

Grace to you and peace from our risen Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Alleluia! Christ is risen! (wait for response)

The fact that “Alleluia” is the first word we say in worship on Easter is no accident. In the church, we’ve just completed a season of intentional self-examination and introspection – focusing on what it means to follow Jesus, how it shapes the way we live. That season was followed by Holy Week, seven days that remind us of what human beings are capable of doing to each other.

In all of that, “Alleluia” reminds us that, no matter what else is going on, God has the final word, and God’s word is life.

It’s a word that flows easily, especially today. But when the women went to the tomb at early dawn on the first Easter, “Alleluia” was the furthest thing from their minds. They were still in shock over what had happened to Jesus on the Thursday and Friday before. And it wouldn’t be a stretch to say that they were on autopilot as they went to take care of his body.

But when they arrived at the tomb, everything changed in a matter of seconds. The stone had been rolled away, Jesus’ body was nowhere to be found. And two men were there asking, “Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen. Remember what he told you...”

And in that instant, they did remember.

But when the women went back to tell the other disciples what they’d seen, none of them believed them – at all. In fact, the words “idle tale” are a polite translation of what they really thought. They didn’t start to come around until later on that day when Jesus appeared to them on the road to Emmaus.

But because the women took a few tentative steps early on that first Easter, the whole world came to know what God had done. Their amazement, and the amazement of the other disciples, was justified.

Because to believe in the resurrection of Jesus takes faith and courage. <sup>1</sup>No one saw him walk out of the tomb. All we know is that sometime in the pre-dawn hours of that Sunday morning, God worked in secret to bring life out of death. From the heart of loss and misery, God brought about salvation and healing for the world.

But to believe in Jesus' resurrection is more than saying "yes" to that good news. It also means saying "no" to the voices and powers that would have us believe that loss and misery, and pain and death are all that we ought to expect in this world.

There's certainly no shortage of any of those things. And when we're faced with them day after day, it can make it difficult to see much else. But Easter begins with fear, bewilderment, pain, and a profound loss of certainty. It begins with hope in the midst of struggle – before "Alleluia" is even a whisper.

<sup>2</sup>Within the ELCA, there are groups that express the work of the church in the world. One of them is called Sumud. Sumud is an Arabic word that means "steadfastness," and ELCA Sumud is the church's response to occupation and injustice in Palestine and Israel.

Last Saturday, Palm Sunday weekend, ELCA Sumud hosted a webinar with ELCA Presiding Bishop Elizabeth Eaton, Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada National Bishop Susan Johnson, and the Bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan and the Holy Land, Dr. Sani Ibrahim Azar.

Bishops Eaton and Johnson were in Jerusalem as part of a solidarity visit. And in the webinar last Saturday, they shared about some of their experiences – the people they encountered and the situations they witnessed.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/lectionary-essays/current-essay?id=2172>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.elca.org/our-work/publicly-engaged-church/sumud>

What stood out to me, though – and what I’m still holding onto – are the closing comments that Bishop Azar made. He talked about the war, the damage and fear and harm that it’s causing to so many people.

And he said, too, that what we hear about it in the news is just fragments of what’s actually happening. And that with just the fragments, it’s easy to think that everyone is divided and no one is working together. And there are divisions.

But he said that the churches there are working together. They’re working to meet people’s needs and to care for one another. And while Bishop Azar didn’t share the details of their work, my sense is that their work together is a series of “Alleluia” moments.

They aren’t denying the violence and harm that are happening. They’re right in the midst of it all, embodying the hope of the risen Christ.

Most of us are fortunate to have never been in a war zone for any reason. But we do know what it feels like when our lives get turned upside down. The confusion and disorientation that it causes. The power of Christ’s resurrection is what allows us to see our way through when it happens.

It’s what allows us to hold onto hope in the midst of struggle, and to take even tentative steps toward the empty tomb. To come to it just as we are, and to encounter the risen Christ in the chaos. It’s what makes it possible for us to whisper “Alleluia” and say “yes” to the life that we find there.

It gives us the courage to speak the truth about what’s happening – whether we’re facing it in our own lives or in global events. And to meet whatever it is head-on. Because no matter how awful it is, we trust that God is at work. And the power of Christ’s resurrection gives us the strength to go out and bear witness to that.

This type of witness isn’t automatic or easy. It requires the risk of hanging on to hope when there’s no earthly reason to. It requires the risk of getting up in the morning and going to the empty tomb, and trusting that the risen Christ will see us through the chaos, the loss, and the disappointment.

The grittiness of that risk seems to bump up against the celebration of today. But it's only because we've come through the grit that we can even consider saying "Alleluia." Because the power of Christ's resurrection changes the way we live and respond to the things that are happening in our world.

It is no accident that "Alleluia" is the first word we say on Easter Sunday. "Alleluia" reminds us that no matter how messy or scary things are, that isn't all there is. It reminds us that God is at work to bring healing out of loss, hope out of despair, reconciliation out of conflict, triumph out of disappointment, and life out of death.

Thanks be to God! Alleluia. Amen.