

9 April 2023
The Resurrection of Our Lord

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

Jesu Juva

“Our Faithful and Living Bridegroom”

Text: Matthew 28:1-10; Jeremiah 31:1-6; Colossians 3:1-4

(Introit: from Exodus 15)

Alleluia! Christ is Risen! [*He is risen indeed! Alleluia!*] Alleluia!

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

In our marriage liturgy, the bride and groom vow their faithfulness to one another *until death us do part*. And one day it will. As joyous as they are, all marriages begin with that reality - they will not last forever. But on the wedding day, the joy far outshines that reality. That part of the future can be safely tucked away. For now.

That was the situation for the disciples. At least three times, Jesus had told them that their relationship was going to end - with death. His death. He told them that He was going to be betrayed, arrested, and crucified. He didn't tell them when. So the joy of being with Him, hearing Him teach, witnessing His miracles, enabled them to safely tuck that reality away.

And when He entered Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, with the large crowds and the shouts of *Hosanna!* it seemed that reality *would* be in the distant future. But how quickly things happened after that. It took only a couple of days. And death parted them. And suddenly they were alone. And felt very alone.

So after the Sabbath, the women went to the tomb, as many a grieving widow visits the grave of her beloved now parted from her. That part of the story is no surprise. What is is *who else* went to the tomb of their beloved that day - **an angel** who ***came and rolled back the stone and sat on it***. An angel whose ***appearance was like lightning***, and whose ***clothing was white as snow***. An angel who made even hardened ***guards tremble and become like dead men***. An angel who basically said this: you think that death has parted your loved one from you; that this is the end. It is not! ***He is not here, because he has risen, as he said*** He would. This is not the end! For there is one marriage that death cannot end - the marriage of the Lamb and His Bride, the Church. That's why Jesus died - so He could rise and defeat death. That our joy have no end. That we be with Him forever.

Well, as you can certainly understand, it is not easy going from sadness and mourning to

joy that quickly! The women *departed from the tomb* both *with fear and great joy*. Probably more than a bit befuddled, wanting to believe but cautious, not wanting to believe and then crash back down again. But then *Jesus met them*, and their joy was the joy of a wedding day! They were united again, and *took hold of his feet and worshiped him*.

Now I bring this up about marriage and put Jesus and His resurrection into this kind of context - which is perhaps a bit unusual for an Easter sermon! - because this is what the prophet Jeremiah does in the words we heard from him today. Now I have to confess, in all the weddings I've performed and all I've been to, I don't think I've ever - ever! - heard Jeremiah as one of the Scripture readings. And, I think, with good reason. Jeremiah isn't a very cheery prophet. Most aren't! Most are sent by God to call His people to repentance, and Jeremiah was no exception. And the time of Jeremiah was a low point for the people of Judah. They had not just been unfaithful to God, their heavenly Bridegroom, they had been *very* unfaithful. They had been spiritually adulterous with not a few false gods. And so the death of the nation was imminent.

And yet, in the midst of these words of warning, Jeremiah also speaks words of hope - the words we heard this morning. Words filled with *marriage* hope and joy.

For first, the Lord declares through Jeremiah, *I will be [their] God . . . and they shall be my people*. You probably don't realize it, but those are Old Testament marriage words. In our marriage liturgy, we ask bride and groom if they will take one another, and they say: *I will*. Here, it is God who says: I will. Even though His people had said *we won't*, even though His people had been unfaithful to Him, the Lord *continued [His] faithfulness to [them]*. I will! And then notice the second half of that sentence: *I will be [their] God . . . and they shall be my people*. Even though they, right now, are saying *we won't*, God is doing something, God is going to do something, so they *shall be His people*. That's a statement. That's a promise.

For, the Lord says, *I have loved you with an everlasting love*. That's not a love that runs hot and cold, a love that's here today and gone tomorrow, a love based on feelings or what have you done for me lately - an everlasting love could come only from one who *is* everlasting Himself. And be not because of anything in you or me, but because of Him; because that's the kind of love He is and has for His Bride. *An everlasting love* is what brides and grooms promise, but which only the Lord can deliver and give. And He does. You are loved with that kind of love.

Then He goes on to say, *Again I will build you, and you shall be built, O virgin Israel!* Which, if you read through the book of Jeremiah to this point, you say: What? Huh? Israel is *anything but* a virgin! She has been unfaithful all over the place and with all kinds of gods! She is filthy and unclean; Disgusting, really.

So what's going on with these words? Well, two things. **First, this is what forgiveness is.** To speak of Israel as *a virgin* means that all her past - and all your past, too! - her sins, her unfaithfulness, her adultery, her rebellion, her *I won't!* - is gone! Is *forgiven*. For God's forgiveness is so total, so complete, that it's *as if* the sin never happened. Jeremiah says later in this chapter that *your sin is remembered no more* (31:34). The Psalmist says your sin is separated from you *as far as the east is from the west* (Psalm 103:12), and there is no distance as great as that. So when you are forgiven, you are restored, you are perfect.

Which is also hinted at with the word **build** in that verse. That's the verb used for Eve in the Garden, when God created her, or literally *built* her, for Adam. The sinless bride for the sinless husband in the first marriage. So **the way it was is the way it will be again.** Just as the perfect bride, Eve, was **built** from the side of Adam, so will the perfectly forgiven Church, the Bride of Christ, be **built** from the side of Christ, when His side is pierced on the cross, and His life-giving, forgiveness-giving blood and water pour out.

Then next for Jeremiah, there is music and dancing, and vineyards and their fruit - a party, **a wedding feast.** And then these words: **Arise** - and if that word doesn't stand out like a sore thumb on the day of Easter, the day of our Lord's arising, His resurrection! **Arise, and let us go up to Zion, to the Lord our God.** These are Easter words, new life words, because these words don't make sense for the people of Jeremiah's day, for Zion, the city of God, the dwelling place of God, according to Jeremiah's prophecy, was about to be no more, destroyed, wiped out. But there was coming a day, when God's people would **arise** - rise from their graves! - and **go up** - ascend - to the city of God, to the dwelling place of God! And then would begin the marriage feast that has no end.

These words of Jeremiah are his vision of Easter, some 500 years before it happened. Though things were about to get very bad for the people, and there would be much death and destruction, God was going to raise them up. God was going to make things right again. God is faithful, and when He makes a marriage vow, He keeps it.

Which means that unlike our marriages, because of Jesus' resurrection this day, death cannot part us from our Saviour. Though we die, His resurrection means that one day we will **arise and go up to the Lord our God.** For as we heard also from St. Paul today, **When Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.** That's another promise for you.

Which we need, right? Because like the people of Jeremiah's day, we look around and there's a lot of death and destruction in our world. I don't have to go through the litany of things again - you know them. You see them. You are saddened and sorrowed by them. **But we are not without hope.** For Easter is not about bunnies or chocolate, but about our Bridegroom who so loved His Bride that He laid down His life for us, so that dying He defeat our death, so that He wash away the stain of our sins and unfaithfulness, and fulfill His promise: *I will.* And I never won't.

And until that day, until death no longer parts us and the marriage feast of the Lamb in His kingdom begins, He feeds us now. *The Lamb's High Feast*, as we will sing (LSB #633). A foretaste of the feast to come. Take eat, take drink, this is My Body, this is My Blood, the Blood of My promise, the Blood of forgiveness, the food you need, My beloved. And as you come and eat and drink, *set your minds on things above*. Don't get mired and stuck in the things of this world and life. Yes, there is much to fear and worry about. But your life is not here or dependent on these things. Your life is safe with me, Jesus says. And *when Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory*. For as Jesus has already said through the prophet Jeremiah so many years ago: *I will be your God, and you shall be my people*. He has made it so.

So as we sang in the Introit, *[We] will sing to the Lord, for he has triumphed gloriously!* And *here* is where these words will become a reality for us: *until death us do part*. For when we die in Christ, we will rise to life in Christ, and then we will finally and fully be parted from all sin, from death, and from the devil. Our divorce - not from God, but *from evil* - will be complete. And final. For *the Lord will reign forever and ever*. And because of this day, because of Jesus, because of His resurrection, we will reign with Him. Never to be parted again.

For **Alleluia! Christ is risen!** [*He is risen indeed! Alleluia!*] Alleluia!

In the Name of the Father, and of the (+) Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.