

## DAY OF GLADNESS

**An Easter sermon by Dean Scotty McLennan  
University Public Worship  
Stanford Memorial Church  
April 24, 2011**

Happy Easter to each and every one of you! This is truly the day of gladness. Mary Magdalene, who had personally seen Jesus die on the cross<sup>i</sup> and then watched his corpse be buried in a rock tomb just before the Sabbath,<sup>ii</sup> comes to his burial place the morning after the Sabbath<sup>iii</sup> and encounters Jesus alive again, risen from the grave. The gospel lesson I just read from John<sup>iv</sup> describes Mary as then simply going to announce to the male disciples, "I have seen the Lord," but in the gospel of Matthew we're told that Mary left the tomb with great joy and ran to tell the male disciples.<sup>v</sup>

We modern rationalists might deny that any corpse can come to life again, but the gospel reports are that Mary and other females first, and later all of Jesus's male disciples had at least visions of him risen again -- visions that are described in different gospel accounts as appearances<sup>vi</sup> of a Jesus who can disappear at will,<sup>vii</sup> seems ghostlike,<sup>viii</sup> and passes through closed and locked doors.<sup>ix</sup> The apostle Paul, who never knew Jesus before his crucifixion, later has an auditory experience of the risen Jesus speaking to him -- although not heard by others present.<sup>x</sup> These kinds of experiences, perhaps mystical experiences of what Paul calls a spiritual body rather than a physical body,<sup>xi</sup> were in any case very powerful for Jesus' followers and convinced them that he was with them anew and that they should go on in his spirit to feed and tend his sheep,<sup>xii</sup> to teach others what he had commanded them,<sup>xiii</sup> and to proclaim the good news of the coming of the Kingdom of God to all of the world.<sup>xiv</sup> The first Easter for his disciples was truly a day of gladness.

What makes this a day of gladness for you? Reunion and celebration with family members? Experiencing the beauty of this place -- the grandeur of this church with its mosaics and stained glass and soaring ceilings? Singing your heart out and hearing great music from our organist and choir? Looking forward to an Easter dinner with all the trimmings? Easter egg hunts with children? Or just delighting in the spring, with trees budding and flowers blooming and sunny days getting longer and longer?

Of course Easter is not the only great spring festival being celebrated now. Our Jewish friends are in the midst of Passover, commemorating the Exodus -- liberation from slavery and promise of redemption to come.<sup>xv</sup> May Day is coming soon, and it has a long history probably originating in spring fertility festivals in India and Egypt, through the festival of the Roman goddess of spring, Flora, through dancing around the Maypole, starting in medieval England, through the labor holiday proclaimed by the Socialist International in 1889.<sup>xvi</sup> We will end this service singing of nature's rebirth: "fields are smiling in the sun...loosened streamlets seaward run...Tender blade and leaf appear...'tis the springtide of the year."<sup>xvii</sup>

But we don't come to Easter without remembering and recognizing a winter of discontent that lies behind. It's been cold and rainy, even in beautiful California. The season of Lent, as always, has been one of introspection, sacrifice, and penance.<sup>xviii</sup> At our noontime Good Friday service here in Memorial Church this year, our seminarian Mary Green preached about Jesus's horrendous torture and death, nailed to a cross. We all recited his experience of being in a wilderness of doubts and hungers; of being forsaken, denied and betrayed; of drinking gall.<sup>xix</sup> None of us experience a life that's consistently sunny, vibrant, and redemptive. And our larger world has experienced economic recession, earthquakes, tsunamis, wars, terrorism bigotry and dislocation. Of course, so much of that still continues.

But Easter is the great day of hope. It's the time we affirm the awe-inspiring cycle of life that brings renewal again and again, even after the greatest devastation and desolation. The sun rises again after the darkest night. Wounds can heal, enemies can be reconciled, good times can follow bad, people can find their way home again or build a new one.

I'm reminded of the words of the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. when he gave the eulogy for little girls killed in 1963 by a bomb as they attended Sunday school at the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama.<sup>xx</sup> He spoke of "the brief years that they were privileged to act on this mortal stage" and how "they are now committed back to that eternity from which they came." "Unoffending, innocent and beautiful children" they were, and then they became "victims of one of the most vicious, heinous crimes ever perpetuated against humanity." But he explained that they have much to say to us in their death as well as in their life. They live on in urging us to "work passionately and unrelentingly to make the American Dream a reality." Their innocent blood may well serve, he said, as a redemptive force for good, for bringing us all closer to peace and brotherhood [and sisterhood].

Rev. King spoke not only of the possibility of redemption in this life, but also of the meaning of eternal life -- of what resurrection, in effect, means for these girls themselves. He described death "not as a period that ends the great sentence of life, but a comma that punctuates it to more lofty significance." His notion of the girls being "committed back to that eternity from which they came," sounds to me like the only image that's ever made sense to me of what happens to our individual consciousness after we die -- we remerge into universal consciousness. The image is of emerging from the great ocean of being, like a wave that swells and then breaks, with tiny droplets falling back into the sea. Our years of conscious individual life on this earth are the time that we, as those drops, are falling freely and uniquely through the air. But then we

remerge into the infinite and eternal ocean of being. There will be more waves ahead and more droplets floating free for a while, but ultimately they all remerge into the one sea. Or, to use another image, tiny seeds mature into plants that live gloriously for a while, and then in their turn become soil for new life to arise.

King and others have spoken of us all standing on the shoulders of those who came before, as those who come after us will stand on our shoulders. Not only do we have eternal significance in the ecology of life itself, but we also have personal significance and influence during and after our individual earthly lives, because of those who came before us and because of how we affect those who come after us. Jesus spoke of coming to fulfill the law and the prophets who came before him, and his own influence has continued to grow on this earth for two thousand years after his death on the cross. Rev. King always paid tribute to his forbearers, and now there's a national holiday in his honor that carries his moral and spiritual vision forward. And we don't need to be prominent or famous for our personal significance and influence to endure. When I do memorial services for students, faculty, staff and alumni here at Stanford, I often remind the gathered congregation of the accomplishments, the joy, the love, and inspiration that the deceased person leaves behind, which continues to touch us going forward. And our love for him or her, deeply felt and cherished, endures all things, and reaches out to transform other people through its unconquerable power. Those other people, standing on their forbearers' shoulders, affect the generations to come, and the cycle continues without end.

"O give thanks to the Lord," says the psalmist, "for he is good; his steadfast love endures forever... This is the day that the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it."<sup>xxi</sup>

## **BENEDICTION**

In the words of the prophet Isaiah [55:12],

"You shall go out in joy, and be led back in peace;

The mountains and the hills before you shall burst into song,

And all the trees of the fields shall clap their hands." AMEN.

## NOTES

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- <sup>i</sup> John 19: 25-30; Mark 15: 33-41; Matthew 27: 45-56.
- <sup>ii</sup> John 19: 31; Luke 23: 54-55.
- <sup>iii</sup> Matthew 28:1; Mark 16: 1-2; Luke 24: 1-10; John 20:1.
- <sup>iv</sup> John 20:1-18.
- <sup>v</sup> Matthew 28:8.
- <sup>vi</sup> John 21:1; Luke 24:34; Mark 16: 9,12,14.
- <sup>vii</sup> Luke 24:31.
- <sup>viii</sup> Luke 24:37.
- <sup>ix</sup> John 20: 19,26.
- <sup>x</sup> Acts 9: 3-7; 22: 6-9.
- <sup>xi</sup> I Corinthians 15:44;
- <sup>xii</sup> John 21: 15-17;
- <sup>xiii</sup> Matthew 28:20.
- <sup>xiv</sup> Mark 16:15.
- <sup>xv</sup> Jonathan Smith (ed.), *The HarperCollins Dictionary of Religion* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1995), pp. 971-972.
- <sup>xvi</sup> Judith Levey (ed.), *The Concise Columbia Encyclopedia* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), p. 528.
- <sup>xvii</sup> Frederick Lucian Hosmer, "Lo, the Day of Days is Here" (1890).
- <sup>xviii</sup> *HarperCollins Dictionary*, p. 656.
- <sup>xix</sup> Jane Parker Huber, "Christ Jesus Knew a Wilderness" (1986).
- <sup>xx</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr., "Eulogy for the Martyred Children," 1963, as reprinted in James Melvin Washington, *A Testament of Hope* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1986), pp. 221-223.
- <sup>xxi</sup> Psalm 118: 1, 24.