

On the Rise
Preached by
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Sunday April 17, 2022
Easter
Celebrating the Resurrection

For Reflection *"Faith is the strength by which a shattered world shall emerge into the light."*
Helen Keller

Hebrew Scripture *Isaiah 65:17-25*

17 For I am about to create new heavens and a new earth; the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind. 18 But be glad and rejoice forever in what I am creating; for I am about to create Jerusalem as a joy, and its people as a delight. 19 I will rejoice in Jerusalem, and delight in my people; no more shall the sound of weeping be heard in it, or the cry of distress. 20 No more shall there be in it an infant that lives but a few days, or an old person who does not live out a lifetime; for one who dies at a hundred years will be considered a youth, and one who falls short of a hundred will be considered accursed. 21 They shall build houses and inhabit them; they shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit. 22 They shall not build and another inhabit; they shall not plant and another eat; for like the days of a tree shall the days of my people be, and my chosen shall long enjoy the work of their hands. 23 They shall not labor in vain, or bear children for calamity; for they shall be offspring blessed by the LORD-- and their descendants as well. 24 Before they call I will answer, while they are yet speaking I will hear. 25 The wolf and the lamb shall feed together, the lion shall eat straw like the ox; but the serpent—its food shall be dust! They shall not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain, says the LORD.

Gospel Reading *John 20:1-18*

1 Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb. 2 So she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him." 3 Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went toward the tomb. 4 The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. 5 He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in. 6 Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there, 7 and the cloth that had been on Jesus' head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself. 8 Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; 9 for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead. 10 Then the disciples returned to their homes. 11 But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb; 12 and she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet. 13 They said to her, "Woman, why

are you weeping?" She said to them, "They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him." 14 When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. 15 Jesus said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?" Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away." 16 Jesus said to her, Mary!" She turned and said to him in Hebrew, "Rabbouni!" (which means Teacher). 17 Jesus said to her, "Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'" 18 Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, "I have seen the Lord"; and she told them that he had said these things to her.

Meditation *On the Rise*

As might any person, a day after Jesus' burial, a close friend went to his tomb to mourn. Unexpectedly, she found the grave had been opened. As any one of us might do, she ran to tell other friends the grave had been disturbed. Such a sight would have been just as horrific then as now to find a loved one's grave desecrated.

Perhaps hoping Mary was mistaken in her grief, Jesus' other disciples ran to the tomb, only to discover it was as Magdalene had said: the grave was empty, a few shreds of cloth left behind. With nothing to do but wonder to what use their deceased teacher's body would be put – perhaps by those who had killed him, those who had feared or despised them—they went home.

So far, there was no response among these people from so long ago that we couldn't imagine today. There isn't anything that couldn't have happened in our own time. Just read the papers.

Mary Magdalene remained at the grave weeping—for her teacher, for the desecration of his grave, for the loss of all that might have been. Hoping against hope that somehow Jesus' disciples and she had been mistaken, she looked into the tomb one more time. This time, she saw two angels clothed in white. Not particularly set aback by that vision, Mary turned and saw someone else. She'd never—none of us have ever—seen a dead man, walking and talking (*Walking Dead* notwithstanding). And, if we did, surely, we'd expect it to be gruesome or glorious, anything but an ordinary person standing there expressing concern.

Were it to happen to us, we'd no doubt do as Mary had done, because a human brain is a human brain. It is always striving to make sense of its world. Most times, it easily interprets its sensory input. Even when faced with the challenges of the unexpected, it generates explanations so rapidly as to seem instantaneous. It processes so quickly we often can't tell the difference between reality and the perception our brain has formed.

Mary's brain did just what ours would do when confronted with input for which there is no experience. It rapidly sought to find order and provide an explanation. The one that it came up with wasn't bad: This was a cemetery caretaker. Then the caretaker spoke for a second time, now uttering her name, providing an extra element of sensory input to radically shift her perception. All of a sudden, Magdalene knew the seemingly impossible was real.

In contrast to all that had happened in the moments just before—perception overwhelming reality—in this moment, reality overwhelmed expectation. Mary reached to embrace Jesus. In so doing, she discovered that which was real was also changed. This

resurrected Jesus was both the same and different than the one she knew before death. Recognizable, but untouchable. Not glorious, but ready for glory. Both a familiar stranger and an unfamiliar friend.

Easter does not ask us to suspend our thinking or our reasoning. It asks us to let our expectations be illumined by the Spirit. That is Easter's invitation to us all year long. New life rarely comes in glory and it doesn't often come from strangers. We are most likely to overlook or miss new life entirely, if we let our brains do all the sense-making, rather than letting our spirits have a voice.

If we allow our brains' overwhelming power for interpretation and perception, based only on the past to hold unexamined sway, perhaps we'd think new life only comes in spring time or when a baby is born; possibly we'd stretch our definition to include the birth of a marriage. It's is good and wonderful to catch those glimpses of new life, but if they are the only ones we see, the only ones we are looking for—we'd miss a great deal that comes to light in Easter's dawn.

This story demands that in Christ's rising, we see life on the rise all around us every day. It demands that our own faithful lives also be on the rise. Easter traditions may include glorious music and beautiful flowers; they may include holiday hats and quirky ties, hunting for eggs and biting the ears off chocolate bunnies; but those things only ever ought be reminders of life on the rise—Christ's and our own, not an endpoint in and of themselves.

Embracing life on the rise that dawns on Easter is a faithful life-giving opportunity we may often miss because of where Easter falls in our secular calendar in the northern hemisphere. As we lean into a season of graduations and weddings, and just a little beyond it the end of school and family vacations and reunions, after the intense spiritual seasons of Lent and its extra services and disciplines, Easter can seem like an end, not a beginning—which would be a terrible shame.

After God's victory over death, after the initial shock and fear, the disciples spread out and spread the word. The church came to vital life, unrolling in waves of faithfulness across earth and oceans and changing the world for all time. The resurrection was the start of a new way of thinking about God, of God's purposes and chosen relationships with humans, the start of a new way of looking at ourselves and our neighbors and a revitalized way of considering our gifts and the reasons for which we were given them.

The power to be changed and to change the world is renewed every Easter if only we don't let our thinking be shaped by a sense that Easter was one and done; if only, like Magdalene we can accept the possibility that God can do a new thing beyond our human expectation or experience.

This year offers us some rare encouragements for celebration and engagement. Despite the current setbacks with regard to COVID, life is being restored to a new and free-er normal. We have started resuming some old activities and have much to look forward to. As we embrace that, let us remember even these gifts are not for us alone.

With our life on the rise, we need to minister to neighbors for whom the economy is crushing, not merely inconvenient. We need to minister and seek justice and change for cities, including our own still being torn apart by gun violence. We need to minister to what may be the greatest refugee crisis of our lives. We need to minister in making peace and safety for all people.

Christ brought life on the rise for us but not for us alone. This year we have special opportunity to experience, be part of and lead life on the rise. Here in our church home, May and early June are filled with a remarkable collection of mission and outreach efforts and other signs of life on the rise.

We will host the Syracuse University Brass ensembles concert to benefit UNICEF Ukraine; we will be hosting a drop off food drive to benefit the F-M Food Pantry and providing a meal for the Brown Memorial Church Community. On the first Sunday in June, we will mark the gift of the Spirit to the Church on Pentecost, celebrating the reception of two Seekers into membership, the ordination of officers and sharing the feast of God for all people—signs that the Spirit is active among us and life is on the rise.

So let not Easter be an endpoint for us. Rather let us pray and may God grant us the eyes of Magdalene to see and be part of life on the rise this day and every day.

Prayers for Others and Ourselves

Loving God: On this Easter Sunday, as we do so many mornings, we come to you this morning praying from our hearts. We come in joy and thanksgiving, for the new life we have found in your Son. We are glad for families gathered together to worship and celebrate this day with us. We ask that you keep all of us in your care, in this place, and around tables and as we travel to near and distant homes.

Even amid the change and hope offered this day, there are things in our lives that have not changed. We continue to care for family members who are ill; we suffer ourselves from failing bodies and minds. We struggle with jobs that do not fulfill us, we try to heal broken relationships and we try to heal ourselves of all the brokenness inside. We are witness to the never-ending rattling of swords, the dropping of bombs, the launching of missiles and the firing of guns in our streets remind us that new life is a fragile thing and your peace has not yet come.

Remind us that the Easter hope is not limited to this day or hour, but that your hope and love are among us every minute of our lives. Remind us, too, that as we strive to fix all that is wrong in the world and in our lives, that you are the source of all healing. Help us to open ourselves to your Spirit, so that in us and through us you might work your will for the world. All this we pray in the name of your Son, who taught us to come to you in prayer saying

The Lord's Prayer

**Our Father, who art in heaven,
hallowed be thy name.
Thy kingdom come, thy will be done
on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day, our daily bread.
Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors
and lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from evil,
for thine is the kingdom and the power
and the glory forever. Amen.**