Alleluia! Christ is Risen!

On this day, we remember and celebrate the event that turned the world upside down. We remember and celebrate what those faithful women witnessed. We remember and celebrate that absurdity — that Christ is risen, that death is no longer the final word. We remember and celebrate the event that promises new life, new beginnings.

It is that event to which Peter points, as we heard in the lesson from Acts. And it is that event that compelled Peter and his fellow followers of Christ to preach to the people and to testify that Christ was the one ordained by God as judge of the living and the dead. Everyone who believes in Christ receives forgiveness of sin." "Everyone who believes," Peter asserts. And we know that Peter had some issues with that notion of "everyone". He had his own personal problems with non-Jews becoming Christians (remember the dream he had of clean and unclean food). And then he had to deal with that same problem in the Church, where many Jewish Christians were hesitant to allow in Gentiles.

Because Christ is risen, everyone who believes receives forgiveness of sins. It is a free gift, offered to all, and available to be accepted by all. But this concept of "everyone" presented great difficulties to the early church, beyond just those issues Peter had to address. Those women who were the first witnesses of the resurrection — they were not believed. The closing verses of today's reading relate that the other followers of Jesus thought the report of the women to be nothing but an idle tale. Women were some of Jesus' most faithful followers, and yet they were not believed; they were only reluctantly admitted to the "everyone" who could believe or be believed. Indeed, in one of the apocryphal gospels (those ancient writings that did not get accepted by mainstream Christianity, which represented certain actions later declared heretical)—in one of those "gospels", we are told that Mary Magdalene must be made "male" before she could be saved. And the church for centuries, has kept women on the periphery of the inner circle, the circle of recognized power. However long it is
taking, that is changing, praise God! We have evidence here: next Sunday we will celebrate the 40th anniversary of the ordination of the Rev. Sandy Boyd, one of the first women ordained a priest in the Episcopal Church. And, in a few weeks, the Episcopal Church in Colorado will consecrate the Rev. Kym Lucas as bishop!

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But it is not just women who have only "barely qualified" for salvation. Some of Peter's friends thought that circumcision and keeping kosher were crucial. Other early Christians believed celibacy to be necessary: indeed, some argued that married persons should divorce if they truly wanted to enter the kingdom of God. Those of you who are aware of my doctoral work will not be surprised to learn that still other early Christians were unconvinced that even celibacy was sufficient, a more drastic, physical, "operation" was necessary for males. And still others were unconvinced that "barbarians", those non-Greco-Romans whose language sounded like nothing more than "bar-bar-bar", had the right stuff for salvation.

But the message of Easter is that everyone qualifies. And that is hard medicine to take, or at least the Church has found it so throughout its history. The Church has put people to death for not believing the "right" things about God. The Church has cast people out for everything from card-playing and dancing to divorce to differences in sexual orientation. That everyone qualifies has indeed been hard medicine to take.

But we are really no different. Our exclusionary practices may be more subtle, but they are there nonetheless. On college campuses, the issue of how our language belies our cultural biases has received a great amount of attention. Nationally, we are engaged in a debate about who is really, or what constitutes being, an "American". And this issue is no less real in the Church. In the last revision of the hymnal, a number of hymns were left out because of excessively male-centered language, for example -- I think of "O brother man, fold to thy heart thy brother." And this revision caused many to throw up their hands and cry, "Where will all this 'inclusivity' end?" as if letting everyone feel that God was the God who created everyone, male and female, was too much to allow.

But that is not the question; the real question is not "where will the 'inclusivity' end," but where, or when did the exclusivity end? It ended on the cross and it was left in the tomb with those wrappings that bound Jesus. Those
wrappings may still bind us, but the message of the resurrection is that we too -- all of us -- can leave them behind.

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But this weekend, God's inclusivity has another, very important focus. The new life celebrated on Easter has been acted out here at Good Shepherd in the sacrament of baptism. God's arms opened last evening as two more people laid claim to the promise that Peter proclaimed. And, while Eva and Alex Trevizo, through their parents and sponsor, took their baptismal VOWS for the first time, we joined with them as we recalled and renewed our experience. With water the old life, the old ideas, the old exclusivities — all of these were washed away. In water we are buried; and from the water we rise again. We rise again—made alive in Christ, as the Corinthians were told. We rise again in joy to show forth the good news of God in Christ. We rise again to serve all persons. We rise again in glory.

These are the new beginnings. These are the moments that continue to turn the world upside down; they are the moments that turn us upside down. These are the moments when the absurdity of resurrection is proclaimed again. We remember what those faithful women witnessed. We celebrate what those faithful women, and the Trevizo family, full of faith, have experienced.

It is Easter! Christ has risen! And everyone who believes in Christ receives forgiveness of sins and is welcomed fully, with joy, into the family of God.

Alleluia! Christ is Risen!

Amen.