

Sermon + Easter Sunday, Matthew 28:1-10
April 12, 2020
For Resurrection Evangelical Lutheran Church
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Christ is risen. Christ is risen indeed. Alleluia. We make this song, even as the chaos of pandemic wreaks havoc all around us. Still, Christ is risen indeed.

The holy gospel according to Matthew. **Glory to you, O Lord.**

After the sabbath, as the first day of the week was dawning, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb. ²And suddenly there was a great earthquake; for an angel of the Lord, descending from heaven, came and rolled back the stone and sat on it. ³His appearance was like lightning, and his clothing white as snow. ⁴For fear of him the guards shook and became like dead men. ⁵But the angel said to the women, “Do not be afraid; I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. ⁶He is not here; for he has been raised, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay. ⁷Then go quickly and tell his disciples, ‘He has been raised from the dead, and indeed he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him.’ This is my message for you.” ⁸So they left the tomb quickly with fear and great joy, and ran to tell his disciples. ⁹Suddenly Jesus met them and said, “Greetings!” And they came to him, took hold of his feet, and worshiped him. ¹⁰Then Jesus said to them, “Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me.”

The gospel of the Lord. **Praise to you, O Christ.**

Because we’ve been awash in words throughout Holy Week (this is my fifth sermon in the space of a week!), I’m going to preach on one word from Matthew’s account of the resurrection. The single word in the New Revised Standard Version is this: “Greetings!”

In Matthew’s Gospel, this word is the first recorded utterance from the mouth of the newly risen Christ to mortals. The ears of Mary Magdalene and the other Mary were privileged to hear it. “Greetings!”

I must say that I think of another Mary, mother of our Lord, who in Luke’s account of the whole Christ event, heard a similar salutation: “Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you.”

And, in terms of this offering in the Matthean resurrection account, I must confess I'm with Mary in the spirit of her reaction to the angel Gabriel in the beginning of Luke: "she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be."

Yes, at first glance, I, too, am perplexed by Jesus' resurrection utterance and also ponder what sort of greeting this is, even as I am sure that Mary Magdalene and the other Mary were likewise perplexed.

In our English translation, it sounds rather stiff, formal. "Greetings!" But what are the alternatives? "Hello." "Heyyyy..." "I'm back!" "Didn't expect to see me, did you!?" And on... and who knows what else?

The Revised Standard Version translates it this way: "Hail!" That sounds too much like Jesus movies from the 1950's. The King James Version is "All Hail" – that's even worse, Jesus movies of the 1930's maybe.... The New American Bible and Today's English Version render it as "Peace." The Living Bible, as a paraphrase and not a translation, says it this way – "Good Morning!" These English versions don't cut it...

So just what sort of greeting is this, Jesus' first recorded utterance to mortals as the risen one? In terms of the appearance of the word elsewhere in Matthew's Gospel, it's a greeting dripping with irony.

It's the word that Judas used in the garden of Gethsemane to betray Jesus: "At once [Judas] came up to Jesus and said, 'Greetings, Rabbi!' and kissed him." (Matthew 26:49)

It's the word the soldiers at the governor's headquarters used to mock Jesus after he had been before Pilate: "They stripped him and put a scarlet robe on him, and after twisting some thorns into a crown, they put it on his head. They put a reed in his right hand and knelt before him and mocked him, saying, 'Hail [Greetings] King of the Jews!'" (Matthew 27:28-29)

As it appears in the context of the resurrection, especially after its use by Judas and the Roman soldiers, the greeting is powerfully ironic indeed. Now Jesus has the last word: "Greetings!"

The betrayal, the mocking, the flogging, the cross, the cry, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?', the death, the burial – none of this has the last word. Jesus has the last word... In a word, "Greetings!"

Things are sounding better now for this seemingly odd resurrection word of greeting, aren't they?

But there's more. And for this, we need to understand the word in the original biblical Greek. I won't burden you with the Greek word itself, but perhaps a compelling translation of the salutation (here and, for example, when the Angel Gabriel greets Mary) is: 'rejoice.' Rejoicing fits the mood a lot better than 'hail' or 'greetings,' doesn't it?

And there's still more – one seemingly simple little word, easily overlooked or taken for granted, connects in its root to other Greek words, and thus unlocks the door to reveal a host of theological points made by the resurrection of Christ.

That is to say, the Greek word translated, "Greetings" or "Rejoice" shares a Greek root word with the following churchly words and ideas:

- Joy
- To rejoice with
- Grace (now there's a big one for Lutherans!)
- To give freely (as in Christian generosity in servant ministry)
- To bestow favor, to bless
- Gift (as in charisms or gifts of the Spirit given at Baptism, and anointing with the oil of chrism)
- Gratitude, thanksgiving (the Eucharist – where the risen Jesus is made known to us in the breaking of bread, as if Jesus himself addresses us, "Greetings, this is my body given for you, my blood shed for you")

Theologically, it doesn't get better than this! In the Greek, there's no more fitting word that Jesus could have used as his first greeting to Mary Magdalene and the other Mary upon the event of his resurrection.

"Greetings!" "Rejoice!" A single word trumps Judas's betrayal, the soldiers' mocking. And it is for us and for the world, the last word! And given our world's current misery, this is a wonderful promise indeed.

"Greetings!" "Rejoice!" One word contains the whole of the Gospel (grace, joy and rejoicing with each other, free giving, blessing, gift, our sacramental charisms, gratefulness, thanksgiving, the Eucharist).

“Greetings!” “Rejoice!” One word summarizes and fully expresses the Good News of Jesus, the one who was dead, the one who has been raised.

May you know grace-filled rejoicing this day, even as lament is also on our lips and in our hearts as the global pandemic rages on, for we trust that no matter what, Jesus will always have the last word, “Rejoice!”