

St. John Lutheran Church

The Sermon

Rev. Andy Rutrough

Sermon, April 9, 2023

John 20:1-18

Alleluia, Christ is risen!
Christ is risen indeed, alleluia!

This means new life for everyone.

In the Gospel lesson for today, Mary Magdalene grows in her understanding of who Jesus is and what is going on. She has a sense that Jesus brings God's abundant, intimate new life. But she thinks that Jesus is still dead. She sees the empty tomb and she thinks that someone has stolen Jesus's body. Then, when she sees Jesus, she thinks he is the gardener until Jesus calls her name. Then she recognizes him but she thinks he is still her beloved teacher. "Rabbi," she calls. But Jesus is more than a teacher now. Now, the intimacy between God and Jesus, the connection, the relationship, the love between them has opened up to embrace Mary Magdalene and all of us. Then, Mary Magdalene goes and tells the other disciples, "I have seen the Lord!"

Mary grows.

This is absolutely common in the Gospel of John. People have an inkling of new life. But they don't understand fully. Then they grow. We saw this in Nicodemus several weeks ago, then with the woman at the well, the man born blind, whom Jesus gives the gift of sight, and Mary and Martha. All of them begin with imperfect understanding, and grow.

We also, don't have all the answers. We don't understand fully. We are lucky if we've even got the right questions. Our whole lives are a journey of discovery, of growth in understanding. I suspect that our eternal life will also be a continual journey of discovery and wonder at the infinite beauty of God.

Nevertheless, we do have a sense of what this is all about. It's about new life that reaches beyond human sin, beyond death.

Here is an example of what I mean.

My wife, Thyne, grew up in a family that did not go to church. They might have called themselves humanist, if they had felt inclined to put a label on themselves. That is, they found meaning and purpose in the good things human beings can do. They put a high value on integrity and honesty, and on treating others with respect, even if they came from a different culture or background. They believed showing compassion and kindness to people, and they found expression of the mysteries and the depth of life in art and music, good food, celebration of life, and the wonders of science.

They were good people. Still are.

But Thyne had questions and wonderments. Questions are holy, powerful things. While she was at Earlham College, she attended a Quaker meeting. Quakers sit in silence at their worship services, and wait for the Holy Spirit to speak to someone. Well, unfortunately, the Holy spirit told one of the members of this congregation what the congregation needed to do, so she stood up and told everyone. Then the Holy Spirit turned around and said something completely different to someone else. Thyne was kind of turned off. . . This, of course never happens in our churches—someone with deep questions being turned off by a badly managed conflict in the church.

Thyne got a nursing degree after college in pediatric nursing. That means she took care of children and babies. She went into the Peace Corps, and worked as a nurse in the African nation of Nigeria, on the edge of the Sahara desert.

She helped a lot of people there. But she also saw a lot of children die. People did not trust Western medicine, so they would bring their children to the hospital as a last resort. They would walk for miles and miles from the countryside, not past crops

and fallow fields and pasture like in our countryside, but past land that looks more like the American Southwest, except in the rainy season, when things grew a little more. Often, by the time they got to the hospital, their children were too far gone. So, in addition to helping a lot of children, Thyne saw a lot of children die of stupid things:

They didn't have enough to eat so their bodies could not fight off measles. They would die of measles, which can be prevented with a simple vaccine. We have enough food in the world We have vaccines. Does everyone have access to food and vaccines? No.

Children died of dysentery, diarrhea, because they did not have access to clean water. Why not? Why not enough food, vaccines or water? Because we are selfish, that's why. Not just the United States, not just rich countries, but us as a whole, us as a species. Because we human beings have a problem. We think mostly of ourselves. We re not good people.

After the Peace Corps, Thyne earned a master's degree in public health from UCLA, where she worked at night as a nurse in the neonatal intensive care unit. That's where they take care of babies who are in trouble. She helped many babies, but some died. Usually, a child's parents are there when they die. But sometimes they couldn't be. So Thyne would sit with the babies, in the dark, just to be with them. She would tell them it would be okay. They were going to be with God.

Still not a Christian.

After getting her masters in public health, Thyne went to University of Michigan and earned a doctorate in population studies. While she was there, a friend of her named Bruce Christiansen went on a trip to Germany to see the Luther sites, Whittenburg University where Luther taught, Wartburg Castle, where he translated the Bible. Now Bruce was a good, quiet Lutheran from Minnesota. He was in his mid-thirties, but drove like he was ninety-three. He would be driving through town at the speed limit. The speed limit, even if it was twenty-five miles an hour! Everyone behind him would be popping a coronary because of this car ahead of them that was only going twenty-five miles an hour.

So Bruce is telling Thyne and his other friends at University of Michigan about his trip to Germany, and Thyne says, "So, you're a Lutheran." He says "Yes." "Do you

go to church?” He says, “Yes.” He went to Lord of Light Lutheran Church, the student campus ministry at University of Michigan. Then he invited Thyne to come with him to Bible study Wednesday night.

Here’s an aside: If Bruce Christensen, who drives his car at twenty-five miles an hour through town can invite someone to a church event, then we can. Just sayin’.

So, Thyne goes with Bruce to Bible study a couple of times. Then she walks into the campus pastor’s office. His name is Galen Hora. She says to Galen, “I have a question for you.”

Remember, questions are holy.

She says, “When I was in the Peace Corps, I saw a lot of babies die, and they weren’t baptized.” (Because Niger is a Muslim country.) She said, “I need to know if you think those babies are in hell right now.

Galen says, “No, that’s not part of my theology.” In other words, to the best of my discernment, that’s not what God is like.

Thyne says, “Okay, then I’ve got a few more questions.”

She and Pastor Galen talked several times, and then, at the age of thirty-five, she was baptized at Lord of Light Lutheran Church, campus ministry at University of Michigan.

So, in the first place, you make this sort of thing happen. Or rather, God makes this sort of thing happen through you. When you put money in the offering plate, some of it goes to the Synod, and from there, into campus ministry. This sort of thing happens because of you. Thank you for what you let God do through you.

Secondly, I met Thyne a year later, and a year after that, we got married. Best thing that ever happened to me. And here’s why I tell you this long story. Us pastors are human and sometimes we get discouraged. People don’t do what we think they should do, or else things don’t happen as fast as we think they should. We get afraid that the church will die, or that we might fail or whatever.

One time in a former parish, I got discouraged, and I was complaining to my spouse, as pastors do too often. I said, “What are we doing here? Are we just a worship club where people get together to sing familiar songs to make themselves feel better? Are we a social service agency? If so, why don’t we just merge with agencies that have training and experience? Are we a salvation club, set up to save our own sorry hides from the fires of hell and as for everybody else, oh well why should we care? What is this all about?”

And my wife, who had seen so much stupid death, said, “New life. That’s what it’s about. New life.”

We don’t have all the answers. But we do have an inkling that Jesus brings new life, that Jesus’ new life reaches beyond death, even stupid death that’s brought about by stupid human sin. Jesus’ new life reaches to us, all of us.

Alleluia, Christ is risen.

Christ is risen indeed, alleluia.