
² The LORD proclaims: “The people who survived the sword found grace in the wilderness. As Israel searched for a place of rest, ³ the LORD appeared to them from a distance: I have loved you with a love that lasts forever. And so with unfailing love, I have drawn you to Myself. ⁴ Again, I will build you up, and you will be rebuilt, virgin Israel. Again, you will play your tambourines and dance with joy.
Jeremiah 31:2-4 (NRSV)

Christ is risen! He is risen indeed!

This is the day the Lord has made! Let us rejoice and be glad in it!

These are our familiar refrains on Easter morning. When people gather in worship on this day, it is not uncommon to have someone greet you with the first part of this call, seeking the response: *Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! This is the day the Lord has made!* Let us rejoice and be glad in it! (If you are at home with someone, try this..)

Easter Sunday is always a day of celebration, in spite of the circumstances we are experiencing in this life. Certainly, Easter 2020 is like no other Easter ever before. Church Buildings are empty. There are no Easter Dawn Services. In many ways, it may seem the earth is ‘quiet’ and ‘still’. Interestingly, one of the effects of COVID-19 has been clearer air (as people aren’t driving, and many facets of industry have slowed down). Seismologists say the Earth itself is more ‘still’ (it’s not shaking as much, because people aren’t out and about). Air over cities such as Paris is much clearer. And the waterways of Venice no longer look brown, but the green-blue of the sea because there aren’t powered boats rushing around everywhere.

The world is certainly different, isn’t it? What are some of the positive things you have seen emerge in spite of COVID-19? Are you reconnecting to people you haven’t spoken with for a while? Are you getting around to those jobs you have wished to do for some time? Of course, we are also aware that in other areas, people’s lives have been significantly impacted in other ways.

As we rejoice on this special day in our Church Year, we may also remember Mary on her way to the Tomb of Jesus. She had come expecting to find one thing, and her world was radically changed. At first she was upset (John 20:2,11). Then she is overjoyed as she clings on to the one who calls her by name (John 20:17).

Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! And our world is changed, indeed! How is your life, and world-view, changed by Jesus?

In our First Reading this day (Jeremiah 31:1-6) we have the word of Jeremiah speaking to his people in a time of darkness and challenge. Jeremiah was a prophet to Judah during the time leading up to the exile.

Jeremiah witnessed the fall of Jerusalem. The city was first overrun by the Babylonians in 597 BC; ten years later they occupied the whole of Judea and deported many of the leaders.

In the early chapters of the book, Jeremiah laments over Judah and the coming defeat of Jerusalem. He warns the people of the severe consequences of their sin. But they do not heed his warning. He also includes striking personal lament over his life as an unwelcome prophet. Being a prophet was a hard task for Jeremiah. It almost broke his heart. But today's reading is a prophecy that the exile will end, that God will not desert Israel. Our reading for Easter Day is from the Book of Consolation, chapters 30 and 31 of Jeremiah. In these chapters, the tone shifts from warning to the promise of restoration and renewal.

The prophet Jeremiah records what the Lord says: "As Israel searched for a place of rest, the LORD appeared to them from a distance: I have loved you with a love that lasts forever. And so with unfailing love, I have drawn you to Myself. Again, I will build you up, and you will be rebuilt, virgin Israel. Again, you will play your tambourines and dance with joy."

"Again, you will play your tambourines and dance with joy..." Some of you may remember a different time when many Christian people frowned upon dancing. We may wonder if those folks ever read the Bible and if they ever read the Old Testament. The whole way through, particularly the Old Testament prophecies, the promise, the hope of God's saving presence in human life is described the way we heard Jeremiah describe it this morning: "once again you will take up your tambourines and dance joyfully."

God reminds the people that He has loved them with 'an everlasting love,' with continued faithfulness. Implied in this is the assurance that even their sin cannot cause God to abandon them. Here, even if they sin and are punished, God will in the end deliver them, not due to their deserving, but simply because God's love for them is without limit.

This is the day the Lord has made! Let us rejoice and be glad in it! How do you experience this? In what way do you feel 'Easter joy'?

The joy of Easter is the joy of praising the Lord for what He has done. This is the joy of knowing that Jesus rose from the dead, the joy of knowing that death has been conquered. That's the joy we have today, the kind of joy that makes us want to set aside everything else, and to join the dance of the joyful.

Of course, this joy does not mean you will always feel 'happy'. Maybe you're not really feeling it this morning. Maybe you're not feeling as if you could dance and play the tambourine today. And I don't mean this because we don't usually dance or play tambourines in Sunday worship. But maybe you're not feeling it in your heart. You're not convinced that this day is much different than any other day. You're not sure you can even say the words, "Oh, the joy!"

If that's a struggle for you, if you're not sure if you're caught up in the Easter moment, well, perhaps it'd be helpful to go back, to go back and remember that it wasn't always this way. There wasn't always an occasion for joy. There wasn't always reason to dance and play tambourines. In fact, if we really look at ourselves honestly, there's plenty of reason that we shouldn't be joyful—shouldn't be joyful because we're so separated from God, we're sinners, we're turned away from God. Where's the joy in that?

Jeremiah did say “Again you will take up your tambourines,” The word “again’ is important, as it implies there was a time when you didn’t “take up your tambourines,” a time when you didn’t “go out to dance with the joyful.”

These verses from Jeremiah are written in a time when Israel was split in two, with the northern kingdom, Samaria, being under foreign rule. And Jeremiah was prophesying that the southern kingdom, Judah, would also be under foreign rule. There’s destruction in the North, and there’s destruction approaching the South. So there’s this great sense of loss, this great sense of having everything you know and love, everything you trust in be taken away from you.

So when Jeremiah speaks the word of God, the word of hope and consolation, when Jeremiah says that again the city will be built, again they will play the tambourine, again they will plant vineyards and enjoy the fruit, when Jeremiah says “again”, he means this in the context of the difficult reality that is actually before the people. This ‘dancing with joy’ was not meant to be some form of escapism, or some manufactured and artificial hype so common in the world today (to try and manipulate people to some outcome for the one who hypes, rather than listening to the hearts of others). But Jeremiah says, “Again”. Again... It’ll happen again. It happened once long ago, but now it’s going to happen again. What got lost will happen again. Again the city will be built. Again, they will dance and make merry. Again they will plant vineyard and enjoy the fruits of their labour.

This is the day the Lord has made! Let us rejoice and be glad in it! The joy we have is not from seeking to hype ourselves up from the inside, but the reality of Christ’s resurrection from the dead – in spite of how we may think and feel.

In his wildest fantasies of faith, Jeremiah never could have imagined Easter morning. Indeed, for Jeremiah, his life was one of great challenge and a depression of the heart (see Lamentations). Jeremiah is not about false hope or hype. And yet he says, “Again.” Again...

The promise of Easter morning is that in spite of the reality of pain, suffering, death, disappointment and defeat; in spite of all the hurt of the world in which we live, we as God’s children may “pick up our tambourines and dance”. The sure hope of Easter is that, confronted with the very real pain of the world we experience, by God’s power and grace, our mourning is turned into joy, our sorrow is turned into gladness, and even our death is turned into life.

Today is about God stepping in to play tambourine in your life, to say “Oh, the joy!” for you. Even if it’s hard to see the joy in your life, even if it’s hard to remember why Easter is about dancing and tambourine playing, still the Spirit is working today in your life, working to bring that joy into your life. He will be your God, and you will be His people. Jesus rising again brings the joy and hope. Jesus on the cross cancelled the past. Today is about God stepping in to play tambourine for us, bringing us the joy we need. Today is about the AGAIN, making AGAIN possible.

Where do you need God to play that tambourine for you? Where do you need joy? Where do you need the hope of Easter in your life? Where do you need God to step in and remind you that He has done it all for you, that He has made eternal

life possible, that it's all about what He's done? Where do you need God to step in and be your God?

When we are in the middle of Lent, we find it hard to imagine Easter. Likewise, while we might in our 'minds' have a 'faith' in the resurrection, but sometimes we can't quite believe it in the face of death and loss. Also, even though in our 'minds' we have the concept of forgiveness, we can't quite believe it in the midst of our sin and the sin around us. And even though Jesus tells us that He will never leave us nor forsake us, we can't quite grasp and hold on to Jesus' presence when we feel alone. Yet, He calls us by name. That is His promise.

Easter is the promise that God works joy in your life. God has stepped in to play tambourine in your life—He's brought you the joy through His Spirit. Today is about the fact that God has stepped in, and He has made you to be His people. God has done everything necessary for you to be His people and have eternal life.

From the very first page through the very last, the Bible demonstrates one relentless passion... that is, the Father's passion to see those whom He has created walk in intimacy with Him. In Jeremiah 31:3 the Lord speaks, "I have loved you with an everlasting love... and I have drawn you in loving-kindness." This verse is so beautiful because it demonstrates God's passion to draw us into His presence.

This is the day the Lord has made! Let us rejoice and be glad in it

Jeremiah declares God's everlasting love and faithfulness, and does so even in the midst of seeming despair. Is this a promise we can take hold of? If we do, what will this mean for us? Can we dance before God, celebrating the new life we experience in Christ?

Every Sunday we celebrate. We celebrate, again and again, what God has done for us in Jesus Christ. All the love, all the grace, all the promises that God made to God's people find ultimate fulfilment in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Easter is about the love God has shown to the world once and for all, again and again. Once and for all, yet again and again!

Each and every year we celebrate Easter's victory. Each and every Sunday we offer God our praise and our lives as we worship together in a "little Easter", for that is what Sunday worship is – it is a "little Easter" every week. Again and again and again God offers us fresh starts, renewed relationships and even rebuilt lives.

The world is a different place because Jesus Christ rose from the dead. Our God of the 'again' walks with us. Our God of Easter assures us of guidance. Our Lord Jesus Christ reminds us what can be done when we focus upon Him. The Holy Spirit offers us strength and hope.

Today we rejoice in Jesus' bodily resurrection. In Jesus' resurrection we are given the precious gift of new life. Resurrection Day is a day to celebrate. This is the day the Lord has made! Let us rejoice and be glad in it! The tomb is empty. Jesus walks with us – again. He is alive. We are forgiven. And heaven's gates are open wide. Christ has risen. Let us dance and sing for joy in the fullness of our salvation. Amen.