

Rejoice, Rejoice
John 20: 1-18

Shirley Nelson
Easter, April 4, 2021

Without realizing it, this morning I chose two of my favorite hymns for the service written by the same song writers. "There is Something About that Name" and "Because he Lives" were both written and sung by Bill and Gloria Gaither. They were written in the early 70's and are only about 50 years old which is fairly new compared to so many of the hymns in our hymnal. Written in 1971 Gloria Gaither tells the story of being a wife and a mother and expecting their third baby. They were living during the time of the drug culture. Cities were rampant with racial tension and the God-is-dead pronouncement had worked its way all through our educational system.

Gloria Gaither said Bill was physically exhausted, battling some family problems, struggling with people questioning them about the whole existence of God. On New Year's Eve she sat alone in darkness in their living room wondering who in their right mind would bring another child into this world where so much evil was rampant.

She couldn't explain what happened at that moment, but the Spirit of the Lord came over her and suddenly she was released from all the panic she felt. A reassuring presence engulfed her life, the fear left and the joy of having a new baby returned to her. She knew that she could face the future. Because He lives, she could face tomorrow and the start of a new song.

We can all face tomorrow because the Resurrection is just as real today as it was 2,000 years ago! Jesus is just as real. He is just as alive. He brings just as much meaning to our lives now as he did back then.

This morning our scripture talked about the disciples and the fact that they had been through so much with Jesus. Jesus had repeatedly told them that he would rise again, but they just didn't get it. And now, on Easter Sunday, they had heard the report from Mary - the tomb is empty!

Peter and John had seen the evidence for themselves - the tomb was empty! When John went into the empty tomb and saw, he believed and rejoiced.... the tomb is empty! It is empty! He lives! But then the disciples returned to their homes." Can you believe it? When faced with the most earth-shaking, life-changing fact of history, they all went home, cowering in fear! Where was their confidence? Jesus told him he would rise again. Did he rise or was his body stolen? Their confidence only came when Jesus showed up in the flesh and he appeared to them in a locked room a few days later.

Jesus is here with us this morning. He has risen and we are rejoicing that he is alive. The message is still the same for all of us. Because he lives, we can face tomorrow!

"A twelve-year-old (boy) became a Christian during a revival. He accepted God as his savior. The next week at school his friends questioned him about the experience. 'Did you see a vision?' asked one friend. 'Did you hear God speak?' asked another. The youngster answered no to all these questions. 'Well, how did you know you were saved?' they asked. The boy searched for an answer and finally he said: 'It's like when you catch a fish, you can't see the fish

or hear the fish; you just feel him tugging on your line. I just felt God tugging on my heart” When you feel God tugging on your heart and you respond, it makes facing tomorrow a whole lot easier!

The disciples didn't have the faith to believe - the tomb was empty! They couldn't face tomorrow because they were not there to see the empty tomb. How much faith do you have in God for tomorrow? It's easy to condemn the disciples for their struggle, isn't it? But to be truthful, we are often no better than the disciples.

But because He lives, we can face tomorrow with faith! we can have faith in God everywhere at all times! The empty tomb means that we never have to have an empty heart that does not have faith in God for today and tomorrow. We can face eternity with peace. We know that Jesus died for our sins.

History tells us that all of the disciples except one, died violent deaths, many of them being crucified, just as their Master was. What does this tell us? That, after the Resurrection, they scattered across many lands, preaching to countless people, bearing up under great opposition, embracing the Cross of their Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. They all knew they would enter into eternity some day, but they were at peace with the idea, because they knew the one who held all eternity in his hand, and their hope rested squarely on him! The disciples were sent out in all directions of the world to spread the word and to be true disciples of Christ

Over a hundred years ago, “an American tourist paid a visit to a renowned Polish rabbi. He was astonished to see that the rabbi's home was only a simple room filled with books, plus a table and a cot. “The tourist asked, ‘Rabbi, where is your furniture? And the rabbi replied in return, ‘Where is yours?’

The puzzled American asked, ‘Mine? But I'm only a visitor here. I'm only passing through.’ The rabbi replied, ‘So am I’”

This is what the apostles knew as well. They were only passing through. They were sent out to spread the word. Soon enough they would move into the landscape of eternity, and they were prepared for that event, and so they were at peace.

In John 14:27, Jesus gives us this promise: “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.” The disciples heard these words, and a few short days later, they were on the journey of a lifetime where life was rarely good, but the word they were spreading about God was always good.

They had little financial security, popularity, praise, or the stability of a permanent home or job. But they had Jesus, and Jesus was enough for them and enough for all of us. If we have the risen Jesus, that is enough! No matter what else we do or do not have in life, Jesus is more than enough. He is all I need and all you need. He gives us his peace for all eternity.

When you sing the closing hymn this morning, take special note of all three verses and remember it was written by Bill and Gloria Gaither waiting for the birth of their third child.

. It starts out....

God sent His Son, they called Him Jesus,

He came to love, Heal, and forgive;
He lived and died to buy my pardon,
An empty grave is there to prove My Savior lives.
Because He lives, I can face tomorrow,
Because He lives All fear is gone;
Because I know He holds the future.
And life is worth the living Just because He lives.

Jesus is alive! The tomb could not hold him! And because he lives, we do not have to fear today, tomorrow, or eternity!

The story of the empty tomb has been retold every year for more than 2000 years. And it is just as new today as it has been since the Friday that Jesus died on the cross and the Sunday that he rose from the dead.

One of the few Country Western concerts I ever attended was a Johnny Cash concert in the early 60's. It was obvious that he was on drugs. His voice was less than pleasing and he couldn't even sing a lot of the songs. Johnny Cash was raised in a devout church-going family. Once his singing career took off, he drifted away from what he knew. "Show business pressures drove him to take pills to go to sleep, pills to wake up, pills to go to sleep again, and soon he was addicted.

His first arrest came in 1965, when he was caught holding more than one thousand pills. He went from a healthy 200 pounds to 140 pounds... Then on May 9, 1971, Johnny Cash sat in the pew of a small church in his hometown. The pastor finished his sermon and appealed to the congregation to come to the Lord and make things right with God.

Johnny Cash stood up and walked to the wooden altar", found Jesus, and his life was never the same! He lived another 32 years clean and sober and a devout follower of Jesus Christ.

How ironic that Bill and Gloria Gaither were writing the song, "Because He Lives" about the same time that Johnny Cash was giving his life to the Lord. Most people today hope for a long and happy life, but Jesus offers so much more. He offers forever. He offers eternity. The promise of eternal life is the heartbeat of hope. It's what we, as Christians, long for and look forward to. No doubt as we age and grow, we feel the limitations of a 24-hour day and a 7-day week. We feel the limitations of a month and the fact that there are only 12 months in a year through which to fulfil the demands being made upon our time.

We can fulfil those demands by beginning a new relationship with God. We can talk to Him and tell Him what's on our mind. We can confess our sins to Him and He will forgive us. We can tell Him our problems and He will help us work through them. He will even heal you if you come to Him in faith today – heal you of a painful past, help you in the present, and be with you forever in the future. He can be trusted because He is the same faithful God that we all know – yesterday, today, and forever. Amen and Amen