

What is the Meaning? We Were Created for Celebration
Jo Ann and Tony
April 19, 2020 (Easter Sunday)

Christ is risen!
He is risen indeed!

Happy Easter, Hosanna! Jesus is Risen! Our dearest Friend, who was dead, is alive! He has been completely transformed! And everything is different...

Because resurrection changes everything! So, on Jesus' first day out of the tomb... let's celebrate... for we were created for celebration... and for *this* celebration in particular... *this* celebration which was foretold by prophets... and awaited by God's people... for centuries:

Isaiah 25:6-8 NIV -- On this mountain the Lord Almighty will prepare a feast of rich food for all peoples, a banquet of aged wine— the best of meats and the finest of wines. On this mountain he will destroy the shroud that enfolds all peoples, the sheet that covers all nations; he will swallow up death forever...

And we celebrate on this Easter day the fulfillment of that and hundreds of other prophecies... in the resurrection of Christ, who destroyed the power of death... and now invites all people to come and celebrate with Him in the endless banquet of the Kingdom of God.

So much of Jesus' teaching of God's Kingdom was told in parables about parties and feasts... and He apparently enjoyed the Kingdom feast so much in His earthly life that his detractors called him a drunk and a glutton! Jesus' entire ministry was a moveable feast... he went from table to table, bringing the joy and freedom of heaven with him... inviting all and everyone to join him in celebrating *before time*... the eternal feast table that would be set very, very soon....

That banquet began... on earth as it is in heaven... on that first Easter morning... the day everything changed! Because every day since that day is Easter! Every day from today into eternity is Easter! So, this morning, we no longer celebrate *before time*... because Jesus is alive NOW... and we get to celebrate with him in *REAL TIME*! This joyous reality is what Paul celebrated with the Corinthian church:

When the perishable has been clothed with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality, (When did this happen? That first Easter morning!)... then the saying that is written (by Isaiah) will come true: "Death has been swallowed up in victory." "Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?" (1 Corinthians 15:54-56 NIV)

We have so much to celebrate... because resurrection changes everything!

Everything changed for Jesus... yet everything remained the same for his disciples. He was completely transformed... but they were not yet transformed. That was still all in the future for them. On this day, they were trying to wrap their heads around the rumors and stories that he had somehow come back to life! They certainly did not know anything of the last 1,500 years of theology... or even what Jesus would share with them over the coming 40 days! They had no clue that his resurrection had anything to do with them... they were simply stunned silly, just trying to make sense of it all!

And the world they were living in on that first Easter morning hadn't changed either... the markets opened as usual, the laundry needed to be done, the streets hummed with the sounds of people doing their usual stuff. Those people didn't know that anything unusual had happened in the early dawn hours. The pilgrims who had flooded into Jerusalem for the Passover were heading home, now that Sabbath was over. Many of them had witnessed Jesus' condemnation and crucifixion. Some were no doubt talking about him. But no one had any inkling that the one they saw dead on a cross on Friday was now alive and free in the world... even as they packed their donkeys and started walking out of Jerusalem. So, if few on that first day of resurrection got anything out of it, then what was the point of Easter anyway?

This is the point... Jesus is Alive! Our dearest Friend, who was dead, has been completely transformed! On this mountain the Lord Almighty has prepared a feast of rich food for all people... a banquet of the best of meats and the finest of wines... which were his own broken body, his own spilled blood. And on this mountain he has destroyed the shroud that enfolds all people... the sheet that covers all nations... and he has swallowed up death forever!! This is the point of Easter... Jesus is alive!! And he is overjoyed about that!

And his Father is overjoyed about that, too... Can't you feel the Father's excitement... hear the Father's response as the stone was rolled away from Jesus' tomb? ***"Let's have a feast and celebrate. For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found."*** ***So they began to celebrate. (Luke 15:23-24 NIV)***

And I believe that the first to celebrate on that first Easter morning were the Trinity! Father, Son, and Spirit... joining together again in their divine dance of oneness... this is beyond our human ability to imagine or comprehend... yet, resurrection does change everything... even God!

Don't panic! Jesus' resurrection did not change the essence of God... nor the character of God... both are unchanging... the *same yesterday, today, and forever*. However, the resurrection did change the experience of God. Think about it... invisible, immortal God had never been human before, but In Jesus, God took on our humanity... and experienced our limitations, our needs, and our mortality. Again, this is one of the great mysteries of Christianity... affirmed as truth in the fourth century... Jesus was fully divine... and fully human!

One of the three members of the Trinity became human... and through HIS life, suffering, death, and resurrection... the WHOLE Trinity experienced something new! And if God had wanted us to understand it, Jesus would have explained it to us. But He didn't give us an explanation...

...What Jesus did give us was a beautiful story, the story of the Prodigal Father... that offers us a glimpse into the joy that God must have experienced when His resurrected Son walked out of that tomb. That was not a moment for theological charts or scientific explanations. The only possible response in that moment is UNBOUNDED, OVERFLOWING, JOY and Celebration in the Trinity... and, no doubt, a lot of angels cheering and singing around them, too! And right at the center of all of this celebration is Christ...

What was the first thing the prodigal father in Jesus' parable did when he received his son back alive? Did he prepare a press release? Deliver a sermon? Send him to the fields to work? :) No, the first thing he did... instinctively, joyfully... was to throw a party! And he invited *everyone* to celebrate with him.

“Look! my son is alive and has come home! Celebrate with me!” His son was the center of the celebration.

This was true on that first Easter... Jesus is alive and full of joy... and what he and the Father want more than anything in that moment is for everyone to celebrate with him! How do we know this?... because he said it himself! The last time he sat at a table with his disciples he told them... ***You will weep and be overcome with grief over what happens to me....But know this, your sadness will turn into joy when you see me again! Just like a woman giving birth experiences intense labor pains in delivering her baby, yet after the child is born she quickly forgets what she went through because of the overwhelming joy of knowing that a new baby has been born into the world. So will you also pass through a time of intense sorrow when I am taken from you, but you will see me again! And then your hearts will burst with joy, with no one being able to take it from you! (John 16:20-22 TPT).***

He’s talking about EASTER! There is only one response to Easter... hearts bursting with joy!! For him! He wants his friends to celebrate with Him... he invites us to share in His joy, in the Trinity’s joy.

But that’s not all! In those first, confused, joyful encounters with the risen Christ, his friends are getting their first glimpse of a truth that would become more and more evident as time went on...that Resurrection not only *changes* everything... but also *redeems* everything as well...

... beginning with Jesus’ friends... Resurrection redeemed their failure to keep company with him the night of his arrest. You remember what happened on Friday night... after the Passover meal... what we call the Last Supper... Jesus led his friends to the Mount of Olives, to a garden where he often prayed. Only this time, He was in anguish... “deeply grieved, even to death,” as he put it... by what had been, and was yet, to happen...

“Please stay and pray with me,” he asked a few of them, and then went about a stone’s throw away and prayed his heart out for an hour... only to return to find his friends sleeping. It was late... they were full from the meal and tired... but they were also uninvolved, disconnected from their friend’s agony. He woke them and pleaded with them to be with Him... he wanted the comfort of their company... “yes, sure, Jesus”... but when he returned an hour later, they were asleep again. And it happened again a third time! And that time, they were awakened to see armed guards there to arrest Jesus... and their nightmare began....

For three hours that night, Jesus’ friends abandoned him. Yet, after His resurrection, Jesus came alongside a couple of other disciples who were on their way home from Jerusalem to Emmaus. They didn’t recognize Jesus when he asked them what they were talking about.... Thinking he was probably another pilgrim... they began to tell him about what had happened over the weekend... that Jesus, crucified on Friday, was reported to have risen from the dead just that morning! And then the stranger told them the story from Scripture of who Jesus was and why it had happened as it did. They were amazed... and wanted to hear more.... they wanted to keep company with this man. So when they got to Emmaus, they invited him to join them for supper. He did, and then... finally!... they realized who they had been keeping company with!

Tony, you were keeping company with Jesus in Emmaus recently, too, weren’t you?

Yes, I spent two weeks in what turned out to be Emmaus last summer, digging in the dirt and being on spiritual pilgrimage. And I went to Jerusalem several times while I was there. If I were walking it... I'm guessing it would have taken about 3 hours to travel by foot from Jerusalem to Emmaus.

And how cool is this? It appears that in Jesus' joy-filled 3-hour walk to Emmaus with some friends who wanted to be with Him and begged Him to stay... He may have been redeeming the painful 3 hours spent in the garden, with tired friends who simply couldn't yet understand the whole story unfolding before them.

Isn't that awesome? We never noticed that before. And here's another one!...the resurrection of Jesus also redeemed the last meal he and his friends had had together. It had been on the previous Thursday evening... and it was the feast of Passover. They had gathered in an upper room somewhere in Jerusalem to do what Jews still do... to remember the deliverance of their ancestors from slavery in Egypt. Families would gather and celebrate this feast together. They were friends, becoming a family, so Jesus played the part of the servant and washed their feet, to their surprise and objections...and he also played the part of the head of the family, who presided over this very symbolic meal.

It had been a sad event that evening, with Jesus using the symbols of the meal to predict and describe his death. He had broken the Passover bread like normal... but instead of pointing backward toward the Exodus, this time he pointed forward to the next day... to his body, about to be broken. He then served the Passover wine... but instead of drawing attention to the blood of lambs on Israelite doorposts, as would have been typical, he talked about his own blood, about to be shed for them. It was somber and sober. The meal was also rudely interrupted by Judas, who left early to go betray Jesus, who knew exactly what he was up to. It was a deeply meaningful meal, linking together the past, the present, and the future, but it was sad... a funeral meal in advance... a preparation for death.

It's fascinating, then, that the disciples in Emmaus recognized Jesus immediately when he sat down for dinner with them and broke bread! That's when their eyes were opened to see him as he truly was. Why then? Because even in the sadness of the previous meal he had assured them that, no matter what else would happen to him, they would eat together again someday.... ***I tell you, I will never again drink of this fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father's kingdom" (Matt. 26:29 NRSV).*** And now, here he was, eating and drinking with them in entirely new circumstances! And what had been a meal of sorrow then was now a meal of celebration, for he was alive! And because of his resurrection, the kingdom of his Father had come to them! He had redeemed the meal, because he had redeemed their grief.

The resurrection of Jesus also redeemed their betrayals, hesitations, fears, and sorrows. In the 40 days following the resurrection, Jesus would engage his disciples again and again... helping them to understand what had happened... and the implications for the future. But even in the first few days, they could see that things were different.

Jesus engaged Peter at the Sea of Galilee... and this disciple who did not want Jesus to wash his feet jumped into the water and swam to shore to be with His Friend, Jesus... who transformed the bitter regret of his denial into an affirmation of love.

Other disciples that abandoned Jesus as he hung dying on the cross experienced their relationship with him renewed. The two Marys who went in grief to the tomb that Sunday morning found their fear transformed into awe when He appeared to them alive! And Thomas, who quite reasonably wanted to see Jesus alive with his own eyes... fell to his knees in worship when Jesus did just that! Is there any better response to the resurrection than that? Awe and astonishment, gratitude and delight, instinctive reverence... kneeling in faith before a reality beyond reason... with exclamations of praise and shouts of joy!

Resurrection does, indeed, change and redeem everything... it changed Jesus... it changed the Trinity... and it does change us... we'll talk more about that next week... but for today, and this coming week... why don't we simply keep our focus on Him... and give Jesus what he wants... friends who will celebrate with him... with exceeding joy... that He IS alive, because no tomb can hold him! And that this miracle did... and does... happen... for all who will open their eyes to see Him... smiling in joy before them!

So we invite you to celebrate Jesus' resurrection today!... in at least two ways. First, let's celebrate communion together! Not the sad communion of Maundy Thursday... that's appropriate then... but it's Easter now!... let's join the disciples in Emmaus and eat and drink his resurrection! As his friends in this generation, let's celebrate that he is alive, that the kingdom of God is among us, that resurrection changes and redeems everything.

We don't have to be in the same room to do this, although it's wonderful when we can be. We miss you today. :) We don't even have to eat the same bread and drink from the same cup, although, again, it's wonderful when we can do that. But those things are not the point of it, not the core. We don't even have to have a particular kind of bread or drink. Find something you have available wherever you are... something will represent what Jesus had in front of him... a slice of bread, a hamburger roll, a Saltine, whatever... and something to drink... wine, grape juice, diet Pepsi even. :) Pause this recording if you need to while you gather that for yourself and any others in your household who are joining you...

The Greek word for this celebration is "eucharist"... which means, literally, "good grace" and often translated as "Thanksgiving." Some churches still use that word for what we call "communion." It's the good grace of God that raised Jesus from the dead, and it's the good grace of God that allows his resurrection to change everything! So let's celebrate the good grace of God by sharing the Lord's Supper... and the Lord's Feast!... together right now.

Please take the bread in your hand... as we pause to remember in gratitude what this bread represents... both the bruised and broken body of Jesus, freely given for us all on the cross... and the resurrected body of Jesus, raised in new and eternal life, freely given to all who will come to Him in love. Take and eat...

Now, please take the cup, as we pause to remember in gratitude what this cup represents... both the shed blood of Jesus, freely flowing to wash us clean... and the wounds still visible on Jesus' resurrected body... the pain and suffering transformed in trophies of grace... in love and for love. Take and drink...

Prayer of Blessing:

*Blessed are you, Lord God of our salvation, to you be praise and glory forever.
As once you ransomed your people from Egypt*

*and led them to freedom in the promised land,
so now you have delivered us from the dominion of darkness
and brought us into the kingdom of your risen Son.
May we, the first fruits of your new creation,
rejoice in this new day you have made, and praise you for your mighty acts.
Blessed be God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Blessed be God forever. Amen.*

What did Mary, Mary, and Thomas do upon encountering the risen Christ? Scripture says they each instinctively reacted by stopping in their tracks to worship him. Let's do the same! This is our second way to celebrate his resurrection. Continue this service by going now to the worship video that Shawn and the worship team have prepared for us... to remember, to give thanks, to rejoice!... out loud in your home, if possible. Let's celebrate that our friend Jesus is risen!

He is risen indeed!