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HE IS ALIVE!

JOHN 20:1-18

Let us Pray: Loving God, as you opened the tomb and raised Jesus to new life, so open our hearts and minds by the power of your Holy Spirit that as your Word is proclaimed, we may hear with joy what you say to us today. We ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.

I wonder how you got here this morning. I expect that some of you have come here because you are always here, even when it's not Easter. Still, others of you have come because someone invited you, or someone forced you, or you just simply came out of curiosity.

Or it could be a story a friend told me who while coming out of church one day, saw the preacher standing at the door, shaking hands. He grabbed my friend by the hand and pulled him aside. The Pastor said to him, "You need to join the Army of the Lord!"

My friend replied, "I'm already in the Army of the Lord, Pastor." Pastor questioned, "How come I don't see you except at Christmas and Easter?" He whispered back, "I'm in the secret service.

But it is no secret why you are here today. This is the day on which our entire faith rises or falls, the day on which it matters. This is the day on which it all really matters.

As the apostle Paul says, "...if Christ has not been raised, then our proclamation has been in vain and your faith has been in vain." If Christ has not been raised, then we have nothing to preach and you have nothing to believe. [1 Cor. 15:14].

Either we proclaim with all our hearts, "Christ is risen indeed! Alleluia!" or we may as well just close our hymnals and go home to the Sunday paper and our Easter brunches right now.

John's account of the resurrection of Christ begins with Mary Magdalene coming to the tomb, no doubt intent on putting spices on the dead body of Christ as a last act of devotion. Arriving at the tomb just before sun came up on Sunday morning, she sees that the stone had been removed.

She didn't enter the tomb. Instead she immediately ran to Peter and the other disciples. Gasping for air she said, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we don't know where they have laid him." Jesus was alive, Mary just didn't know where he was. In fact, she was assuming that he was still dead.

Apparently, Mary went back to the tomb after telling Peter and John about her discovery for the text tells us that she bent around the entrance to look in the tomb. She finally got her nerve up to look and what did she see but two angels.

One was sitting at the head and the other at the feet of where Jesus had laid. And they said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping?" Mary said to them: "They have taken away my Lord, and I don't know where they have laid him?"

The angels knew Jesus was alive. But where was he? The grim reality of Jesus' death was all Mary could think about. After speaking to the angels, John says that Mary turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she didn't know that it was Jesus.

He asked her the same question the angels asked: "Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?" Again, Mary can only think about the death of Christ.

Though the risen Christ was standing right in front of her, she thought he was a gardener. So, with tear-filled eyes, she said, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him." Christ was alive and graciously speaking to Mary face to face, but her question was persistent.

"Where is he?" That's the question that our world asks today: He is alive, but where is he? He is among the least of these, my brothers and sisters. He can be found in the poorest of the poor and the sickest of the sick.

He is among the dirty and downtrodden and oppressed human beings who populate our world. He's alive, but where is he? He's where very few

people are looking. Look there and you will find him. But Christ is not only among the poor. He is in the church.

What do we mean when we say Jesus is here in the church? Where is he? Is he in the front pew, the back pew, the choir, the sanctuary, the fellowship room?

A small church in Toledo, Ohio was having a weekend retreat at a local campsite. At one of the sessions the pastor asked those attending to answer the question, "What first attracted you to the church?"

They were given a 3 x 5 card to write their response. He collected the cards and came across Jennifer's card, a seven-year-old just learning how to write. In response to the question, "What first attracted you to the church?"

She wrote one word in large letters, . . . "Jesus." Jesus. He is the reason we are here. His presence is what draws us to gather for worship. He is here because this is his body. He has in the divine nature of things left himself among us, among those who believe in him and confess him as Lord.

Whatever you may think about that person who has wronged you, or that teacher who is overbearing, or the preacher who just doesn't speak a word that relates to you, . . . know this: Jesus Christ is here, for this is His body.

Paul in his letter to the Romans said, "So we who are many, are one body in Christ" (Rom 12:5). "YOU ARE THE BODY OF CHRIST. That's why Jesus said, "Wherever two or three are gathered in my name there I am also."

That was an inclusive statement, not an exclusive one. He was making a statement about the church, the body of Christ, the coming together of the saints and sinners for worship, fellowship, and confession.

He was saying whenever the church comes together in my name I will be there. As Mary stood before the empty tomb she didn't know where Christ was. She still believed him to be dead. He asked her why she was crying, and she failed to recognize him.

She thought he was the gardener. But then he said the word that changed her life, the word that he says to every human being. It's the word he says to you. He said her name. "Mary." Mary opened her mind and her heart to hear the voice of her Lord calling her by name.

The voice of Jesus was the only voice she wanted to hear. Mary, her own name—that personal, intimate knowledge that Jesus knew who she was. She wanted and needed to hear it so desperately, even though it was not logical, she finally had to admit the possibility. Yes, He had indeed arisen. Hallelujah!!!

And in that one-word God broke through and revealed himself in such dramatic fashion that she was never the same. "Yes, He is alive. He died and was in the grave for 3 days, but death could not overpower him.

Have you heard Jesus say your name? Or have the murmurings of the world and the constant buzz of cell phones, iPod, and Facebook kept you from hearing his voice.

You know he doesn't use those devices to speak you. He speaks directly to your heart. Maybe you've dismissed his still small voice as the distant remnants of childhood fantasy. Jesus is OK for 7-year-old Jennifer, but he's really not for grownups who live in the real world.

Oh, but Jesus is persistent. He's relentless. He continues to say your name. No matter how far you stray away. No matter how many times you dismiss him. He's alive and he continues to say your name, calling you to surrender your life to him.

Do you have a desire—a deep, burning, restless desire—for an encounter with the risen Christ? Do you have a longing to hear God call you by name, for God to know you intimately, a desire so great you are willing to open your heart and your mind?

He's alive, and, where is he? He is here on earth, starving in Ethiopia, living under a tent in Port-au-Prince, Haiti. He's alive and, where is he? He's right here in Watchung Avenue Presbyterian Church, our church sleeping and eating with the homeless. For whatever you do to the least of these you do to me.

If you're going to see Jesus, you'll have to see him in unexpected places. So, look for him and you will see him. Listen for him and you will hear your name. Just as he spoke Mary's name, he's speaking yours.

Christ is Risen. Mary saw Him, and I am here today to say that I have seen Him, too. He is right here. I know that He lives, and death has no power over Him. And because He lives, I can face tomorrow. Life belongs to the Lord Jesus.

This is what Easter proclaims and I believe it is true. Christ is Risen and Ruling, and you can trust in the goodness of God. There is One whose heart is beating—he is risen indeed—and it's beating for me and it is beating for you. This is the day that the Lord has made. Let us rejoice and be glad in it. Hallelujah. Amen.

Let us pray: Dear Heavenly Father, let us go from this place not in disappointment, but in awe, knowing our Lord for who he is. Let us go forth knowing he is indeed alive, full of Alleluias to live lives of praise. Amen!