

# Seeing with the Disciples

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Date: 05 April 2026

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[ 0 : 00 ] So, Isaiah 53, we'll be starting at verse 7. And we're speaking about, it's speaking about Jesus, of course.

He was oppressed and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearer is silent, so he opened not his mouth.

By oppression and judgment he was taken away, and as for his generation who considered that he was cut off out of the land of the living, stricken for the transgression of my people.

And they made his grave with the wicked and with the rich man in his death, although he had done no violence and there was no deceit in his mouth.

Yet it was the will of the Lord to crush him. He has put him to grief. When his soul makes an offering for guilt, he shall see his offspring.

[ 1 : 17 ] He shall prolong his days. The will of the Lord shall prosper in his hand. Out of the anguish of his soul he shall see and be satisfied.

By his knowledge shall the righteous one, my servant, make many to be accounted righteous, and he shall bear their iniquities.

Therefore I will divide him a portion with the many, and he shall divide the spoil with the strong, because he poured out his soul to death, and he was numbered with the transgressors.

Yet he bore the sin of many, and makes intercession for the transgressors. So now from John 19 from verse 38.

After these things, Joseph of Arimathea, who was a disciple of Jesus, but secretly for the fears of the Jews, asked Pilate that he might take away the body of Jesus, and Pilate gave him permission.

[ 2 : 31 ] So he came and took away his body. Nicodemus also, who earlier had come to Jesus by night, came bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about 75 pounds in weight.

So they took the body of Jesus and bound it in linen cloths with the spices, as is the burial custom of the Jews. Now in the place where he was crucified, there was a garden, and in the garden a new tomb, in which no one had yet been laid.

So because of the Jewish day of preparation, since the tomb was close at hand, they laid Jesus there. Well, on a Sunday morning, exactly 1,993 years ago, the 5th of April, A.D. 33, the body of Jesus disappeared from his tomb.

And Jesus' first disciples spent that day trying to understand what had happened, trying to piece together what had occurred from the clues that they saw.

Now, of course, we know what happened, because it is the foundational event of Christian faith. We know why the early Christians came to refer to Sunday as the Lord's Day.

[ 4 : 08 ] We know why churches have traditionally gathered on Sundays for corporate worship. There's no way really for us to recapture the confusion and the surprise of that day.

But the eyewitness account we're going to follow in the Gospel of John, it doesn't give us the explanation up front. It invites us into sort of follow the footsteps of the disciples.

It takes us through that day as it unfolded for the disciples. Now, you all know the saying that seeing is believing. And yet Christian faith involves believing what we haven't seen.

How can we do that? How can we believe something that we haven't seen? Now, of course, you could answer that question, how can we believe something we haven't seen? You could answer that question by saying that in reality, that's true of any event in history.

There are all kinds of things we believe, even though we haven't seen them. Any historical event, we haven't witnessed ourselves. That's how history works. In history, you need other reasons for believing than seeing.

[ 5 : 28 ] And often what you need are reports of those who did see eyewitness accounts. Well, this morning, we're going to hear the eyewitness accounts of those who were there, those who did get to see, of the eyewitness accounts of Peter, John and Mary, which could almost be a folk band.

In particular, it's the account of John, the author of John's Gospel, but he's with Peter, and twice in this account, Mary immediately relates her own testimony to John and the other disciples.

And so John incorporates Mary's testimony within his own testimony. And the way this narrative unfolds, as I said, is that it invites us to follow the eyewitnesses, to see through their eyes, as they piece together the clues of what took place that Sunday morning.

So first, let's take in the setting, which we had in the second of those readings that Joe just did for us at the end of John chapter 19. After Jesus' cry on the cross of, it is finished, he gave up his spirit and died.

And sometime later, a soldier confirmed he was dead by piercing his side with a spear. And then two secret disciples, as in they weren't following Jesus openly, but secretly, Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus, they requested the body of Jesus.

[ 6 : 54 ] They prepared Jesus' body for burial by binding Jesus' body in linen cloths, along with a significant quantity of costly spices. And then in John chapter 19, verse 41, we read, Now in the place where he was crucified, there was a garden, and in the garden a new tomb, in which no one had yet been laid.

So they placed Jesus there, because it's nearby, and the day of the Sabbath day, which began with sundown on Friday, the Sabbath day was approaching, they placed Jesus there.

It's a new tomb, John tells us. Jesus is the only one who's been laid there, so that everything that subsequently took place in and around that tomb must concern Jesus' body and no one else's.

There's no possibility of confusion here. So the next day was a Sabbath, the day of rest, and on the third day, the first to arrive at this garden tomb was Mary Magdalene.

So John tells us, John chapter 20, verse 1, Now on the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb early, while it was still dark, and saw that the stone had been taken away from the tomb.

[ 8 : 20 ] Now before we think about what Mary saw, let's just pause to ponder for a moment the symbolism of the setting.

It's the first day of the week. It's a beginning. It's early. There's darkness. There's a garden.

But in the garden was a tomb. The place of life had become a place of death. Can you feel the meaning just in the setting here?

Can you hear the echoes of another beginning? Of another darkness upon which light was about to break?

Of another garden? Mary came to this place, and what did she see? She saw that the stone had been taken away from the tomb.

[ 9 : 29 ] The stone which sealed the tomb had been removed. The tomb had been broken open. Now I wonder, have you ever come home to find one of the doors of your house, which you left closed, standing wide open?

If you have experienced that, it's quite an unsettling sight. You come home, you close the door, there it is, it's open. If you have experienced that, you probably immediately thought something similar to what Mary thought at this moment.

Verse 2, So she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, this is the one whom Jesus loved, that's John, and said to them, they have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they've laid him.

She immediately jumps to the conclusion that Jesus' body has been taken away, someone's stolen it, based on the clues she had seen.

Now, it seems that Mary didn't enter the tomb before running to alert Peter and John. I wonder what you would have done if you were in Mary's shoes. Would you have entered the tomb? If you, particularly perhaps if you're a woman and you come home and you find that the door to your house which you left closed is open, are you going in?

[ 11 : 05 ] What about if it's not a house but it's actually a dark tomb where you need to stoop down in order to get into it? Are you going in? You probably do what Mary did. But based on the clues she had seen, she formed what seemed to be the obvious conclusion and she took what seemed to be the prudent course of action.

She ran to fetch others. Notice in passing Mary's words to the disciples, in verse 2, they've taken the Lord out of the tomb and we do not know where they've laid him.

There's a little hint that there were other women present with Mary at the tomb. Perhaps they ran with Mary to Peter and John also. Perhaps they're still at the tomb. John, this account doesn't tell us.

But I just draw attention to it in passing because it's one of those points at which an apparent discrepancy between the four Gospels, the other three Gospels have multiple women at the tomb. John, at first appearance, seems to have just Mary.

An apparent discrepancy is not a discrepancy at all. It's just different ways of telling the same story. The same event being reported. For whatever reason, the other Gospels focus on a group of women.

[12:18] John chooses to focus on one woman, Mary Magdalene. We'll return to Mary shortly, but for now the narrative passes from what Mary saw to what Peter and John saw.

Verse 3. So Peter went out with the other disciple and they were going toward the tomb. Both of them were running together, but the other disciple, that's John, who's writing this account, the other disciple, outran Peter and reached the tomb first.

Now given Mary's startling announcement, it isn't that surprising that they ran to the tomb. That's not a surprise to find them running. Now I like running. I like running enough. I'm slowing down as I get older, but I like running enough that I still kind of keep track of times and try to beat my previous times and so on.

And so I can appreciate verses 3 to 4. It must have been nice for John while honestly and accurately reporting what took place that day just to drop into the account that he ran faster than his friend.

I mean, I'm not bragging, I'm just telling what happened. John reached the tomb first. What did John see and Peter after him?

[13:36] And stooping down to look in, he saw the linen cloths lying there, but he did not go in. Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb.

He saw the linen cloths lying there and the face cloth, which had been on Jesus' head, not lying with the linen cloths, but folded up in a place by itself.

Notice the careful attention to detail here. John doesn't tell us why he didn't barge right into the tomb. You know, maybe it was fear, maybe he was being respectful, he doesn't tell us why he didn't go in, but I think I'd probably be with John here.

You know, a bit of caution doesn't go astray. But there's no holding Peter back, which is kind of in keeping with what we know of Peter's temperament from other events in the Gospels.

Peter arrived and he just goes straight in. From outside the tomb, peering in, bending down and peering in, John could see the linen cloths lying there.

[14:40] These are the cloths that Jesus' body had been wrapped in. What's implied is that the cloths are there, but the body isn't. If the body of Jesus had been there, the linen cloths would have been wrapped around the body, not just lying there.

I think it's also implied that the spices are still there, although they're not directly visible, but the spices which had been bound up between layers of cloth as Joseph and Nicodemus had prepared Jesus' body.

So that's what John sees inside the tomb when Peter enters. He can see another detail. The face cloth folded up in a place by itself.

Well, emboldened by Peter's example, John enters the tomb and he's able to take in this additional detail and he tells us his state of mind at the time. Remember, it's written in the third person, but this is John's personal testimony in this account.

Verse 8, then the other disciple, John, who had reached the tomb first, let's just drop that in again, he also went in and he saw and believed.

[16:02] He saw and believed. What did he see? Now he saw the whole scene just as Peter had, nobody, the linen cloths, the face cloth folded up in a separate place by itself.

He took in these things, he saw these clues and he believed. John is, he's drawing connection, now in his account, John is intentionally drawing a connection between seeing and believing.

He saw and he believed, he believed because he saw. But what did he believe? It seems to me that what we're supposed to understand by this is that John at this moment believed that Jesus had

risen from the dead.

Now why do I say that? Well, have a look at verse 9. Verse 8, he saw and believed for as yet they did not understand the scripture that he must rise from the dead.

Now notice the start of verse 9, it says, he saw and believed for as yet they did not understand, he's explaining, verse 9, the for is explaining something about the verse 8.

[ 17 : 33 ] What's it explaining? It doesn't explain why he believed because verse 9 is about something they didn't understand. It doesn't even explain really what he believed.

I think what it does explain is why John had to see before he believed. That's what it explains, why he had to see before he believed.

Why? He saw and believed for as yet they did not understand the scripture. Now John doesn't tell us whether Peter also believed at this point, maybe he did, maybe he didn't.

But John isn't bragging about, he's not boasting about believing here, if anything he's saying, I should have believed earlier, I should have already known this, that Jesus would rise from the dead, I should have known this would happen because the scripture said so.

Of course, not only did scriptures like Isaiah 53, which Joe read for us in Psalm 16, prophesy, predict this event, that the Messiah, the Christ would rise, but Jesus himself had told his disciples multiple times that he would rise after three days.

[ 18 : 55 ] Perhaps Jesus' words are there in the back of John's mind somewhere. But why is it that seeing these things in particular, seeing the linen cloth, seeing the folded up face cloth, why is it that seeing these things would prompt John to believe that Jesus was alive?

You might say it's a hasty conclusion, it goes beyond the evidence. But it's, I think it is, if you think about it, if you reflect on it, it is, what John saw did make other conclusions less likely.

intrinsically less likely. So let's consider some other conclusions. Conclusion one, someone took the body, someone stole Jesus' body. Well, if someone broke into the tomb and took Jesus' body, it's very unlikely that they would have removed the cloths first.

They'd just grab the body with the cloths, the only body in the tomb. on the other hand, if it were grave robbers, I mean, it's not like Jesus wasn't buried with a chest of treasure or anything, but if it was grave robbers, what would they have done?

They would have left the body and taken the linen cloths, because they were the only thing of value. So either the body and cloths are gone together, or the cloths are gone and the body's left, but who would take just the body?

[ 20 : 31 ] And whoever they were, you know, if they're coming in, they're breaking into the tomb and taking something or someone, or if they're up to no good, they would have just snatched what they wanted and left. They wouldn't have gone to the effort of neatly folding up the face cloth.

No, John seems to reach the conclusion here that the burial cloths are left in the tomb because Jesus had no need of them anymore.

For that simple reason. Of course, at this stage, John's belief may have only been hesitant, uncertain, incomplete. There are more things John will see in time.

But John, as he tells his account, he wants us to know that his belief was based on what he saw. He saw and believed.

His belief was not based on what he expected, he didn't yet understand the scriptures, it was based on what he saw. Well, having seen and believed, verse 10, then the disciples went back to their homes.

[ 21 : 40 ] And now we return to the one with whom this day began, Mary Magdalene, and what Mary saw next. Mary had not seen what Peter and John saw.

I mean, perhaps, I think it's likely she was still on her way back to the tomb when they reached the tomb. But verse 11 leads with Mary's emotional state, but Mary stood weeping outside the tomb, and as she wept, she stooped to look into the tomb.

Notice that Mary's weeping is mentioned twice in this verse. She's weeping because Jesus, her Lord, her friend, had been cruelly put to death.

She's weeping because, as best she could judge, his tomb had been broken open and his body taken. She's weeping, she's grieving over death and loss, and she stooped to look into the tomb, as John had done when he first arrived at the tomb, and we expect her to see what John saw.

But instead, she sees something else. Verse 12, and she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had lain, one at the head and one at the feet.

[ 23 : 08 ] Now, presumably, the linen cloths are still there, although perhaps Peter and John took them, I don't know. but the surprise for Mary is, I mean, again, Jesus' body isn't there, but she sees these two angels dressed in white.

They are there, but Jesus is not. They're sitting where Jesus' body had lain. Now, the thing about angels, the whole thing about angels, their whole shtick, really, is that angels are messengers, They deliver messages.

In fact, the word angel can, in other contexts, just be translated as messenger. In the other gospels, Matthew, Mark and Luke, these angels deliver a message to the women at the tomb.

But here in John, they simply ask Mary a question. Verse 13, they said to her, Woman, why are you weeping?

We've been told twice in verse 11 that Mary was weeping, and now the angels ask her, why are you weeping? And the question, I think it strikes us as a bit odd, doesn't it?

[ 24 : 17 ] I mean, maybe even a bit callous. If you went to a funeral and you turned to someone who was crying next to you and said, Woman, why are you weeping?

I think they'd probably throw you out. I mean, Mary's weeping really shouldn't require an explanation.

Weeping's what one does at a tomb. Jesus wept at the tomb of Lazarus, Mary weeps at the tomb of Jesus. So, what are these angels saying by their question?

Woman, why are you weeping? Verse 13 again, she said to them, they have taken away my Lord and I do not know where they have laid him.

Now, it may in part be an answer to the angel's question. This is one of the reasons she's crying because she doesn't know where Jesus' body is. She's distressed. But it also shows she's still in the same frame of mind as when she first went to Peter and John back in verse 2.

[ 25 : 30 ] She thinks someone's taken, people have taken Jesus' body away. But in verse 2, she said to Peter and John, the Lord and we do not know.

Now, she says to the angels, my Lord and I do not know. In her grief, her world has shrunk just to her Lord and her confusion.

the angels don't answer. In fact, that's all we hear of the angels in John's Gospel. Still in despair and confusion, Mary turns away from the tomb and she sees something else.

Verse 14, having said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing, but she did not know that it was Jesus.

Jesus said to her, woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you seeking? She sees Jesus, she doesn't realise it's Jesus.

[ 26 : 44 ] This new man asks her the same question as the angels and then a second question. But now these questions take on new meaning, don't they?

Jesus' questions to Mary are not to belittle or mock her grief. Rather, Jesus' questions are to answer Mary's grief.

Why are you weeping? There's no need for tears. whom are you seeking? I'm standing right here. It was right for Jesus to weep at the tomb of Lazarus when Lazarus was still in the tomb. But why should Mary weep at the tomb of Jesus when the tomb was empty?

But Mary's not there yet. She hasn't caught up. Verse 15, supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him and I will take him away.

[ 27 : 58 ] I mean, supposing him to be the gardener, we're reminded again of the garden and perhaps of another garden. Remember that at creation, the first man was placed in Eden to be a gardener, and so now at the dawn of a new creation, the last man appears as a gardener at first.

Verse 16, Jesus said to her, Mary, and she turned and said to him in Aramaic, Rabboni, which means teacher.

Jesus speaks her name. And we're told again that Mary turned, perhaps she hadn't looked directly at Jesus previously, but now she faces him directly full on.

She hears his voice, she recognises his call, she turns to him and she says Rabboni, and this is one of those few times in the Gospels, which the Gospels were written in Greek, but one of those few times in the Gospels where we're given the exact Aramaic word which was spoken at that moment.

It draws us in as readers even closer to this precise moment. As we hear the word she said. We can picture at this moment Mary falling to her knees, clinging onto Jesus' feet as joy, relief and

amazement and awe wash over her.

[ 29 : 31 ] But Jesus' resurrection was not merely a return to life as it had been before, nor was it for Mary alone.

So verse 17, Jesus said to her, do not cling to me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father, but go to my brothers and say to them, I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.

Now there's an awful lot we could unpack here in these words of Jesus in verse 17, more than we have time for today. Briefly to touch on a few things, Jesus says he would soon ascend to the Father as he'd already promised, but Jesus' ascension to the Father is more than a return, it's also an elevation.

Jesus would ascend to his position of authority with the Father in glory. He would not, Jesus says, at this time remain bodily with his disciples.

Instead he would, as he'd previously taught, he would send forth another counsellor. For the next stage of God's plan that was about to unfold, Jesus' presence with his disciples would be in the person of the Spirit.

[ 30 : 57 ] He says, I've not yet ascended to the Father. This is the first time that Jesus, in John's Gospel, we see it also in Luke, this is the first time in John's Gospel, that Jesus calls his followers, my brothers, my brothers.

A new family had been established by Jesus' death and resurrection. A new family in which we, as Jesus, call on God as Father, and yet Jesus' relationship with the Father is distinct from ours. Jesus says, he's my Father and your Father, he's my God and your God. There's a sense in which the Father is Jesus' God, the sense in which the Father is Jesus' Father is distinct from the sense in which he's our Father.

The sense in which God the Father is Jesus' God is distinct from the sense in which he is our God. There's some deep Trinitarian reflection we could do on this verse, but we'll move on.

I want to close with two thoughts. First, Mary's announcement, weeping, verse 18, Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, I have seen the Lord, and that he had said these things to her.

[ 32 : 21 ] I've seen the Lord. I mean, again, we've got that key verb that's been throughout this account, seen, I have seen the Lord. just as John saw and believed, Mary had now seen and she believed.

The next verses, the rest of the chapter, would relate how the other disciples also came to see Jesus and believe, including John and Peter.

why all this emphasis on what Mary and the disciples saw? Well, the Bible records this, it's for us, it's for our sake.

Jesus would soon say to his disciples, because you have seen me, you have believed, blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.

Jesus is talking about us. We haven't seen Jesus, but God wants everyone to know that Jesus rose from the dead, even those, the thousands, the millions, the billions that would follow, to know that Jesus rose from the dead, even though we have not seen.

[ 33 : 42 ] God wants everyone to know that Jesus is alive and that he is Lord. And because God wants us all to know this too, the disciples wrote this down so that we could in a sense see what they see, what they saw.

They wrote down what they saw, the stone rolled away from the tomb, the linen cloths lying in the tomb, the wrapping for Jesus' head folded in a separate place, two angels at the tomb, and finally Jesus himself, they wrote down what they saw, so that even though we haven't seen Jesus, we too could believe that he is alive.

That that Jesus bodily rose from the dead on the third day after his crucifixion is absolutely foundational to faith. Christian faith is resurrection faith.

Paul, that enemy of the church turned apostle, he is another who believed because he saw. He wrote that Jesus' resurrection is of first importance.

If Christ has not been raised, Paul wrote, our faith is futile. The resurrection of Jesus means first that he is Lord.

[ 35 : 00 ] He has conquered sin, he's conquered death, he's conquered the devil, he's victorious over all of God's enemies, he's exalted, he's appointed by God the Father as Lord of all, as ruler

and judge of all.

And so in Romans 10 verse 9 Paul says, if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.

That is the, that's what we confess, that's what we believe, those two belong together, confessing that Jesus is Lord, believing that God raised him from the dead, that is Christian faith.

If the body of Jesus remained in the tomb, if he's still buried there, he might be an inspiring example, he might be a noble martyr, but if the tomb is empty, he is Lord, the living Lord.

We can say with Mary, Jesus is Lord, indeed each of us must say with Mary, not only that Jesus is the Lord, but that Jesus is my Lord.

[ 36 : 13 ] The one who conquered death has all authority, there's nothing beyond his rule and power, and now it just remains for the world to hear this. Mary Magdalene's initial announcement must be carried to all nations.

Think of the most dark and dismal situations in our world today. there is none, no matter how grim, that could not be transformed by the news that Jesus rose from the dead.

With our church small group last week, we had a social where Catherine Gibbons took us through some slides of her recent holiday in West Papua, where she visited a number of small villages during a cruise around parts of West Papua.

Catherine showed us a bunch of churches and so on, and told us how openly the people of West Papua were speaking about this, that once a year, people will come together for a service of celebration and thanksgiving, thanking God for the Christian missionaries who first came to tell Papuans that Jesus is the risen Lord of all.

And they relate how before they knew Jesus their lives were brutal and full of violence and death, tribe warring against tribe, but the gospel has brought peace and life and love and transformed their society.

[ 37 : 49 ] Max Stiles tells in his book The Marks of the Messenger of how the day after September 11, the terrorist attack on the World Trade Centre, the day after September 11, he banged a for sale sign in the front yard of his house and prepared to move with his family to Dubai because he was convinced that the church's response to the horrific events of September 11 must be missionary, not military.

I'm not making a political comment here, I'm speaking to the church. church. The Middle East needs Christian mission now more than ever.

The main problem in the Middle East is not oil or nuclear weapons or oppressive government, the problem is that too few people know that Jesus rose from the dead and that he is Lord of all.

The resurrection of Jesus means that he is Lord and if the resurrection of Jesus means that he is Lord, it also means that he is the life giver.

He's the life giver. He's overcome death and there's life with him and so we have hope. Jesus' resurrection is the pattern for the resurrection of all of God's people.

[ 39 : 12 ] Paul says in 1 Corinthians 15, Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep. As in Adam all die, so in Christ all shall be made alive, but each in his own order, Christ the first fruits and then at his coming those who belong to Christ.

That's our hope, that we will be raised as he was raised, that death is not the end. You see this hope at the funerals of believers, a real hope.

Peter, the Apostle Peter called it a living hope. A hope that has a foundation, a hope that is based in a real event that took place in history. Those who die in Christ will rise again because he rose.

I've read some tragic stories over the past week of young people who have chosen for themselves voluntary assisted dying, euthanasia.

Young people, people in their twenties, because of the depression they're experiencing or the pain or the suffering that they no longer want to bear. The law and the medical system should have prevented this.

[ 40 : 33 ] Instead, the law and doctors facilitated it. need to hope. These poor people had no hope and those around them failed to give them hope.

That's where nihilism and atheism lead, to a culture of death, to a world without hope. death. But Jesus said to Mary, woman, why are you weeping?

Jesus showed Mary the answer to tears is not death, but life. Jesus might ask you, why are you weeping?

Of course, we do weep, and we should weep, for there are many terrible things in our world. But our tears are temporary.

Tears do not have the last word. And there is no suffering, no pain, no grief that cannot be transformed by the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

[ 41 : 44 ] Jesus endured betrayal and deception and abandonment. Jesus endured scourging and spitting and mocking. Jesus endured the nails and the cross. Jesus endured the judgment and wrath of God, the full penalty of divine punishment due to the sins of the world.

Jesus endured death and the grave. He endured for the joy that lay before him. He endured knowing that, as we read in Isaiah 53, when his soul makes an offering for guilt, he shall see his offspring, he shall prolong his days.

Out of the anguish of his soul, he shall see and be satisfied. Exactly 1,993 years ago today, death was defeated and hope was born.

Christ rose that we might rise. Christ rose that tears might give way to laughter. Christ rose that despair might give way to gladness.

Christ rose that grief might give way to joy. This is our day. This is the Lord's day, the day of Jesus Christ, Lord and life giver who rose from the dead.

[ 43 : 08 ] all glory and honour and power be to our risen Lord. Amen.