

# THIRD SUNDAY OF EASTER

## Christ Our Savior Lutheran Church

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### Joy and Amazement

#### Luke 24:36-49

<sup>36</sup>While they were still talking about this, Jesus himself stood among them and said to them, "Peace be with you."

<sup>37</sup>They were startled and frightened, thinking they saw a ghost. <sup>38</sup>He said to them, "Why are you troubled, and why do doubts rise in your minds? <sup>39</sup>Look at my hands and my feet. It is I myself! Touch me and see; a ghost does not have flesh and bones, as you see I have."

<sup>40</sup>When he had said this, he showed them his hands and feet. <sup>41</sup>And while they still did not believe it because of joy and amazement, he asked them, "Do you have anything here to eat?" <sup>42</sup>They gave him a piece of broiled fish, <sup>43</sup>and he took it and ate it in their presence.

<sup>44</sup>He said to them, "This is what I told you while I was still with you: Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms."

<sup>45</sup>Then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures. <sup>46</sup>He told them, "This is what is written: The Messiah will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, <sup>47</sup>and repentance for the forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. <sup>48</sup>You are witnesses of these things. <sup>49</sup>I am going to send you what my Father has promised; but stay in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high."

I think I've mentioned this before. How for me, the best Easter ever was during my childhood. We were at my grandparents' old downtown church, Grace Lutheran in Monroe, Wisconsin. I don't recall if there were trumpets like we always have, or what the organ sounded like or anything about how the congregation was singing. I just remember a ray of sunshine suddenly bursting through a stained-glass window like a laser beam and lighting up the altar and chancel and all the lilies just as we were singing, "Jesus Christ is Risen Today, Alleluia". I'll never forget that moment, and how my Grandpa Zabel looked down at me and smiled because he saw it too. I've picked that hymn every Easter I've been a pastor and there's always been plenty of lilies up here for the sun to shine on too. But by now I've come to realize that I'll probably never again sing "Jesus Christ has Risen Today" with such wide-eyed amazement and joy as I did that Easter morning nearly fifty years ago, at least not until I get to heaven – which I expect will have a joy and amazement all its own.

Joy and amazement. What would Easter worship be without them?

Probably nothing more than the confused, depressed huddle of frightened, song-less people present that first Easter morning. So down were Jesus' disciples that nothing made sense to them that day: not the empty tomb, not the reports of the women, not even Mary Magdalene's eyewitness encounter. From their perspective there was nothing to get too excited about that morning. By afternoon things were starting to change. The disciples seemed to give the reports of the women a little more credibility once some of them had gone and seen the empty tomb for themselves. Peter even had his own encounter with the risen Christ too. By the time the two who had unknowingly walked with the risen Christ to Emmaus that afternoon broke into the disciples evening gathering with their news, some excitement about the situation was starting to show. "It's true! The Lord has risen" (Luke 24:34) was how they were greeted before they could share what had happened to them.

Joy and amazement. What would Christian faith be without them?

Probably nothing more than a confusing labyrinth of doctrines and a dull listing of intellectual assertions. It would, perhaps, if you were into that sort of thing, stimulate the mind as you bantered about its various philosophical tenants. And I suppose, over time, as you pondered the depth and the wisdom and the sheer other-worldliness of what's written in Holy Scripture you could sense some excitement percolating somewhere in that heart of yours. Three persons, yet one being. Ooh. In-with-and under the bread and wine. Aah! But doctrines like the Holy Trinity or the Real Presence in the Sacrament – as wonderful as they are - rarely, if ever, generate sudden bursts of joy and amazement.

But we wish they would. Don't we?

I mean when faith gets stale or times get tough, don't you find yourself wishing the faith could be more ... moving? When commitment lags and doubts begin to creep in, more joy and amazement seem to be the perfect prescription. After all, inspiring sermons are better than boring ones. Upbeat music is to be preferred to a minor key. Genuine

fellowship is always superior to casual acquaintances. But are they really what makes the risen Christ real and our faith in him strong? Is our excitement about him what makes him present among us?

I'm not so sure given what we heard in today's Holy Gospel about that first Easter evening. We can understand what Luke says is the reason why the disciples first had trouble believing Jesus was really there with them. "They were startled and frightened" (24:36). The suddenness of his appearing caught them off guard, understandable. But their unbelief lingers, causing Jesus to chide them, "Why are you troubled, and why do doubts rise in your minds?" (24:38) as he patiently offers proof of presence by inviting them to touch his scared hands and feet. Okay. Some people need more proof than others. We get that. But here's the kicker: "He showed them his hands and feet. And... they still did not believe it because of joy and amazement" (24:41).

Think about what that's saying for a minute. Simply swapping out fear and trembling – or repetition and boredom – for joy and amazement wasn't enough to get the disciples to believe Jesus himself was standing there at that moment. The disciples, including Peter who had seen him that afternoon (Luke 24:34) and the two who had just excitedly run back from Emmaus to tell everyone that they had just spent the afternoon with the risen Christ, that same evening those disciples didn't believe their own eyes because of joy and amazement.

Joy and amazement. As appreciated as these two things are to our faiths and Easter worship, they do not have the power to convince us Christ is risen. They don't make faith, nor do they make faith stronger.

For that, Jesus said to his startled-frightened-troubled-doubting-joyous-and-amazed disciples, "This is what I told you while I was still with you: Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms.' Then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures" (Lk 24:44-45).

Think about that for a moment. The power to convince us that Christ is risen isn't in our lying eyes ... it isn't in our experience ... it isn't in our emotions – even if those emotions are joy and amazement. It's in his Word. Just like the power to make faith and make it stronger is in the Word. Just like the prescription for all our believing problems, be they the trial and tribulation and temptation kind or just the garden variety staleness and stagnation is in the Word. Not in more joy and amazement or in adding more lilies and brass and somehow timing those welcomed breaks in the clouds. Christianity is not inspiration for inspiration's sake. It's information. It's understanding the Scriptures, specifically understanding that the Scriptures are about what Christ Jesus did to save the world from its sins. Just like Jesus said. "This is what is written: The Messiah will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance for the forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem" (Lk 24:46-47).

Now don't get me wrong. Joy and amazement have their place in our worship and faith. Both would be severely lacking without them. But they do not make Easter real. They do not make us believe Christ is risen and among us. The Word does that, for it has "power from on high" (Luke 24:49).

Let me illustrate the implication of the point I'm making. I am a college basketball fan and a Michigan fan. So, this last month has been an amazing experience to cheer on the Wolverines as they made their way through the Big Ten tournament and the NCAA tournament, all the way to the National Championship game. But as amazing and emotionally intense the buzzer-beaters and hard-fought victories were, the joy of it all didn't change my life. It didn't even provide me what I needed to do and deal with whatever the next day called for. In fact, it fades away almost as quickly as it burst on the scene.

Similarly, to expect the joy and amazement of even Easter to be what makes and sustains and strengthens faith every other day is setting oneself up for trouble and doubts. For most days require us to deal with real disappointments, real sorrow, real sin. And sometimes even real death that the mere feelings of joy and amazement are no match for. God's Word, however, is. When we use it, our risen Savior is with us, opening our minds to understand how its information about his dying and rising, about repentance and forgiveness, about new life now and eternal life hereafter clothes us with the Holy Spirit's power for whatever we have to deal with every day.

One last thing about joy and amazement in the faith. It will always feel insufficient and forced if you are trying to gin it up out of a faith contented with merely knowing about Jesus. On the other hand, taking the time and expending the effort to understand what his Scriptures say makes for a well-versed faith from which joy and amazement naturally flow on Easter and every other day until we rise too!

Amen.

### **Prayer of the Day**

M: O God, by the humiliation of your Son you lifted up this fallen world from the despair of death. By his resurrection to life, grant your faithful people gladness of heart and the hope of eternal joys; through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

C: **Amen.**

### **Prayers of the Church**

M: p. 126 for Easter

*Special requests*