

An Easter sermon delivered by the Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, senior minister at the First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, April 4, 2010, dedicated to the memory of Thomas Moyer, chief justice of Ohio's Supreme Court, 1985-2010, and always to the glory of God!

“An Exciting Faith Takes Joyful Risks”

Acts 10:34-43; Luke 24:1-12

(Part VIII of VIII in the sermon series “An Exciting Faith”)

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen.

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Today we celebrate our exciting faith on this day of Resurrection. On this glorious day in which Christ Jesus rose from the grave, I am ask you to consider the story of our risen friend.

Jesus of Nazareth, the one in whose spirit and name our exciting faith was founded, was born in an obscure village, the child of a peasant woman. Jesus worked as a carpenter until he was 30 when, during his baptism in the water of the Jordan River, he received God's clear call to serve. For three years he was an itinerant rabbi with a following of 12 men, whom he called his disciples. He never wrote a book. He never held an office. He never owned a home. He never had a family.

He never went to college. He lived in small towns, preached on hillsides, healed in huts, and fished with his friends in a fresh water sea. He died 10 miles from the place where he was born, having traveled no further than 200 miles over his lifetime.

He never did one of the things that usually accompany greatness. He had no credentials but his word. In his final days of life, the tide of popular opinion turned against him. He was arrested unjustly and turned over to his enemies for a trial that was a complete mockery. He was nailed to a cross between two thieves. While he was dying above them, with his blood flowing everywhere, his executioners gambled for his robe, the only piece of property he had on earth. After his death, he was taken down and laid in a borrowed grave through the pity of an admirer.

His story doesn't end in a borrowed grave. It begins there! One-thousand, nine-hundred and seventy-seven years ago, death could not hold Jesus Christ. A second-hand tomb could not contain him. On this day, Easter 33 A.D., Jesus Christ was unleashed into the world, redeemed, risen, real in a way that is a mystery and a wonder.

In our day, witnesses of the resurrection are everywhere to be found. Orthodox Jewish scholar Pinchas Lapide writes: "I accept the resurrection of Easter Sunday not as an invention of the community of disciples, but as a historical event. If the resurrection of Jesus from the dead on that Easter Sunday were a public event which had been made known . . . not only to the 530 Jewish witnesses but to the entire population, all Jews would have become followers of Jesus."

And what an amazing Christ we follow!

Close to twenty centuries have come and gone and today Jesus stands as the centerpiece of the human race, the leader of the column of progress. In the words of James C. Hefley, "All the armies that ever marched, and all the navies that ever

were built, and all the governments that ever sat, and all the kings that ever reigned, put together, have not affected the life of humanity upon this earth as powerfully as has that One Solitary Life.”

Nineteenth-century theologian Phillip Schaff, speaking from our German Reformed tradition, speaks of our savior with these words: “Jesus of Nazareth, without money or arms, conquered more millions than Alexander the Great, Caesar, Mohammed and Napoleon; without science and learning, he shed more light on things human and divine than all philosophers and scholars combined; without the eloquence of school, he spoke such words of life as were never spoken before or since, and produced effects which lie beyond the reach of orator or poet; without writing a single line, he set more pens in motion, and furnished themes for more sermons, orations, discussions, learned volumes, works of art and songs of praise than the whole army of great men of ancient and modern times.”

In him, our faith becomes exciting not only to believers but to others. Historian H.G. Wells has written: “I am an historian, I am not a believer, but I must confess as a historian that this penniless preacher from Nazareth is irrevocably the very center of history. Jesus Christ is easily the most dominant figure in all history.”

Albert Einstein joins the parade of witnesses adding: “As a child I received instruction both in the Bible and in the Talmud. I am a Jew, but I am enthralled by the luminous figure of the Nazarene. . . . No one can read the Gospels without feeling the actual presence of Jesus. His personality pulsates in every word. No myth is filled with such life.”

Witnesses beyond our faith proclaim, “Jesus is the reason for humanity having hope!”

“No myth is filled with such life!” What do we say? Walking in the way of the life of Christ, our faith is not only

exciting, it is also risky business. To follow the risen Christ requires courage and boldness and joy – beyond belief!

Christians risk their lives for friends and strangers. Because Christianity's influence is so pervasive throughout much of the world, it is easy to forget how radical our beliefs once were. We must always remember that Jesus' resurrection forever changed Christians' view of life and death.

For example, when a major plague hit the ancient Roman Empire, Christians had surprisingly high survival rates. Why? Most Roman citizens would banish any plague-stricken person from their household. But because Christians had no fear of death, they nursed their sick instead of throwing them out on the streets. Therefore, many Christians survived the plague. Caring for the poor, the forsaken, the forgotten, the widow, the orphan and oppressed has always been a joyful risk that Christians have been willing to take.

When Nazis and fascists in Italy were destroying the Jews and much of Europe with a twisted theology of hate, the resistance movement throughout Europe was most often run by Christians hiding Jews and attempting to stop Hitler's madness. In town after town in France, Italy, Denmark and beyond, it was "real" Christians who hid Jews in their homes, convents, monasteries and churches. The power of the risen Christ was alive in the risk-taking followers who loved the strangers in their midst – in perilous times, such as World War II, but in times before and since.

We belong to a long line of loving, risk-taking Christians here at First Church. Hiding slaves and ordaining women into Christian ministry in the 1850s; fighting for an end to slavery in the war between the states in the 1860s; setting up African-American colleges in the South for freed slaves in the 1870s; proclaiming the radical vision of the social gospel in the 1880s to 1890s; fighting for women's right to vote; forming Gladden Community House, the YWCA and Godman Guild, all in the first 20 years of the 20th century; 10 years

later, stepping-up and stepping-out while building this incredible “million-dollar church” (\$12 million in today’s dollars) in the heart of the Depression in the 1930s; forming and running the first integrated pre-school in the 1940s and 1950s; fighting for civil rights and women’s rights in the 1960s; ordaining the first openly gay men and women in the 1970s, while building the Beckerath organ – the first of its kind in Ohio 40 years ago this summer; adding our incredible Days of Creation stained-glass windows in the 1980s; offering same-sex marriage ceremonies to couples in the 1990s; joining BREAD and the struggle for social justice in January 2000; welcoming the Muslim community into our building to worship and teach in the aftermath of September 11, 2001; becoming an Open and Affirming church in 2002; and drawing the line in the sand against highly-politicized fundamentalist Christians attempting to take over our state six years ago. We have stood strong and taken joyful risks in our 158 years in the heart of our great city as a joyful witness for Christ’s love for all people.

But, ours is not a faith or a congregation to rest on our laurels or the accolades of others. Ours is a risk-taking, forward-looking, ever-moving and joyful congregation that finds our strength in stepping up, stepping out and stepping forward in holy boldness!

Now is our time to be strong. Now is our opportunity to take a joyful risk, to live into our resurrected faith! This is our greatest opportunity in 79 years! In the land that is adjacent to our western border – the old Byers used car lot – our future growth and development can be found. The property that is ours to own and build upon will double our current footprint in downtown Columbus! We also will fix this Cathedral of Grace, improving everything about her. We also will spread our joy in mission to our neighbors and far away!

But to make this dream come true, you will have to be as bold, as strong and as clear in joyful risk-taking as our forebearers in faith.

You and I are the witnesses for Christ's resurrection in our time! You and I must encourage one another to invest, to invite, to encourage one another and to spread the good news that ours is a church that follows our risen savior from a borrowed tomb to the fullness of God's glory.

Ours is an exciting faith whose future is calling us to be joyful risk-takers in building up God's kingdom. Now is the time for our resurrection faith to take wing and fly to a future with unbounded possibilities and hope! After all, what a great Lord we serve! What an exciting faith we have! Thanks be to God! Alleluia! Amen.

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