

My sisters and brothers, whom I love and adore, my joy and crown,
stand firm in the Lord...and know this - it's all true!

Every bit of it - it's all true!

The empty tomb. The risen Lord.

That he was buried, that he was raised on the third day,
that he appeared first to Mary, then to Peter and the twelve,
and later to Paul.

It's all true.

On this, the day of days, lay aside skepticism and doubt,
and instead join with the great chorus of saints,
with angels and archangels and all the company of heaven and say:

Alleluia. Christ is risen! **The Lord is risen indeed. Alleluia! (say it again!)**

It's all true.

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We are here this morning because of one little sentence.

"I have seen the Lord!"

Mary Magdalene's proclamation is why we're all here.

Because if Mary Magdalene is telling the truth, then everything is different.

And if she isn't, then all of this -

the flowers, the music, the joy, the BRUNCH -
as beautiful as it all is...is pointless.

But Mary is speaking truth: She has seen the Lord!

God is alive. God is real. And God loves YOU.

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Now, who this real God DOESN'T love...is the not-real you.

Not Instagram you. Not "hey, everything's great" you.

Definitely not Twitter you.

But the actual flesh & blood, snot & fat YOU

Whatever your age, whatever your finances,

whatever your mental health, physical health,

whoever it is you see when you look in the mirror,

whatever your pronouns, whoever you love,

whoever you vote for,

however you interpret the news of the day or the culture around you,

God. Loves. YOU.

Not because those things don't matter.

Because God loves you anyway.

Loves you so much God became one of you.

Laughed with you, ate with you, rejoiced & wept with you.

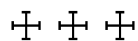
Washed your stinky feet, healed your bloody sores,

suffered & died for you, rose for you,

freed YOU from the dominion of death,

and then, just for good measure,

cooked breakfast on the shore. For you.



I preach this sermon every Easter

because the hardest thing for so many of us to do,
is to believe that God could love me - the actual me.

And the second hardest thing for us to do

is believe that the resurrection of Jesus is real.

Not a metaphor, but a physical resurrection. His body, risen.

God does not love the IDEA of you, God loves YOU.

and WE don't believe in the IDEA of the resurrection.

We worship a risen Lord.

John Updike says,

Make no mistake: if He rose at all it was as His body;
if the cells' dissolution did not reverse, the molecules reknit,
the amino acids rekindle, the Church will fall.¹

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It matters that Jesus' body is raised because YOUR body matters,
because everything that happens to you happens to your body.

You don't love the IDEA of somebody. You love their body.

You don't grieve the idea of somebody's death.

You grieve the actual physical death of this person you love.

The death of their body.

¹ John Updike, "Seven Stanzas at Easter."

Joy, love, courage...trauma, anxiety, depression -

these don't exist on some hidden spiritual plane of existence.

They exist in your body, in the neurotransmitters of your brain,

in the blood vessels that constrict under stress and relax in safety,

in the nerves that tingle when your beloved touches you,

in the muscles that cramp & ache in grief when the one you love has died.

You know, the older I get the more I see how much of who I am

is affected by things like brain chemistry and circumstance.

My decisions, my morality and values -

they're as much about my body as they are my mind or my soul.

And it makes me think that if my morality and values are affected

by whether or not Publix has my prescription ready,

then maybe God's love isn't contingent on my moral fortitude,

or on the development of my frontal cortex.

Maybe God's love really is for my body -

for this stinky, sinful, inconsistent, beautiful flesh-and-blood body.

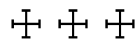
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Flannery O'Connor says,

It is not the soul... that will rise but the body, glorified.²

And St. Paul says if he is not risen, then we are most to be pitied.

I say if our hope is in the resurrection of Jesus' body,
then hoping...is a physical act of your body.



Now there's room for doubt about all this. A lot of room.

Never be scared of doubts, but don't make an idol out of them, either.

The first ones to the tomb had trouble believing.

Mary. Peter. Even the Beloved Disciple.

They looked in & still didn't understand,
not even an empty tomb could open their eyes.

After the trauma of Good Friday, their hearts were buried

in a cave of fear and resignation that whispered it was all over,

that the Jesus movement had been put down, that it was all just a lie.

But then Jesus called Mary by her name,

and all of a sudden the world was back to the way it should be

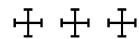
because it was the voice of Our Lord, the voice of Our Hope,

and now everything is possible again because Jesus is alive

and calling her by name.

What if Jesus is still calling out to us today?

² Flannery O'Connor, *The Habit of Being*.



The poet Christian Wiman has a new book out,
and in one of his essays he tells about why he is a Christian.
See if it reminds you of Mary Magdalene.

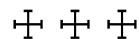
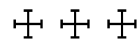
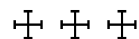
This interviewer told Wiman that he could see from his writings
why he was a theist - why he believed in God -
but he couldn't understand how Wiman was a Christian.³

Wiman said,

“In that moment all my thoughts about incarnation and resurrection,
apophasis and cataphasis, atoms and Adams - *poof* - gone.
I stammered out the only answer I had.”

“I am a Christian because once when I was suffering terribly and near death,
Christ came to me: in my mind, in my heart,
through the minds and hearts of others, through what I was reading,
and what I was touching and tasting and seeing.

He seemed everywhere, dammit, and was present in my soul. Was my soul.”



³ Christian Wiman, “Zero at the Bone: 50 Entries Against Despair,” pg. 254.

Hey, did you know there are 50 days of Easter? 50 days!

I want to challenge you to start something special this Easter.

In the spirit of Jesus calling Mary by name.

and of Christ coming to Christian Wiman

at what he thought was the end of his life,

I would like to challenge each of us to try and deeply know someone
you are not at all inclined to want to know.

This might sound a little naive or hokey but it's not. It's deeply important.

We are about to promise that with God's help

we will seek and serve Christ in all persons

and respect the dignity of every human being.

That promise is not just for the people who think like you

and the people you feel sympathy for.

It includes the ones you have identified as enemy,

the ones you have closed your heart to,

the ones you think are pulling us all in exactly the wrong direction.

Expand your circle by exactly one person.

Could be anybody, as long as he or she belongs to

that category we all have: "People I don't want to talk to. Ever."

For those of you hurt by old churches,
maybe it's someone whose soul is still being fed at that old church.

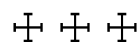
Maybe it's getting to deeply know someone who seems content
being stuck in a cycle of poverty and dependence.

Maybe it's someone who has found life and meaning
around a political or cultural issue that is deeply offensive to you.

Not that it has to be some deep political thing.

It could be a member of the "Overbearing School Moms of Decatur,"
or the "Association of People Who Drive BMW's like idiots on I-285,"
or their rival gang,
the "DeKalb Count Association of People
Who Refuse to Cross a Major Street at the Crosswalk."

Only you know who is on your list of undesirables.
Only you know who your heart is closed to.



The second part of this challenge -
and just saying this out loud is making me nervous
because I know who my group is
and I don't want to open my heart to them -
but the second part of this challenge is to remember that the goal
is not to change him, or fix him, or that classic - be reconciled to him.

The goal is to make a friend.

To learn where she grew up. What her parents were like.

The goal is to discover what she's proud of in her life and what she regrets.

It's to discover the really complex inner life and story
behind the outer face you had previously rejected.

It's to know this person well enough, to care about her enough,
that if she were to call you,
you would rearrange your schedule to help her out.

See, this Easter challenge is not about her. It's about you.

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When Jesus called Mary Magdalene by name,
when Christ reached out to the poet who bore his name,
their lives were changed forever.

We don't have that kind of influence,
but we make a difference in people's lives.
People know when they don't matter to us.
They know when we don't see them as human.

I can't think of a better way to celebrate Jesus calling Mary by name
than to discover a real, live child of God
behind the face of someone you had long ago written off
as a non-person.

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50 days of Easter. You can do anything for 50 days. Give it a try.

If it doesn't work, after Pentecost you can go right back
to the old ways of malice and wickedness.

But give it a try.

Do it because Christ is risen and that's all the excuse you need.

Lift your voice rejoicing, Mary. It's all true!

Christos Anesti! Alithos Anesti!

Alleluia - Christ is Risen!

The LORD is risen indeed! Alleluia!