our churches filled on Easter and empty the following Sunday? This is a new day and the message of Easter offers an invitation for renewal within our Easter Church! Fill the sanctuary next week and be alive in Christ on Monday morning. Paradise is found, not in some ocean resort on the beaches of Hawaii, but in the promise of a new day right here and right now. The bells are ringing and because Jesus lives and is victorious, so we live and victory is ours!

But some would say, “So what? Why does Easter matter? What does this victory mean for my day to day life? How does Easter become more than a religious ritual?

What does it mean to truly live in paradise as resurrection people?" There are (at least) three ways to respond & each are captured in our Gospels.

1. "The women were terrified and bowed their faces to the ground ..." (Luke 24:5)

"Do not be afraid!" There is no phrase more common in all of Scripture than God saying, "Do not be afraid." Fear is the ball and chain of the human condition. Our fears hold us captive, paralyzing us in so many ways. Whether it be the fear of failure, the fear of being vulnerable, the fear of not having enough, or the fear of dying, the stone remains securely placed at our tomb. There is an ancient legend that has the devil pacing back and forth after the resurrection of Jesus. He is upset at his defeat. He is heard muttering, "I may not be able to defeat Jesus, but I can defeat his disciples." Fear keeps us stuck, and it's the devil's way of neutralizing faith and keeping us in our personal tombs. To encounter the risen Christ is to be filled with courage!

2. "But Peter got up and ran to the tomb; stooping to look in ..." (Luke 24:12a)

Don't sit! What do we do with good news? We share it. We can call, text, tweet, email, Facebook post and Instagram it. We can even tell someone in person! The women ran to tell the disciples, Peter ran to verify, and suddenly, with the Son rising, there is a new day—paradise lost has been found. Our community, our nation and our world need the Church to get moving. Easter is not OK news; it is the best news. The bells that ring call us to action. In our homes, in our workplaces, in our schools, we must not sit in weak resignation, but rise up and boldly proclaim that Christ is risen in our words and in our faith active in love. Now is the time!

3. "... and remember I am with you until the end of the age." (Matthew 28:20b)

Don't stop! Winston Churchill went to speak at Harrow School in London. He shuffled up to the podium, moving slower in his advancing age. He got up to the podium and spoke the following words; "Never, never, never, ever give up!" Churchill then left the stage and went and sat down. In one of shortest speeches on record Churchill captured the courage of faith. To live as Easter people on this day with bells ringing and paradise restored is to have grit and determination to not give up. To never stop "fighting the good fight of faith." We can persevere and we can endure because we do not travel alone. We have a promise from Jesus that he is and will be with us always. The "with-ness" of God is what empowers us to be Easter people no matter what trials and tribulations come our way. When we are tempted to climb back in the tomb, feeling defeating and worn out, the risen Jesus says, "Hold on, don't give up, and don't stop believing and trusting ... for I am with you."

On this Easter, may the bells ring in a new day. May you experience the paradise of God's love, joy, hope and peace. May you live with Easter courage as God's Church and live as people of the resurrection. Easter is true! Paradise lost has been found! How, then, will we live in the light of that promise? That's our question to answer today, tomorrow, and every day that follows. Paradise is found! Christ is risen, indeed! Amen.