

“Rising to the Occasion”

John 20:1-18 (NRSV)

To rise to the occasion is to perform better than we thought we would or could in the midst of challenge or pressure, often surprising not only others, but ourselves too.

In the first round of March Madness, the Number 16 team University of Maryland, Baltimore defied all the odds by defeating Number 1 team Virginia by twenty points! Out of the gate, UMBC went on an 8-1 run to establish a seven-point lead. *“At that moment, we started believing more in ourselves,”* point guard K.J. Maura said. *“That gave us confidence to keep getting the shot selection we needed [and to think, we can do this!]”*¹ UMBC went on to lose their next game, but on March 16, they rose to the occasion, making history.

To rise to the occasion is also to show skill or strength we didn’t necessarily know we had until a difficult situation called it out of us.

Twenty-year-old Malala Yousafzai, the Pakistani activist for girls’ education and the world’s youngest Nobel laureate, visited her hometown yesterday for the first time since the Taliban attempted to assassinate her in 2012 when she was riding home from school. Rather than be defeated and slink into the shadows after she was shot down, Malala rose up, with an even louder voice to continue her campaign for educating women and girls in Pakistan.² She has risen to the occasion not just once, but over and over and over again...in the midst of support from some and outright opposition from others.

When is the last time you rose to the occasion – was it the winning shot in an over-time game? Hitting all the notes in a live performance? Nailing a job interview? Closing the deal in a presentation to a key client? Hosting a huge party without a single mishap or flaw? Being the most creative in your

Zach Schonbrun, “March Madness: UMBC Delivers Historic Upset Over No. 1 Virginia” *The New York Times* (March 16, 2018) accessed on April 1, 2018 at <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/16/sports/march-madness-ncaa-tournament.html>.

² Salman Masood, “‘Like a Dream’: Malala Makes an Emotional Visit to Her Pakistani Hometown,” *The New York Times* (March 31, 2018), accessed on April 1, 2018 at <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/31/world/asia/malala-pakistan-taliban.html>.

prom proposal? Telling your family a truth about yourself that you've been hiding? Was it defying odds to overcome a diagnosis or a prognosis? Or was it simply getting of bed in the days following the death of one you loved?

Sometimes we prepare for weeks knowing we have to pull out all the stops and rise to an occasion. Other times we don't even know we're rising to an occasion until it's over and done with and we realize we just did something we never thought we could do.

On Easter Sunday I suppose it's obvious to say that Jesus "rose to the occasion." No one believed him when he said it, but he did indeed say he was going to rise from the dead on the third day, and he did. I don't want to downplay this— because it's pretty miraculous. It's the reason we are all here this morning. It's the reason we can proclaim that Life has defeated Death and that Hope has the final word. The resurrection is the heart of our faith and the key to our salvation, or wholeness. The fact that Jesus rose from the dead is what made people remember him and write down his life's events so that we could one day know this man, and in turn, know God's love for us more deeply.

Not to steal his thunder but Jesus wasn't the only one rose to the occasion that day.

Even before the sun had risen on that first Easter morning, the people who were closest to Jesus were rising to the occasion too...even before they knew it was any kind of significant occasion at all.

Mary arose out of her grief-stricken sleepless night, and made her way to the tomb. She saw that the stone had been removed and assumed Jesus wasn't there. So all the sudden her grief took a back seat to the panic that was rising up within her. She ran to tell two friends, Simon Peter, and the other disciple, the one Jesus' loved. (We don't know for sure whether or not this was John, but for the sake of this sermon, let's call him John.)

These two guys woke up with a start and took off racing. John ran the fastest, gets to the tomb first and peeks in, but doesn't go in. He is eager, but hesitant at the same time.

Simon Peter, on the other hand, has guts. He goes into the tomb without a second thought. Would you walk into a tomb where you thought a dead person was or had been? Simon Peter doesn't shy

away from this spooky, unsettling, mystery, he leads his friends in facing their fears head on.

Because of his leading, John then goes into the tomb, and John, the eager one, turns out to be the most enthusiastic one too...for going into the empty tomb led him to belief.

John is like your friend who is the first to jump on the bandwagon, but who is still really a follower at heart. It doesn't take much for him to believe, and he is eager to believe, but he needed someone else to walk into the tomb first. The because someone else did it, he was all in.

Simon Peter is like your friend who has guts. The one who is up for anything and dives head first into adventure. This is the friend whose courage is contagious. Simon Peter is the leader that gets everyone else fired up and excited. And even if he himself still has questions on the inside, he doesn't show it on the outside.

Both of these men rise to the occasion of Easter, but in different ways. And they need each other. Simon Peter wouldn't have gotten to the tomb without his friend's enthusiasm and eagerness. John wouldn't have believed without his friend's courage and bravery.

Indeed, we see that these friends cannot rise to the occasion without one another.

This is even true for Mary. First her grief wakes her up, then her fear rises up, and then, sitting by the tomb alone, her tears well up.

As she weeps, Mary peeks in the tomb and "poof" – all the sudden two angels are there. Do you have friends like that? Who just seem to show up at the right time or call at the right time or say the right thing at the right time? You don't even know how they knew you needed them, but they're there?

Well, that's what these angels are to Mary. They are the quiet friends who rise to the occasion not in some flashy way, but in a reassuring, ever-present way.

And here, in this tender moment with these two angels who appear out of nowhere at just the right time, Mary rises to the occasion again herself. Because when they ask her why she is weeping, she doesn't shut down or close off. She's not embarrassed by her grief. She wears her heart on her sleeve as she tells the two angels her fear and sadness: "*They have taken away my Lord and I do not know where they have laid him.*" She tells the truth of her heart. How many of us do that with such

ease and readiness? Mary lets the angels into her feelings, and it is perhaps that tender and vulnerable encounter that prepares her for the conversation that will change everything. The encounter she has with the Risen Christ. Who, of course, she thinks is a gardener at first. She opens up to this man as well, letting her protective love rise up into words that express her deepest plea: *“Sir, if you have carried him away, [just please] tell me where you have laid him...”*

Then comes the word that raises Mary’s eyes to see who is really before her. In this key moment, Jesus doesn’t give some big theological statement about how he is the Risen Christ and has come back from the dead just as he predicted to save all of mankind. No. He just says her name, “Mary.”

Jesus has Risen from the grave, yes. But what makes him really “rise to the occasion” in my book is that he meets Mary where she is and simply says her name. He puts relationality above theology and “I told you so”’s...as he had done for his whole life and ministry. That isn’t to say that God wasn’t making a theological statement through the Resurrection. But when the actual moment of revelation of the Risen Christ came...Jesus’ relationship with

Mary, his care for her, is what prevailed. Saying Mary’s name, is the first resulting act of resurrection...pulling Mary out of her grief and into the awareness of the miracle before her eyes...of the new life that is not just standing before her in Jesus, but the new life that she will now have because of this Good News. As dawn breaks, it dawns on Mary that her life will never be the same because Christ is Risen.

Ironically perhaps, this relational moment is what leads to the first theological statement of Easter morning...and it comes from Mary, not from Jesus. She runs back to her friends and says, *“I have seen the Lord!”* It is a testimony of faith.

All throughout this Easter account in John’s gospel, people are rising to the occasion before they even know that Christ has Risen. They do not let their grief or their fear or their questions or their “not knowing” keep them from acting, sharing, seeking and searching. And what we learn from this, I think, is that God does not expect all of us to rise up in faith or believe in the same way. Our personalities and strengths are as different as the people in this Gospel text.

Who do you relate to? Mary’s

persistence and vulnerability?
John's eagerness and enthusiasm?
Simon Peter's gutsy leadership and
courage? The angels unassuming
presence and support just at the
right time? Jesus' tender
relationality? Or Mary's newfound
testimony of faith?

Or maybe you are like one of the
disciples who wasn't even there
that Easter morning. You were still
asleep and wouldn't meet the
Risen Christ until he walked
through the walls into the room
you were huddled in in fear or
until you were walking along a dirt
road gossiping with a friend but all
the events that had taken place? As
we will see in the rest of John's
gospel, those who weren't there on
Easter morning will have the
chance to rise to the occasion of
belief in their own time. God does
not leave them out. They didn't
miss out because they weren't
there or didn't believe
immediately. Easter is not a one
and done event. God does not
leave any of us out. Jesus will keep
rising up until our eyes and hearts
raise up and we see him for
ourselves and proclaim, as Mary
did, "*I have seen the Lord!*"

So yes, Easter Sunday is the
celebration of all celebrations. The
resurrection is what compels us to
share the Good News about God's
Redeeming and sustaining love at

work in the world. That not all is
lost. That hope lives. That life
everlasting has defeated death.

This is all true. Easter is the
occasion of all occasions, and
Jesus rose to that occasion.

But Easter was also a dark
morning of grief and fear and
questioning – before it was ever an
occasion for celebration. If you are
one for whom belief doesn't come
quickly, or for whom questions
abound...if you are one that is
buried in grief today or who can't
see the Light shining in the
Darkness, then remember that
Easter morning was dark. It had
been a long weekend. Full of
violence and betrayal and denial
and frustration and accusations and
suffering and death and loss.

And on that dark Easter morning,
an event happened. Christ arose
from the grave, and appeared to his
friends who needed to see him in
order for them to arise out of their
grief and fear and believe and hope
in life again.

Rather than celebrating Easter
Sunday as a special occasion, what
if we thought of Easter as the
moment that turns *all the other
moments* in our lives into
occasions worth celebrating?

Because the Resurrection changes

everything. Resurrection that the worst thing in our lives is never the last thing. And that means that we should be celebrating a whole heck of a lot more in our everyday lives.

Following Christ is not just about the special occasion like Christmas and Easter. It's really about realizing all the ordinary days in our lives are special occasions because we have life to begin with...here *and* in the hereafter.

The power of the resurrection lay not solely in the act of Jesus being raised from the dead itself, but in how Jesus' followers responded to it. Did they make this moment into a moment that would turn every other moment into an occasion worth celebrating? Did they let this moment of Life defeating Death color the rest of their lives so

- That when they were Depressed, they knew the Load would lessen eventually...
- That when they were grieving, they knew that eventually joy would come again...
- That when they were ill, they knew that healing would come eventually – whether on this side of life or the next...
- That when they were confused, they knew that clarity would come eventually...
- That when they were enraged, they knew that justice would reign eventually...

- That when they were despairing, they knew that the possibility of hope called them to action...
- That when they were unbelieving, that belief would surprise them when they least expected it.

Episcopal priest Phillips Brooks preached, "*Let every man and woman catch the revelation of Jesus in his resurrection. Let them say not merely, 'Christ is Risen!' but 'I shall rise.'*"

If you never thought you could be or would be one to proclaim that you have "seen the Lord." Think again. Easter proves that God loves to surprise us and that we *can* rise to the occasion – no matter who we are.

So don't be fooled. The resurrection is not a joke and hope is not a hoax.

Christ arose on Easter so that we could rise up every other day of our life.

Christ is Risen!

Are you?

Amen.