

“A GLAD DAY,” An Easter Sermon delivered by the Reverend Dr. Geoffrey G. Drutchas, St. Paul United Church of Christ, Taylor, Michigan, April 4, 2021

This morning, congregation, we celebrate Easter. We do with acclamations and great joy. And even a procession at the end of our service. But festivity and Easter did not always go together as they do today. Amazing as it may sound, what we regard as cause for celebration today was experienced by our earliest forebearers in Christian faith as something akin to a calamity or catastrophe. For those faced with the actual events of the first Easter, it literally took a miracle to turn their outlook and perspective around—a miracle of faith to realize and appreciate that in the revealed circumstances of this day there was genuine reason for joy.

Who can exactly know the heart and mind of our original Christian ancestors as they greeted the third day after Christ’s crucifixion at Calvary? Nevertheless, from what the gospels tell us it is obvious that all of Jesus’ disciples were torn by anguish and numb with grief on the first Easter. They had been personal witnesses to all that had unfolded on Good Friday. They had observed a scourged and beaten Jesus being nailed to the cross on that hill variously known as Calvary or Golgotha, the “Place of the Skull.” (*Mark 15:22-25; Luke 23:32-38*) Thereafter, they had watched Jesus slowly suffocate on the cross as the weight of his own body squeezed and collapsed his lungs. Dehydration had only added to his physical distress. Standing not far from the foot of Calvary’s cross, the disciples were also in earshot of Jesus’ final spoken words. (*Mark 15:26-37, 40; Luke 23:44-47*) It was a cruel end for Jesus. However, it was no less cruel, no less terrible for his disciples to behold. From what the gospels suggest, the disciples really did believe that the grave provided by a generous and wealthy member of the Jewish community was the end for him—and for them as a community of believers. (*Mark 15:42-46; Luke 23:50-54*)

Yet the trauma for the disciples did not stop there. Their feelings of guilt were huge, if not close to overwhelming. Obviously, among the apostles Judas had been the worst and meanest of all. He had actively betrayed Jesus and then died because of it—as parallel scriptures recount, either from suicide or exploding guts. (*Matthew 27:3-10; Acts 1:17-19*) However, Peter “the Rock” had also denied even knowing Jesus. And he did so not once but three times over before the cock crowed, just as Jesus had earlier predicted he would! (*Matthew 26:69-75; Luke 22:54-62*)

Meantime, after Jesus’ arrest at the Garden of Gethsemane, the other male apostles had also acted as if they hardly knew him, except to mingle in the crowd at the cross. Cowering behind closed doors the day after the crucifixion, they were fearful that the Roman authorities would soon come knocking on their door or kicking it in to seize them. too. (*Matthew 26:56; Mark 14:50; John 20:10, 19*)

As the sun dawned on that first Easter morning, how embarrassed and forlorn each of them must have been! It’s not hard to imagine them in the most heavy-hearted prayer, lamenting: *“Oh Jesus, I’m so sorry...so very sorry. If only I had listened better to you. Or done more for you. Or been truer and more faithful to you when we still had time!”* Isn’t this the kind of litany of regret that comes to our lips when someone dear to us dies and we have unfinished business with him or her and feel in need of forgiveness?

But the very God whom Jesus proclaimed through his ministry works in redemptive ways mysterious and amazing. And as the rest of the Easter story unfolds we see how God certainly did work redemptively on the first Easter, transforming it for us all from a day of mourning to the day of joy that we know.

As it turned out, it was Jesus' female disciples, rather than any of male apostles, who ended up as the agents of this transformation. They became the ultimate bearers of good news we now celebrate every Easter. In a beautiful ironic twist, ancient patriarchal prejudice against women, shared by Romans and Jews alike, allowed Jesus' female disciples to brave the day and go places where men could not. Dismissed as harmless, not worthy of concern or account, women were able to stealthily move around Jerusalem, free to visit Jesus' tomb without raising suspicions or being stopped by vigilant authorities as a threat to imperial or ecclesiastical power. Thus, through the grace of God and foolishness of people in power, a small handful of women, close to Jesus in life, were privileged to be the first to learn and to impart the surprising news that Jesus was not defeated by the grave, but truly victorious over it. Their avowed mission as they departed from their homes to the Jerusalem cemetery was to clean and embalm with fragrant spices the broken body of the teacher they loved, lending him in death a dignity that he hadn't known on the last day of his mortal life. (*Mark 16:1-2; Luke 23:54-24:1*)

In all their richness, the four gospels of the New Testament each offer a slightly different account of the women who ventured to Jesus' tomb. In one case there is mention of Joanna and Salome as members of the embalming party. However, what's generally consistent in the telling is the definite presence of Mary Magdalene and a second Mary, known to us as the mother both of Jesus and his half-brother James. (*Mark 16:1; Matthew 28:1; Luke 23:55-24:11; John 20:1-10*) These women, whether just two or as many as four, found Jesus' tomb unsealed—the stone rolled back. That was a surprise. But more shocking still was the emptiness inside. The tomb was missing any human remains.

Fortunately, however, in that emptiness there was the blessing of an angel to interpret and explain the meaning of it all. As the women were informed, Jesus had risen. Moreover, he was soon to be seen in Galilee, home turf where his ministry had first begun. The angel expressly instructed these women to tell the other disciples to look for Jesus there. (*Matthew 28:5-6; Mark 16:3-4; Luke 24:2-7*)

The gospels report that the women were both joyful *and* afraid. They ran from the tomb. (*Matthew 28:8; Mark 16:8*) Small wonder! They had every reason to be shaken up. Jesus' resurrection was unprecedented. Moreover, the women must have grasped in the moment that life would never be the same—either for them or for anyone else. And change is always unsettling, even scary--however necessary, however promising.

Poor women! Few believed them. At least, not at first. (*Luke 24:12*) Though confronted with the women's report, many folks chose instead to cling to the tragedy, trauma, grief, and sense of guilt that had beset them with Jesus' crucifixion. We human beings are, inexplicably, often

like that. We get down so long and so deep, emotionally speaking, that we don't know what's side up. We choose the bad and the sad over what is good, happy, and hopeful.

Although renewed joy did gain a beachhead on that first Easter, it took many appearances of the risen Jesus in Galilee and other locales for doubts to be overcome and for the truth of what the women had learned at the empty tomb to be more widely appreciated as wholly authentic and true. No, death had not defeated Jesus after all. Nor could the sin and evil of a fallen world conquer the way of love and forgiveness that Jesus came to earth to share with humankind for the sake of its salvation. Against all worldly odds, thanks to God's divine grace, everything Jesus had taught in his earthly ministry was powerfully vindicated for all time. Moreover, extended to all who live according to Jesus' teachings and example was the promise of an unquenchable eternal life.

I think back on the struggle of our Christian forebearers to grasp the meaning of the empty tomb after experiencing the horror of the cross on Good Friday. How blessed we are that they were ultimately able to trust the message of an angel imparted to the faithful women in their midst, making Easter the day of jubilation and hope that we celebrate today! Two thousand years later, I hope that each of us continue to trust that same powerful message communicated to humankind in a Jerusalem cemetery where the emptiness of a tomb revealed the fullness and richness of God's redemptive grace. What God proclaimed through the original Easter events was not only intended to encourage and save his people back then, but to restore hope and salvation to all succeeding generations. That includes us!

I personally take courage from the promise of eternal life through the risen Christ. It helps to mute any fear of death and to put into perspective the infirmities that are natural and inevitable in this mortal life. Whatever happens now, some day I'll be free and delivered from it all at the side of Jesus and God in a life to come. Meanwhile, I am also heartened by Jesus' resurrection in other ways. It's a proof, if I need it (as I sometimes do), that God is working redemptively in every difficult life situation, helping the right and the good to prevail, no matter what size the challenge. As a matter of faith, I look for resurrection day by day, lifting my spirits, and lending me fresh hope and insight to surmount problems. And I suspect you do too.

Some time back I came across the testimony of a fellow United Church of Christ pastor writing about moments of resurrection in his congregation. Here are some the examples that he provided that stir me...

- ❖ A young woman who has attempted suicide several times now realizes by God's transforming power, experienced through the love of family and friends, how much she wants to live.
- ❖ An older man who cared for his sick and ailing wife for many years had an overwhelming sense of God's comforting presence on that night she died. This experience of resurrection has pointed him to the next hopeful chapter for life ahead.
- ❖ An executive, out of work for more than two years, has realized that he took no joy in his former job. Praying to God for guidance as to his true calling, he has been rewarded with a fresh sense of how he can best use his talents.

- ❖ A young woman whose husband walked out on her for someone else has been deep in grief, but discovers that God has made her stronger and more resilient than she ever knew. She is reborn to a whole new understanding of who she is.
- ❖ A couple who has struggled with their son's newly-disclosed sexual orientation, have died to their expectation of having grandchildren but, turning to God for comfort and strength in their disappointment, have come to a deeper understanding of what it means to be a family together with an abiding love for their son.
- ❖ A teenager, dealing with the early throes of a drug addiction, really hears Jesus' message that God loves him and makes the decision to die to drugs and find a new life for himself through his faith in Jesus Christ, while seeking out the help of family and a counselor.

Friends, all of these are moving anecdotes--aren't they? Yet I suspect that right here in our own congregation we have equally compelling resurrection stories that we could share. The redemptive, renewing power of God is great. He who can move mountains and unexpectedly even empty out tombs can move us too, bringing us new hope and new life, not only in the hereafter of eternal life, but right here and now for our mortal world. That's what Easter and the risen Christ are all about.

To borrow some of the words of an ancient psalmist, God through his miraculous powers turned the grief and mourning of Jesus' earliest disciples into jubilation and dancing, girding them in gladness. (*Psalms 30:11*) Through God's holy spirit, which is the spirit of the risen Christ, the resurrection miracle can be known and experienced in our lives too. This Easter, on this glad day, let us rejoice in that wonderful news. **Amen.**