

Exodus 15:1-11, 1 Corinthians 5:6b-8, John 20:1-18 – March 31, 2024 (Easter Sunrise)

Have you ever made unleavened bread? And I'm not talking about pita bread or flour tortillas. I'm talking Jewish-style matza. Communion wafers. Totally unleavened. I imagine not too many of you have. I have. And it's an interesting process.

Because it's so easy for yeast to get into bread. It's in the air. It's on your hands. It's on your countertops. It's everywhere. Little cells of yeast are all over the place. And it seems like they will contaminate your bread and cause it rise no matter what you do. You think you're making unleavened bread without a granule of yeast in it. And all of a sudden, bubbles start popping up all over it.

In fact, the only way to make unleavened bread is to expect a certain amount of contamination will occur and account for it by poking the rolled out dough all over with a needle or toothpick. They actually make rolling pins with needles all over them for that purpose. And then, when it bakes, all the gas produced by the yeast has a place to vent. And the dough stays flat.

A bring this up for two reasons. First, to point out that leavened bread and unleavened bread are two complete different things. They may only be different by one ingredient, but they require two very different methods for preparation and they result in two very different kinds of food.

The other reason I bring this up is because of our Epistle lesson for today. It's kind of an odd little passage from 1 Corinthians. One that doesn't seem like it has much to do with Easter. But it very much does.

It does, for one, because when Paul talks about “celebrating the festival” he's talking about the Easter festival. Or rather, he's talking about the Passover festival that the Christians of Corinth and everywhere else are now celebrating not simply as a memorial of their Exodus from Egypt, but as a memorial of Christ's resurrection. And he ties the two together.

He says that Christ is the Passover lamb who has been sacrificed. The Jews of Corinth who believe in Jesus don't need to worry about sacrificing a Passover lamb anymore. Jesus was that Passover lamb. By his blood shed on the cross, the wrath of God passes over us. And now we are free from slavery to sin, death, and the devil forever.

But Passover wasn't just about the lamb. It was also a time for baking bread. Unleavened bread. Bread without an ounce of yeast in it. And making sure that happened was an arduous task. One that required scrubbing every surface of your kitchen to make sure no yeast remained. Because just a little bit could contaminate the whole lump of dough.

But Paul says, that the Passover festival is no longer about making unleavened bread. It is about being unleavened bread. It is about being something completely different than the leavened bread of this world. It is about being something completely different than the unbelieving, hopeless, despairing world in which we live.

And that is what celebrating the festival of Easter is all about. Because Christ has risen from the dead, we are completely different people. By baptism into his death and resurrection, we are a new creation. We are changed. And we see that fact in the resurrection story itself. Because what we see over and over again are people going to the tomb expecting to find one thing and actually finding another.

Mary Magdalene goes to the tomb expecting to find the stone still covering the entrance. Simon Peter and John go to the tomb expecting to find Jesus still inside. Mary Magdalene, again, stays at the tomb, weeping, expecting to find a gardener who might know where Jesus' body has been taken. The disciples sat locked in a room expecting that the only person who might come to them that day was a Jewish authority or a Roman soldier, intending to arrest them and take them away to their own crucifixion.

Mary did not expect to find the stone rolled away. Peter and John did not expect to find an empty tomb. Mary, again, did not expect to find Jesus calling her by name. And the disciples did not expect that Mary would show up and announce the Lord's resurrection. Or that Jesus himself would appear that very evening.

Why did they expect one thing and not the other? Well, because they were leavened bread. Bread leavened with sin. Sin had leavened them with doubt and unbelief. Sin had leavened them with worldly thinking and worldly expectations. Sin had leavened them with fear and selfishness.

Mary didn't expect the stone to be rolled away because stones just don't roll on their own. Peter and John didn't expect the tomb to be empty because dead men just don't get up and walk. Mary, again, didn't expect Jesus to call her by name because dead men don't talk. And the disciples didn't expect Mary to announce the Lord's resurrection or to see Jesus himself that evening because dead men stay dead.

Sin had set up so many expectations for how this world works. And even though Jesus had told them over and over again that the Son of Man would be betrayed into the hands of evil men and suffer and die and then rise again on the third day, they couldn't see past their expectation. They were just too leavened with sin.

It's only after the resurrection that they realize how wrong they are. How much sin had lied to them. How much they shouldn't trust their sinful expectations because it's Jesus doing the work, and sin is no longer in the equation. Death and the devil have no power over him.

Sin, death, and the devil are as powerless before Jesus as Pharaoh was before the Lord during the Exodus. He could send every chariot in his army to attack God's people. But the Lord would throw the horse and his rider into the sea. On Easter morning, Jesus threw the sin, death, and devil into the sea. They had no power to stop him from rising from the dead.

And so, like Mary Magdalene, like Peter and John, like the rest of the disciples, like Paul speaking to the Corinthians, we need to see the work of Jesus with new eyes. As new creatures. We need to see the work of Christ not as bread leavened with sin and evil, but as unleavened bread. Pure and holy. Confident in the work of Christ for us.

And that changes all of our expectations. Because, as I said, sin, death, and the devil have no power over Jesus. But they also have no power over those whom Jesus calls by name.

Sin has no power over you. It cannot accuse of breaking God's law, for Christ has kept the law in your place. It cannot crush you with guilt, for Christ took the weight of your guilt on his shoulders. It cannot burden you with its punishments, for Christ paid the debt of your sin when he died.

Death has no power over you. The grave cannot terrify you anymore. For he is the resurrection and the life. Though you die, yet shall you live. To live and believe in him is to know that you will never die. His resurrection is the promise of your resurrection.

The devil has no power over you. He cannot tempt you like Adam and Eve anymore. For when he tempted Adam and Eve, it was with the curse of death hanging over everything they did. But in Christ the curse has been lifted. You are free. He can tempt and tempt and tempt all he wants. He can say that your sins are too big to forgive. But you can turn that around on him and say, "If my sins are great that just means my Savior is even greater."

You are unleavened bread. You are free. And Christ is with you. You see, that's another expectation that Mary had that Jesus turned on its head. When she realized who this gardener was, she most likely fell at his feet, weeping with joy. It wouldn't be the first time that Mary Magdalene had done that.

But Jesus says to her, "*Do not cling to me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father.*" Don't cling to me now. Now, when I'm standing right in front of you, with my feet literally inches from your hands. No, this is a terrible time to cling to me. The better time to cling to me is forty days from now, after I've ascended into heaven. And you can't see me or touch me anymore. That's when you can really cling to me.

It sounds kinda silly, doesn't it? And yet, he's right. It was for our benefit that he depart from us. For after he departed, he sent the Holy Spirit to be with us. To fill us with faith. To lead us to his Word. To guide us to the Sacrament. And it is through this Word and Sacrament that we now cling to Jesus tighter than ever.

Today, the sinful, unbelieving, leavened world looks at Christians celebrating the festival of Easter and sees a bunch of weird, defective bread clinging to an absent God. But we know that we are not weird or defective. We're unleavened. We are a different creature than them. And our God isn't absent. He is with us always, to the very end of the age. And we cling this day to the resurrected Christ. Sacrificed for us, but alive forevermore. That we may proclaim in sincerity and truth the triumph of our God. Christ is risen! Amen.