

The Flames of Love Never Die! **John 20:1-18**

Christ is Risen!

Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! “Our Christ is risen.” This is the most simple but powerful confession of the Christian faith. Christ died for us while we were yet sinners. God raised him from the dead and made him hope for new life. Because he lives, we can be freed from the shackles of sin and the burdens of the past. Because he lives, we can face tomorrow. Let us praise our God and the risen Christ!

When we could not gather at the sanctuary due to the pandemic, I preached that a full life with God and our neighbors is like a great Conga Line Dance and I would like to dance with you when the pandemic passed. During the Palm Sunday procession, some of our church members waved palm branches and lined up one behind the other and walked around our sanctuary, praising God. It felt like a great Conga Line dance! I believe the risen Christ has already started a joyful dance of new life and invites us to join this dance of life.

Easter but...

Of course, it is also true that not all people feel the joy of Easter. We are celebrating the risen Christ but we also hear news about mass graves in Ukraine in which more than twelve hundred bodies have been found. Thousands of mothers have lost their children and mourn the deaths of their loved ones, holding their bodies. Millions of people are still affected by the Covid-19 virus. The blood of the victims of the Brooklyn subway mass shooting has not yet dried. The power of death is still real and we see tombs that are full of innocent victims of human violence and evil. Many people are still in dark places and still walk in the deep valley of death, so continue to pray for all who are still going through the deep dark of holy Saturday.

But at the same time, don't get tongue tied. We are called to proclaim the good news of Easter even in the face of the reality of death. To do that, we have to face the darkness and the reality of evil in our world. In fact, the resurrection story begins with darkness. Today's passage tells us about the first Easter morning. “Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene went to the tomb.(v1) It was still dark and Mary Magdalene went to the tomb, a place of loss, sorrow, and death. She didn't expect to see the risen Christ. She may have wanted to see her beloved savior and show her love and respect one last time. She just wanted to see the tomb, which was the only place left for her to recall her memories of Jesus. At the tomb, she found that the stone had been removed from the tomb and saw that the body of Jesus was not there. In shock and desperation, she ran to Simon Peter and the other disciple Jesus loved and said, “They took the Master from the tomb. We don't know where they've put him.” Peter and the other disciple left immediately for the tomb. They ran, neck and neck. When they arrived at the tomb, Peter entered the tomb and discovered the linen wrappings lying there, and the cloth that had been on Jesus' head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself. They realized that something had happened at the tomb. What did they do? They went back home!! The gospel writer nicely offers an excuse for the apostles, saying “no one yet knew from the Scripture that he had to rise from the dead.” Well, Jesus had repeatedly told them about his suffering, death and resurrection at least three times, but they still didn't get it. Perhaps, they didn't want to stay at the tomb, which reminded them of their failure, their cowardice and shattered dream. They may have feared they would be caught by the guards and persecuted for being Jesus' followers. Whatever reasons, they went back home.

But Mary remained. Mary Magdalene remained at the tomb, the place of sorrow and death. Why did she remain while the other disciples left? I believe it was her love for Jesus. It was the small flame of love, inside her, for Jesus and that love made her stay at the tomb. She dearly loved Jesus. Who was she? According to the four gospels, she traveled with Jesus as one of his followers from the early days of Jesus ministry. Her name is mentioned by name twelve times in four gospels, which is more than most of the apostles. Some scholars argue that Mary Madelene could have been a patron of Jesus, indicating that she was probably wealthy. The Gospel of Luke states that she was possessed by seven demons and Jesus had cast them out from her. Seven is a symbolic number of perfection, so her life before, though she was wealthy, was completely shattered and broken, but Jesus healed her wounds and gave her a new life purpose. She saw hope in Jesus and loved him dearly, so she supported Jesus, followed him from Galilee to Jerusalem, the crucifixion to the tomb. The divine flame of love Jesus ignited in her wasn't quenched by Jesus' death and that flame of love, though feeble, led her to the place of suffering and death and remained even in the dark. Jesus's disciples wanted to get something out of following Jesus but Mary experienced Jesus' love and she loved Jesus.

The Risen Christ!

While Mary was still weeping, Jesus appeared before her. Mary didn't recognize him but the risen Christ was there with her. Her sorrow and bitterness blinded her but Christ was there with her while she was weeping. Jesus called her by name, "Mary!" and her eyes were open and she could see Jesus. The risen Christ, the light of the world, rekindled the light of hope and love in Mary. The meaning of the name Mary is 'beloved' but its root meaning comes from the Hebrew word, Mara, "Bitter", but Jesus changed her bitterness into jubilation. Her sorrow was turned into joy. Her agony had turned into jubilation. Mary could have been the first witness of the resurrection because of the flame of love inside her that shone even in the darkest time.

Christ has risen! He is risen indeed! The flame of love Jesus ignited in our hearts is still burning. Let it shine. No matter how small they are, just let them shine through your words, through your hands and feet. Because our Christ has risen, we can share the good news of Christ's resurrection. The flames of love Christ kindled never die because our Christ has risen. So my friends, let us rejoice and let the light of love in us shine and cast out darkness in this world. Amen.