

Alleluia. Christ the Lord is Risen
The Lord is risen indeed. Alleluia.

Here we are it is Easter Day. We are rejoicing in the Resurrection of our Lord. We sing joy-filled songs. We hear inspiring scriptures and say heartfelt prayers. We wear our fancy clothes and hats. There is a festive reception awaiting us next door. There is also an Easter Egg Hunt for the young folks. People of any age can join in the flowering of the cross. There are baskets full of treats awaiting us at home. I expect many of us will have family feasts later today. Easter is a magnificent celebration, but it was not always so. Indeed, on that very first Easter Day, no one had a clue that it was Easter or that there had been a Resurrection. It was only as the day unfolded that some people began to realize that something miraculous had happened.

That first Easter morning, all of Jesus' followers were still in hiding. Their teacher, the man they believed was going to lead a revolution in their faith or against the Romans, was dead. He had died in the most cruel and ignominious way. The Romans killed him because they feared he was going to lead an uprising. People were calling him King of the Jews. A King not controlled by the Empire was a problem, especially when there were an extra 50,000 people in Jerusalem for Passover. The Roman Empire had a way of dealing with rabble rousers—Crucifixion. It was not a particularly bloody way to die. The goal was not exsanguination but asphyxiation. The victim died because he no longer had the strength to catch his breath. It was a slow and painful way to die. It had the additional effect of terrifying passersby. This is what would befall you if you tried to defy Rome. Only the bravest or most foolhardy would risk such a fate.

That is the main reason the disciples, men and women, had been in hiding since Friday, when there was darkness at noon. They were afraid, and rightly so, that they would be arrested and put to death by the rope, the sword, or crucifixion. None of the Gospels tells us what happened on the Saturday between Good Friday and Easter. That day was the Sabbath, but I doubt Jesus' followers ventured out to the Temple. There were too many unknowns. Perhaps the Romans had spies on the lookout for them. Maybe the soldiers patrolling the city would spot them. Perhaps someone would recognize their Galilean accent and turn them in. It was best just to stay in hiding and say their prayers there.

Luke tells us that early Sunday morning, the women who were part of Jesus' entourage went to the tomb. They had witnessed Jesus' entombment on Friday. They knew where to go. There were three named women: "Mary Magdalene, Joanna, [and] Mary the mother of James." Luke writes that there were also "other women" who were unnamed and unnumbered. They took with them spices that they had prepared to anoint Jesus' body. But when they arrived at the tomb, the stone that closed the tomb was rolled away. (The tomb was like a cave carved into the rock. To close the tomb but also allow entry for additional burials, there was a circular stone rolled into place to cover the doorway. The stone usually required several strong men to roll it away from the opening.) The women were mystified.

When they went into the tomb, they found it empty. Their first thought might have been that Jesus' body was stolen. It could have been the Romans or the Temple authorities who moved the body. Either group would want to have the body in an unmarked grave so that Jesus' followers would not have a place to venerate him. Moving the body would also put a capstone on the crucifixion, further

deflating Jesus' followers. Another possibility could have been troublemakers who wanted to steal the body of the famous teacher.

As the many thoughts ran through the minds of the women, suddenly, "two men in dazzling clothes stood beside them. The women were terrified and bowed their faces to the ground, but the men said to them, 'Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here but has risen. Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, that the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners, and be crucified, and on the third day rise again.'" What had been a moment of terror and dismay is now a wonderful but incomprehensible event. People, no matter how special they are, do not rise from the dead.

When they went to tell the disciples who were still in hiding, the men scoffed. Luke writes, "But these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them." While these women were also followers of Jesus and had been with him nearly as long as the disciples, the men did not put any faith in what they reported. It seemed too fantastic. I expect even the women were not sure what had happened. Only Peter had to check it out for himself. Taking his chances, he runs to the tomb.

Unlike the women, he was not brave enough to enter the tomb. He stooped and looked in and saw the burial clothes on the slab, but not a body. Remarkably, "he went home, amazed at what had happened." But what did Peter think had happened? Did Peter think that the women's story was true? Did he believe what the angels told the women? Did he believe that Jesus had risen from the dead? Knowing Peter's character, I think he did believe. I think he was stunned speechless. No one who was dead had ever been resurrected, but Peter's faith was so profound that I think he knew that, as improbable as it was, Jesus had risen from the dead.

The remainder of that first Easter Day, Jesus will appear to two disciples on the road to Emmaus, then to the rest of the disciples in hiding. He will eat with them and open the scripture to them. He will ascend into heaven. Finally, as it all sinks in, the disciples will go to the Temple praising God. “Can there be any day but this...?”¹

On that first Easter Day, there were none of the trappings of a modern Easter celebration. The one thing we have in common is praising God. We thank God in word and song and action for the miracle of Jesus of Nazareth becoming the Jesus the Christ. Death, Resurrection, and Ascension are the final marks that Jesus is more than a teacher, preacher, and miracle worker. He truly is the Son of God. We rejoice and are glad in it.

You may have come today knowing the Resurrection is real. Maybe you want it to be real and are looking for confirmation. Perhaps you wonder if such an impossible thing can be real. Wherever we are on our journey of faith, we are drawn to the story because it touches something profoundly deep within us. Just as it has touched Jesus’ followers from the very beginning. Let us join with that cloud of witnesses today as we welcome the happy morning and shout Alleluias to the Risen Lord. May your heart be filled with joy to overflowing. May your joy pour out into the world that cries out for justice, mercy, peace, hope, and love. That is the point.

As the poet wrote:

“Let all the world in ev’ry corner sing: My God and King.”²

¹ George Herbert, “Easter”

² George Herbert, “Antiphon (I)”