

**“Fully Alive; Fully Accepted.”**

**John 20:1-18**

**Easter Sunday: April 24, 2011**

**A homily preached by Rev. Dr. Ivan H.M. Peden**

**MUMC, Thomasville, NC**

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Bishop Will Willimon says that the real challenge of Easter is not to get up early enough and to get ready in our best clothes to come to church on Easter Sunday to find the risen Christ in our midst. That’s good, but not good enough. The real challenge of Easter is to take the risen Christ with us when we leave this place to our homes, our schools, our neighborhoods, our businesses. That was one of Bishop Willimon’s Easter homilies; now, mine.

Let me take you back four months ago ...to December ...to the other major Christian festival, Christmas. I love the Christmas season with the familiar carols, but each year I hear the carols so many times over in the shopping malls, in elevators, in the doctor’s office, on the radio, TV, on my own cd’s, and even during some Sunday services in Advent, that by the time it comes to Christmas Eve I feel as if I have been rehearsing the music and songs for weeks in advance. Don’t get me wrong ... I love them ... but they just don’t match the freshness of the Easter music. There’s nothing quite like singing the soul-stirring hymn of Charles Wesley, *Christ the Lord is risen today*, at the beginning and hearing the choir sing the *Hallelujah Chorus* at the end of this Easter Sunday celebration. We haven’t heard them played over and over again because Easter music is rarely heard outside the church. And we are fortunate not only to have a grand organ and choir, but also brass instruments and timpani this morning and a large crowd with joyous Easter voices.

Easter music still belongs to the gathered community of the faithful. And music proclaims resurrection, transformation, jubilation, and celebration in a way that no words can express. Surrounded by all this glorious music, we are prepared to hear an entirely different message from what we have been hearing during this past week. Easter proclaims that all the tenderness and love of Christ, which on Good Friday we saw scorned and mocked and stretched out on a cross, all that beauty and goodness are again alive and are with us now. They are with us, not as a memory that inevitably fades, but as an undying *presence* in our lives.

Irenaeus, an influential second century theologian and bishop of Lyons in southern France, once said: “The glory of God is a human being fully alive.” The message being

preached from pulpits of great cathedrals and tiny chapels all over the world today is that Christ is risen, *pro nobis*; that is, *for us*. Christ's victory is *our* victory. God raised Jesus Christ *for us* in order to put love in our hearts, noble thoughts into our minds, and strong convictions in our values. God raised Christ to convert us, not only from earthly life to something beyond this life, but also from something less than life to the possibility of being *fully alive* – and that's what God intended us to be. Perhaps Easter is not so much about escape from the grave, as it is about escaping the powers of death on this earth. It is about the triumph of seemingly powerless love over loveless power, of good over evil, of peace over war, of right over wrong.

To illustrate what I mean, let us briefly recall what we know about the experience of Peter during this past week. On Thursday night Peter asked Jesus – as did each disciple – “Is it I, Lord ... I who will betray you?” No, it was not Peter who betrayed Jesus – we know that it was Judas – but on that fateful night Peter failed in another way. When the soldiers arrested Jesus, he ran like a frightened rabbit – as did all the disciples. Then, three times that night Peter denied Jesus. Later, when Peter realized what he had done, he wept bitter tears.

Somehow, however, Peter became a transformed person after Christ's resurrection. He became a human being *fully alive*. Instead of denying Christ, he went on to boldly proclaim the good news of Christ to any and to all. Church tradition holds that nothing dissuaded Peter from his call to preach and teach and heal in the name of Jesus Christ – not even his arrest and imprisonment by the Roman authorities, and his eventual crucifixion. Who can deny that the Risen Christ was somehow present in Peter and the other apostles whose fiery enthusiasm and courage ignited the early church?

That same enthusiasm and courage can be alive in us as well, because the risen Christ is present with us here and now. My prayer for each of us is that we experience Christ not as a memory, not merely as an historical figure, but as a presence. *Fully alive*, with the living presence of Christ, we, too, can become more like the people God wants us to be. With the risen Christ in our hearts, we can be fearless, dedicated, joyous, *fully alive* disciples of Jesus Christ who employ seemingly powerless love to defeat loveless power.

“But, wait a minute, preacher,” you say. “You don't know anything about me ... you don't know how much loveless power I have wielded against others ... how I have hurt those around me ... demanded more than is reasonable from family and friends ... thrown my weight

around in some places ... stepped over the mark of respectability ... brought shame and disgrace to myself and to my loved ones. You don't have a clue. I am not worthy to be in the presence of the risen Christ." Friends, if we are feeling any of those negative emotions this morning, then let us hear this: "Remember Peter." We have just recalled how Peter failed his Lord, but was miraculously and gloriously transformed into Peter the apostle. Why? Because Jesus Christ accepted Peter as he was – with all his faults and failings – and infused Peter with his Spirit to make him fully alive. Peter became fully alive because he was *fully accepted* by God.

We are ... we can be ... we will be accepted by God just as we are – *fully accepted* into the family of God. We have been fully embraced by God in our baptism and profession of faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. That's the good news of Easter that music proclaims and celebrates more eloquently than any words. We are made alive in Christ – *fully alive* – and there is nothing we can do to earn or deserve this wonderful gift. Rather, we come just as we are to Christ in response to this good news because we know that we are *fully accepted*.

And one more thing before I close ... this full acceptance is not only for you or for me ... it is for *all* God's people. I would be failing in my duty as a minister of the Christian gospel if I did not declare boldly and convincingly today that the Easter message is an invitation for participation in a community that affirms and celebrates God reaching out to all of humankind in the Christ event. The message of Easter is not just for the early disciples or for those modern-day disciples who come to church most every Sunday. The good news proclaimed today is that new life in Christ is for *everyone*. A perfect attendance pin, or a particular way of believing or behaving, is not required. In one of Peter's sermons recorded in Acts chapter 10 he proclaimed: "that *everyone* who believes in Christ receives forgiveness of sins through Christ's name."

*Fully alive ... fully accepted ...* let the trumpets sound ... let the organ music swell ... let the drumbeats reverberate ... let God's people sing *Hallelujah!* There's good news here that I have run out of words to convey. I hope you've picked up enough to leave here assured of God's transforming love in Christ for you and for all God's people. I hope you've heard enough to leave here and to take the risen Christ with you to your homes. If perhaps you are not yet at that place of readiness to leave with the risen Christ, then wait and listen to more of

the convincing Easter music. The tone, the pitch, the harmony, the beauty of the music can convey this message of God's transformation of human lives through Christ more profoundly than I can. Listen for the risen Christ, and be moved to believe.

*Christ the Lord is risen today! Alleluia!* The risen Christ is here ...you are fully accepted just as you are ...you are being made fully alive in Christ. You better believe it!

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. AMEN.