

“Finding Strength in Resurrection”
April 20, 2025

Colossians 3:1-4
John 20:1-18

“If you have been raised with Christ,” Paul writes, “Seek the things that are above, where Christ is.”

The skeptical among us—and that means so many of us, doesn’t it?—the skeptical among us might say, “That’s a pretty big ‘*if*.’ Easter arrives, we seem to be just as we always were. We don’t feel ‘raised.’

Such skepticism actually helps us find the strength that resurrection offers for our lives.

Let’s begin with what we heard from the Gospel of John.

“Mary stood weeping outside the tomb.”

Look at Mary Magdalene—and notice three things.

The first is perhaps the most obvious—Mary is crying.

Her tears make it possible for many to attend Easter services such as this. Maybe just knowing that someone else would share your own sorrow today, knowing that someone else would weep with you allowed you to overcome your reluctance and join us this morning. Or maybe you were surprised and comforted to find that you were not alone in your sorrow today.

This Easter

We cry for people unjustly imprisoned in El Salvador.

We cry for people rounded up and deported, for international students at the University of Iowa and around our nation who have had their visas revoked.

We cry for victims of the Palm Sunday bombing in Ukraine even as those who lead our nation wonder if we should continue to support that nation in its struggle against Russian aggression.

We cry for children dying in Sudan because our nation has cut off vital aid that would have saved lives.

Many worship while weeping about family problems, trouble at work, worry from school, concerns about illness and death.

Weeping may have brought you here. There are few places left outside of congregations, outside of worship where we can bring our weary souls and find some rest. There are few places left outside of congregations like ours where we can cry and know that our sorrow is accepted and honored.

Yes, there is joy on this day. Remember, though, that joy is not to be confused with happiness. Joy is an energy that often comes when things are grim or painful. Joy comes uninvited and at the most unexpected times. Often enough joy is accompanied by sorrow. Often enough joy comes with tears.

Mary weeps. We weep. Yet even in sorrow we might sense the stirring of Easter joy that moves us into new life.

Mary is also confused—even though there is much that she knows.

She followed Jesus and was there when they laid him in the tomb. In the pre-dawn darkness she knows just where to go.

Mary goes back to the tomb because that is where she will now find Jesus. No longer would he be among those who followed him—making their lives whole, showing them God’s compassion, announcing that God’s realm of love was breaking into this world of hate, offering the possibility that life could be different, the world could be different. No longer would they know his laughter, his tears, the touch of his hand, the sound of his voice.

Because now, Jesus is dead—and, like the rest of us, Mary knows that the only way to be near a dead person is to return to the place where that person is buried.

But even in the dark, it is clear that something is missing. The stone is rolled away and the result is confusion: “They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him.”

And, of course, confusion now seems to be a consistent part of our lives. Tariffs are on, tariffs are off. Solid global alliances are shaken. Universities—including the one that surround us—are unsure about their funding and their future. We’re not sure which way is up. Sometimes it feels that confusion and chaos are both the means and the end.

So we can understand when, in her confusion, Mary looks right at Jesus—and thinks she is talking to a gardener.

Mary weeps. Mary is confused.

We weep. We are confused.

Weeping and confused, note this third thing: Mary Magdalene is also the bearer of good news.

Mary stayed with the dying Jesus. She is the first to encounter the risen Christ. She is the first to tell the good news of Easter resurrection to others.

We need to say this often and clearly because for centuries the church denied or forgot this reality: Mary—and other women who followed and provided for Jesus as well—Mary stands as an equal with the men who followed Jesus. In the early church, the title of Apostle was reserved for those who had encountered the risen Christ—those such as Mary, who proclaims: “I have seen the Lord.”

Mary first, and then other women and men, proclaimed the incredible news that life *has changed* and it will never really be the same again. Human life and all of creation are not just new, but *different*.

And, yes, *we* are different. “You *have been* raised with Christ,” Paul writes. He is clear that this reality is not in question. And so, with the Colossians, we are called to look beyond what is readily apparent. Paul calls this “setting our mind on things that are above.”

I hear that phrase and I remember the old complaint about people who are “so heavenly minded that they are of no earthly good.”

That criticism doesn’t really fit this congregation, of course. We recognize that there has been within Christianity a mistaken though powerful strain of thought that denied the importance of life on this earth, that put heaven on our minds, and led us to ignore if not abuse the earth and all that live in it, since all this will pass away. We are wary of that and we seek to be of earthly good.

And yet...there are times when it does help to look beyond all that is so readily apparent.

And this might be such a time.

We know so much of suffering, of the cross, of the grave in our lives in and our world. St. Augustine put it well when he said that “there are days when the burdens we carry are heavy on our shoulders and weigh us down, when the road seems dreary and endless, the skies gray and threatening, when our hearts are lonely, and our souls have lost their courage and our lives have no music in them.”

You’ve probably felt like that at times, haven’t you? My sense is that a lot of people have been feeling that way in recent months.

We need help to remember that we have been raised with Christ. So, on Easter we break out the brass and tune our hearts again to the stirring music of God’s new creation. We wake from our winter slumber and lethargy and remember that God’s love and mercy are for all creation, that we are part of God’s new creation, that God is greater than our worries and our weariness and sustains us through days such as these.

This is to say, we set our minds on the things that are above.

Now, if you read on in Paul’s letter to the Colossians—and go ahead, do that at home in the days ahead—if you read on, you will hear something surprising.

When Paul elaborates on what it means to “set our minds on things above,” he makes no mention of angels or afterlife or heavenly glory. Instead, he lays out how we might live with each other in the day to day reality of our earthly existence.

Paul encourages the Colossians—and us—to strip off the dishonesty and the idolatrous greed in which we have clothed ourselves for so long. Anger, wrath, malice, slander, abusive language—so out of fashion!

Take off those old clothes, Paul tells us, and get some Easter clothing: honesty, compassion, forgiveness, gratitude, and love.

All of us can use a new look.

Setting our minds on the things that are above works to reshape our actions on earth. Our own transformation from death to life—being raised with Christ—informs our what we do.

The simple and subversive religious practices by which we express our faith—worship, prayer, giving, hospitality, service—are ways that we reconnect with each other and with our neighbors; they are the ways we strengthen the common bonds of our humanity.

Resurrection strengthens us to be just and peaceful in a time of uncertainty.

Resurrection strengthens us to be open and humane in a time of fear.

Resurrection strengthens us to establish communities of equality and respect in a time of change.

Yes, the good news of Easter is about the “death of death”—but this is much more than some heavenly afterlife. In faith we look toward and pray for the coming of God’s realm, in which the will of God will be done *on earth* as it is in heaven.

In resurrection we find the strength to build in these days the things that will last into God’s new age—or, as the letter to the Colossians puts it, that time “when Christ, who is your life is revealed.” You know this. It is the challenge that you seek to meet each day. Part of this challenge is the calling to a fully human life, reflecting the image of God. This is energized by the Spirit of the risen Christ present within communities like this congregation and people like you.

If we recognize that we have died and have been raised with Christ to a new way of living,

If we open our eyes to the new challenges and opportunities that come to us each day, on this corner, in this city,

If we let the message of Christ—the new possibility—dwell among us in all its richness,

We will be those who see the Lord in our midst, in the midst of life all around us.

The risen Christ was not contained by a tomb. We who are raised with Christ will not be bound by old ways of thinking and acting and living. We will find new meaning and new purpose for life through acts of compassion, mercy, and healing, in the continuing quest for justice and peace, in the creation of beauty, the pursuit of truth. And, yes, quite often we find ourselves a little out of step with those who want the world to be as it once was, those who are clinging tightly to the way things are.

Christ is risen.

And not Christ alone. You—yes, you—you have been raised with Christ.