

**SLD04.03.07 2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday in Easter**  
**Emory Presbyterian Church**  
**John 20:19-22**  
**Jill Oglesby Evans**

### **“Christ is Risen! So What?”**

There’s a word for Sundays like today, a generally accepted moniker for whatever weak-kneed, star-crossed Sunday has the misfortune of wandering in the week **after** the hoopla of a high holiday like Easter, and the word is “low.” In direct contrast to the dizzying heights of energy, effort and attendance surrounding last week’s Easter service, this first Sunday *after* Easter is generally accepted as a “low” Sunday. And understandably so, since last week, like all Christians, we blew our trumpet, and our gasket, on that highest of Christian holidays, the celebration of Christ’s resurrection. And what a celebration it was!

On Easter, we Christians quite literally blow our trumpet, and our gasket, in celebration of the occasion of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. And what a celebration it was here at Emory Church! Beautiful music – the choir outdid themselves – a full service, a full sanctuary, a flowered cross. We got to sing “Jesus Christ Is Risen Today” at the top of our lungs – I wait all year for that – and to say, sing and pray “Alleluia” as much as we pleased. That’s important for me – I go through ‘alleluia-withdrawals’ during Lent. Altogether, Easter here at Emory Church was a wonderful celebration.

But here only a week later, the crowds have thinned, the frocks are ruffled, and our trumpeter must be sleeping in. One might wonder why anyone would show up at all.

Still, it could be worse. I remember a low Sunday about a decade ago at Rock Spring Church that I’m pretty sure hit the all time record low. Once again it was this

untouchable first Sunday after Easter when the pastor was on vacation, the intern (me) was preaching and half the congregation was at the beach on spring break. To make matters worse, it was also Freaknik weekend and nobody in midtown wanted to deal with the traffic on Piedmont Road. And then, just when I'd imagined the Sunday couldn't get any lower, the organist told me about the tornado warnings.

That anyone showed up at all on that star-crossed Sunday was truly nothing short of a minor miracle.

'Course you know, Fred Craddock, now retired professor of homiletics at Candler School of Theology, used to remind us aspiring preachers from time-to-time that we should really feel that way about the presence of parishioners on any given Sunday. "Consider the available alternatives," he used to say. "They're infinite." Just think for a moment of all the good reasons you've ever had for not coming to church one Sunday or another, and the person sitting next to you can come up with at least ten more. A hundred more.

So I thank God for the presence of each one of you this morning, although as I think about what Dr. Craddock said, I can't help wondering, why *did* you come? Why keep showing up at church Sunday after Sunday, even on the low ones?

Of course, many of you express your commitment to the life of this church by regular attendance at worship. Others of you may attend out of habit, a good habit, I might add, and a particularly strong one if you made it here today. But you may not really think much about it anymore.

Others of you may come because you seek a word of hope, or a resting place, and you seek worship to fill you. Some of you may even be here because you want to glorify God. A few of you may be here against your will.

But let me tell you how our faith tradition would explain your presence here today. Our tradition says you're here to celebrate the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ.

But, you say, that was last week. In a manner of speaking, we've "been there, done that, and gotten the t-shirt." And so we have. However, according to our tradition, we're not finished with Easter yet.

Because, you see, we celebrate Christ's resurrection *every* Sunday, which incidentally, is how we came up with the name for the day. Early Christians compared Christ's rising from the dead to the rising of the sun and adopted the pagan term "Sunday" for the day of the week set aside for the celebration of Christ's resurrection. "Sunday" was also considered the first day of creation, and therefore the first day of the *new* creation that was accomplished through Christ's resurrection.

So throughout the history of the Christian church, Sunday has stood out from all other days as the weekly anniversary of the resurrection. Every Sunday, even a low one like today, is a mini-Easter. What's more, even though today is often referred to as the first Sunday *after* Easter, it is actually the second Sunday *of* Easter, of the Easter *season*, which runs the 50 days from Easter Sunday to Pentecost.

Still, whatever we're *supposed* to be celebrating, who could argue that today doesn't have a very different feel than last Sunday? I mean, no one would say that a marriage is any less important on the second day than on the first, but what can

compare with the wedding day? And very much like the long march of days after a wedding, all the Sundays after Easter carry with them a certain air of anti-climax and uncertainty. Christ is risen! We all agree. But so what? What comes next? What are we supposed to do now? What difference does Easter really make?

I'll repeat a story I've told here before. Years ago in the late seventies I lived in San Francisco and had a good friend named Simon Porshnikoff. Simon's parents were Russian but he was born in Mongolia and raised in Brasil. That's the sort of person you meet in San Francisco. Brasil was what Simon and I had in common since I had lived there in the Peace Corps, so when we got together we mostly spoke Portuguese.

Except at Eastertide. During Easter, Simon's Russian heritage kicked in with a vengeance. The Russian Orthodox take the season of Easter very seriously and there are all sorts of rituals associated with the different days of the season. One of them has to do with calling on friends and family, bearing gifts and candy and Easter cakes. That Easter Simon invited me to go calling on his family with him.

Now you know how at Christmas, you go to someone's house for a party and you're loaded down with gifts, they open the door and the first thing you say is "Merry Christmas!" Well, when you go calling on the Russian Orthodox at Easter time and they open the door, you're supposed to say "Xistos Voscrece!" Which means "Christ is Risen!"

Actually, they're hearty people, those Russians. You take a little vodka with those Easter cakes and you're supposed to *shout* the good news: "Xistos Voscrece!" Then they shout back, "Voistenu Voscrece!" He is risen indeed!

Frankly, for this pale-faced protestant girl, it was a bit overwhelming.

But anyway, off Simon and I go, traveling the length and breadth of San Francisco's Russian district dispensing our Easter cakes and shouting our good news until we reach our last call of the day. This time when we knock, the door takes a little longer to open. And when it cracks open just partway, out leans this very large, very dark, grim-faced furry Russian man who looks like he's in a really bad mood. 'Course, this doesn't slow Simon down, full as he is of the joys, and the vodka, of the season. "Xistos Voscrece, Uncle" he shouts. To which the man dourly replies in English... "So what."

Stunned, I look at Simon in confusion. For a moment no one speaks, until suddenly Simon lets loose a stream of Russian invectives, that wouldn't bear repeating even if I'd understood what he said.

Christ is risen! So what? Here only a week after celebrating Easter, I wonder if some of us might be quietly asking ourselves the same question. However enthusiastically we may have proclaimed our alleluias from the heights of last week's holy hoopla, today, back on the unadorned plains of ordinary time, some of us might be pretty hard put to say just what sort of difference Christ's resurrection really makes to us. Has anything really changed?

You can bet Jesus' disciples, huddled together in that back room, doors bolted, windows locked, scared to death of what the other Jews might do to them, were wondering about that. Sure, they'd all heard Mary's news: "I have seen the Lord!" she's said. But even if they believed her, which they mostly didn't, what possible difference could that make to their current situation? The same Jewish authorities who had seen to it that the Romans killed Jesus were just as eager to get rid of his followers. Maybe

Jesus *had* risen from the dead but what on earth difference could *that* make to the fact that their teacher was gone, their movement was trashed and there's a contract on their heads?

And then, what do you know but that right there, smack in the middle of the disciples' panic attack, appears Jesus himself, in the flesh, dirt under his nails and holes in his hands, standing there, talking to them. At least, *somebody* suddenly appeared out of nowhere and starts talking to the disciples. Like Mary, the disciples don't recognize Jesus on sight. Unlike her, they don't know him when he speaks, either.

"Peace be with you," Jesus says. But his disciples only gape at him, trying to figure how this stranger got in through the bolted doors. Not until Jesus shows them the wounds on his hands and side do they realize that the One crucified *is* actually risen and stands before them. At which point, understandably, the disciples go a little nuts, dancing around like a bunch of pickled Russians, hugging Jesus and each other and shouting "Xistos Voscrece" at the top of their lungs.

"*Peace* be with you," Jesus repeats, maybe this time to quiet them down. "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." And then, Jesus shows them what he means. By way of sending his disciples, he leans close, heart to heart, lip to lip, and breathes into each of them the sweet breath of the Holy Spirit.

As God breathed life into Adam at Creation, the new Adam breathes into his disciples the new life of his resurrection.

"Receive the Holy Spirit," says Jesus to those who now recognize him. "Receive the Holy Spirit," he says to those who love him, who open their hearts to receive his gift. "Receive the Holy Spirit," says Jesus to those who follow him, and you will never again

have to rely only on your own resources. “Receive the Holy Spirit,” and you will always be accompanied by a companion, an advocate, a comforter, an energy, an inspiration, a friend.”

It’s John’s version of Pentecost, calmer, quieter, sweeter, more subtle than that awkward, noisy moment at the beginning of Acts when the Spirit steamrolls her way through the crowd, sets off Roman candles and makes people talk funny. Maybe John was Presbyterian; I never heard anybody say he wasn’t. For in this John’s more decent and orderly Pentecost, Jesus simply leans toward his disciples and offers each a prayer on the breath – “Receive the Holy Spirit” – and the church is born.

A breath, a prayer, a quiet command, and those who follow Jesus are transformed from disciples, or students...into apostles, those who are sent out. The quietest and sweetest and most intimate of exchanges, a sharing of breath, and Jesus’ disciples are lit and led by the power of the Holy Spirit to become the body of Christ in the world – that’s how John tells it.

During another Eastertide, I passed a Baptist church that puts its sermon title out on a marquis, and that week it was, “Six Things Sin Will Do In Your Life.” I thought, that’ll pack ‘em in. And then I thought, maybe more appropriate to the Easter season would be “six things *resurrection* will do in your life.”

Christ is risen! So what? So Jesus leans toward each one of us and breathes into us the peace that passes all understanding.

Christ is risen! So what? So the Holy Spirit penetrates the bolted doors of our fear-clutched hearts and reveals herself in all the dark places where we huddle in ignorance, indifference or despair.

Christ is risen! So what? So neither our pain, nor our suffering, nor our disappointment, nor even our death itself has the final word.

Christ is risen! So what? So you and I and all who are inspired by the good news of Christ's resurrection are charged to bear witness to its promises.

Christ is risen! So what? So the risen Christ draws near us, here, now, today, at Emory Church, on this second Sunday of the Easter season, in the joy of worship, the promise of Jane and Henry and Audrey's baptism, and the intimacy of communion with our risen Lord, and breaths into us the sweet, refreshing, realigning breath of the Holy Spirit, that you and I and all who receive that breath might become together one life-giving, breath-sharing body of Christ in the world.

Friends, take a deep breath. For Christ is risen! He is risen, indeed.

To the glory of God. Amen.