

**“Welcome, happy morning! Age to age shall say.”**

**Acts 10:34-43; Psalm 118: 1-2, 14-24;**

**Colossians 3:1-4; John 20:1-18**

**Easter Sunday, April 6, 2023; St. Matthew’s, Sunbury**

**The Rev. Dina Carter Ishler, Deacon in Charge**

***In the Name of God the Father, God the Risen Son,  
God the Holy and Lifegiving Spirit, Amen.***

We all have those hymns that we love best, the ones that touch our souls and gladden our hearts and maybe mist our eyes every time we sing them. Today, Easter Sunday- we have our favorites; there are those cherished Christmas carols that we’ve sung as far back as we can remember; and then there are hymns like “Amazing Grace” that reach, familiar and beloved, across the bounds of denomination or church identity to bind us together. I’m certain that if I asked each of you what is your favorite hymn you’d have a story to tell me about why it means so much to you- maybe you sung it at your wedding, or at the funerals of people you love, or the church where you grew up ALWAYS sung it as the

recessional hymn on Christmas Eve and now it doesn't quite feel like Christmas Eve without it.

For many of us, we treasure certain hymns because the people who loved us and guided us in our faith taught us these hymns or sung them in our presence for as long as we can remember. My mother was raised in the United Methodist church and her favorites were well-known in that tradition, such as "In the Garden" and "The Old Rugged Cross." My father, the lifelong Episcopalian, generally preferred hymns from the 1940 Hymnal that had made it into the 'new' hymnal such as "Immortal, Invisible, God only Wise" and "It came upon a midnight clear" (but only the one tune, you understand- anything else was blasphemy.) If the poor health of my mother or later, himself, made it impossible to physically come to church he'd call me up and want to know what hymns we had sung that day. And on Easter morning, I know without a doubt that his favorite would be the one we just

sang, #179 in our Hymnal 1982: ***“Welcome, happy morning! age to age shall say.”***

Now there are Easter hymns I personally love to sing as much as this one, hymns where I have the text almost memorized from decades of singing them- but this is the one that sticks in my head and lives deep in my soul and I know why: it is that refrain which begins the hymn and ends each verse with these words: ***“Welcome, happy morning! age to age shall say.”***

Here at St. Matthew’s, we have been reminding ourselves, through sermons and individual conversations and spiritual formation opportunities, how the Word of God is rightly called the living Word because it is always alive and lifegiving among us, reaching out from the past to transform us in the present and bless a future we cannot yet see. We believe that as we remember and share all that God has done for God’s people, that as we proclaim all

God's promises as real and true for us and for all believers in every time and place, the fullness of God's kingdom will spread throughout the world- light overcoming darkness, brokenness and separation from God's mercy and love turning towards wholeness and newness of life. And on this, "thine own third morning", we shout and sing with all the joy we can muster the truth we first hear proclaimed by Peter in today's reading from the Acts of the Apostles: "They put him to death by hanging him on a tree, but God raised him on the third day." We boldly proclaim the truth that "Jesus died and was raised from the dead once, for all" in present tense because the wonder of it is alive again every time we sing: ***"Welcome, happy morning! Age to age shall say."***

It is easy to understand this in a church family like St. Matthew's, where the very first stories I heard from you were of friends and families worshipping and serving and doing life together for generation after generation, past

and present and future all deeply significant to our community. From where I have the privilege of standing I can see extended families who have come together on this joyful morning, children and grandparents and great-grandparents and aunts and uncles all together, many of whom were baptized at our font and grew up here...I know there are spaces in our pews and in our hearts because loved ones are singing their alleluias “on another shore and in a greater light”...I can see, with the eyes of my soul, memories as real as this moment here with you all: other church sanctuaries and Easter egg hunts with our own over-excited small children and Easter Day backyard photos posed in front of the just-blooming forsythia and the greeting is equally and joyfully shouted out in each and every place: ***“Welcome, happy morning! Age to age shall say.”***

In our part of the world, the new and abundant life we celebrate in the Easter story finds expression in the

springtime rebirth of our world, as all our senses delight in the colors and scents of this extravagantly lovely time of the year. *“Earth her joy confesses, clothing her for spring, all fresh gifts returned with her returning King: bloom in every meadow, leaves on every bough, speak his sorrow ended, hail his triumph now.”* I love when our hymns speak for us so we can sing the words as our own: *“Welcome, happy morning! Age to age shall say.”*

Spring returns year after year, whether we are fully ready to receive its gifts or not- not every season of our lives makes it easy for us to embrace the joy of the Resurrection story. We have seasons where we are reluctant to leave our post beside the empty tomb, where we struggle to believe any darkness in our own lives will be- can be- driven away by the light of the Easter dawn. And yet, we faithfully tell the stories that say it is so... we proclaim that darkness and brokenness will never triumph... we wait for bulbs to bravely push through the

still-chilly soil and the earliest flowers to bloom with a hope that is persistent and courageous within us. Elaine Schlegel and I have been trading daffodil pictures from our yards back and forth on Facebook- as she shares how she plants all her potted Easter flowers on the bank in front of their house, it is bittersweet as I remember that this is the last time I will see mine bloom in that place, but they will surely bloom without me to herald other springs and bring joy to all who see them. Our created world seems to tell the story of what our own souls know- that the new life God promises will surely spring up in the ages to come as we and those who have gone before us have heard it and shared it: *“Welcome, happy morning! Age to age shall say.”*

So, sing the hymns, beloveds-shout the alleluias- tell the stories- teach our young people- honor the ones who gave us our heritage of faith and love- reach out boldly towards the promise of new and everlasting life made real

in the Resurrection. Proclaim the lifegiving message of God's unchanging love to a world in need of its truth and its joy: "*Welcome, happy morning! Age to age shall say.*" Alleluia, Alleluia, Amen. I wish you a most blessed and joyful Easter season.