

Easter Sunday, 9 April 2023
Saint Aidan's Episcopal Church, Portland OR
The Rev'd Canon Raggs Ragan, Interim Rector

Here we are on Easter morning, full of sunshine and joy. Many of us brought flowers from our gardens to express that joy and to connect our personal worlds to the church. We are blessed in having such lovely natural surroundings here at Saint Aidan's itself so that all of us have a garden in which to commune with God, as Mary Magdalen found the risen Christ in the garden.

This day overflows with celebration and joy, so this morning's readings are filled with joy and revelation.. We tend to think of the prophets as full of woe or scolding and threats, but they are also a source of great hope and rejoicing. This morning Jeremiah showed us God's mercy to the Chosen People in the wilderness and in all times of exile, with 'everlasting love'. Speaking of all the new life and restoration that is promised, the prophet invites them, and us, to 'take our tambourines and go forth in the dance of the merry-makers.' This is a merry, joyful day!

In the Psalm we proclaimed: "On this day the LORD has acted; we will rejoice and be glad in it." Our God has indeed done great things; let us rejoice and be glad in them. This is a text that invites singing and shows up in all kinds of musical settings. I am sure all of us can hear at least one in our hearts.

In Acts we heard about being witnesses to the life and work of Jesus, about being chosen to see and eat with the Risen Lord in order to tell other people about it so that they too could come into relationship with God in Christ. Encountering the Risen Christ is an experience to be shared, not hoarded. Like those first witnesses, we are blessed in order to become a blessing to all people. That invitation to dance with tambourines reminds us that this is not meant to be a quiet, private relationship, but one that shines forth from us to others.

In the Gospel we found Mary Magdalen weeping again, as we saw her at the foot of the cross on Good Friday. Mary's faithfulness and weeping open her to the experience of encountering and recognizing the risen Jesus. This is a valuable thing to remember: our vision can be cleared by tears.

One of the things we learn from all the stories of resurrection appearances is that the risen Christ looks different, and so is hard to recognize. Even people like Mary who had been with Jesus throughout his earthly ministry did not at first recognize him; Peter did not recognize him. This is a whole new life, the resurrected life, life beyond death, life that has harrowed hell and returned, but life filled with hope and love as always, blessing those it touches, always.

It is appropriate that the first recognition of the risen Christ, the first personal encounter, happens in a garden. Christ rose from the ground like all the flowers we brought from our gardens to decorate the cross this morning. Flowers do not look like seeds or tubers or bulbs. If you are an experienced gardener you may know exactly what was planted to give forth a particular bloom, but you know that by experience, not by any visual connection. It seems that Jesus was as changed as the bulbs and seeds. The life is the same, but the appearance is not. So how did they recognize the Risen One? In a variety of ways. Here Mary recognizes the one who calls her by name. It is that direct personal address that cuts through her tears and grief and touches her heart. She recognizes the one who always saw her, even when she was lost in a world of demons, who called her back into human community, and restored her name. She is known – and that being known is familiar and she responds 'Rabbouni' 'My teacher'. She recognizes the one who healed her, the one who included her, the one who taught her, the one who loves her. Not just 'teacher', but '**My** teacher'.

In other resurrection appearances, Christ is recognized most often in sharing food – in the breaking of bread together, the most frequently shared food of the time, which is now the food we share in the Eucharist, – but he is also recognized at a lakeside fish barbecue. Stopping our busyness and eating together can be a great invitation to opening ourselves to recognize God's coming among us, to heal us, to feed us, to welcome us into

the dance. This is what we were doing on Thursday night at our *αγαπη* dinner and will again have the opportunity to do in our Easter potluck today. Stopping and eating together, building community, becoming the Body of Christ. This is something Saint Aidan's does particularly well.

This is a wonderful celebration, but Easter is not a single day. Christmas seems long with a whole 12 days, but Easter is very long – 50 days, rooted in the 50 days from Passover to the Jewish harvest festival of Shavuot, in English called Pentecost (from the Greek of the early Church). In the Jewish tradition the season from Pesach to Shavuoth is a 'week of weeks' (7 7s so 49 days) with the concluding feast on the 50th day.

But we are not called to spend our time tending crops of wheat like the Israelites. We are called to consider the miracle of new life in Christ long and deeply. It takes a long time to live into the remarkable reality of the Risen Christ's time with his followers, to take the experience into our hearts as they did, to become true witnesses who can ourselves incarnate that divine love brought to us for the blessing of the world.

To help us remember that this is a special time with the Risen Christ we have the Paschal Candle, lit last night at the new fire, and appearing to stay lit for the whole 50 days. In earlier centuries the candle was literally never extinguished which contributed to the burning down of many of the wooden churches of Northern Europe, so that now we content ourselves with lighting the candle before people come to worship and not extinguishing it until they have left, reminding us that it burns in our hearts the whole time. Another characteristic of Eastertide is the proliferation of Alleluias, as well as the absence of confessions of sin, as we rejoice in Christ's victory over all that separates us from God. It takes at least 50 days to celebrate all this.

I want to finish with the lovely poem (by Susan Palo Cherwien) which we will hear sung at the offertory. It is a perfect meditation for this glorious day:

In the fair morning, soft sun arising,
bringing spice, expecting death,
We seek the body, sadness and silence,
And hear an angel voice instead:
'Fear not, O people! You seek your Jesus;
God has acted, do not fear.
Seek him in living, seek him in loving,
But in this grave he is not here. Alleluia.
Why stand there weeping? Why weep in sorrow?
Jesus lives, and fear has fled.
Roll away sadness, view this arising:
Jesus is raised, and death is dead.
Bow not your faces, rise up in wonder,
Christ awaits you on the way;
In the fair morning, bright sun arising,
Christ waits to greet you to the day. Alleluia.'
Amen.