

# **“Love Rising”**

**Isaiah 25:6-9; Acts 10:34-43, John 20:1-18**

**Part X of X in the Sermon Series  
“The Journey Back to Love”**

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April 4, 2021

From the Pulpit

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An Easter Meditation delivered by The Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens, Sr. Minister, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, Easter Sunday, April 4, 2021, dedicated to Deborah M. Anderson for her transformational Easter banner dedicated this holy day, to the memories of Dr. Paul Minus and Janet Younger, to Brian and Abby Cave on their 12th anniversary, in thanksgiving for Dr. Karl and Sallie Danneberger and Thom Smith and Dr. Cami Curren, to the memory of The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. who was martyred this day in 1968, and always to the glory of God!

## **“Love Rising”**

Isaiah 25:6-9; Acts 10:34-43, John 20:1-18

We have taken a journey through Lent and Holy Week. Emily and I have delivered nine sermons along the road of this journey. You can find them all on our website and they are also all on YouTube.

It has been a long journey back to love.

I thank you for taking this trip with us.

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

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It is a miracle that she is even alive. Now she is on a journey back to love.

Jesus saved her from certain death and now as Mary Magdalene makes her way through the dark city streets headed for the tomb of her friend and savior in the predawn hours of this day, memories of him flood her mind. *“The way my life was headed, it could have been me in a tomb instead of my Lord,”* she ponders as she replays her life story turned around and saved by Jesus.

Jesus had loved Mary back to life as he ministered to her and healed her of torment, mental anguish and emotional trauma. It is a miracle she is still standing. Thanks to Jesus, she didn’t die young. He cleansed her heart and cleared her mind and made her eternally grateful.

As she turns the final corner to enter the garden tomb her heart is filled with sadness mixed with deep appreciation for all Jesus has meant to her. Then she sees it. The huge stone covering the entrance to the tomb is gone. Panic sets in as she pivots and runs back to tell Peter and the other disciples. Once they hear this stunning news, they take off and she follows. They arrive first to discover the missing body and the linens just lying there (like the one draped on the cross this morning).

Strangely, by the time Mary returns to the tomb the disciples have headed home. Alone in the garden again, she steps into the tomb and sees two angels sitting there (two angels that the disciples apparently missed seeing). Weeping, she repeats to angels what she said to the disciples – with one word changed. This time she calls Jesus *“MY” Lord. “They have taken My Lord and I do not know where they have laid him.”*

Apparently, he hasn't gone far. He is right there. He speaks to her and she doesn't know him until he says her name, "**Mary.**" She recognizes his voice. That kindness. That respect. That love. "**Mary.**" She hears him before she truly sees him. It is real. He is risen! "**Rabbouni...Teacher,**" Mary cries.

Jesus Christ, the one who loves Mary back to life and the one who always loved the world and embraced the world **in spite of** all the evil and discord, the craziness and distain, the hate and inhumanity, he lived in love and he died in love is now fully risen in Love! And Mary is the first first to meet Love Rising!

This story gets better with age. Like a good wine, its vintage improves each year. Perhaps this is true because we need Love Rising more now than ever before. Love Rising is a Real thing. It is not just a metaphor for preachers.

Fr. Richard Rohr, which I am going to share with you because he has given us a mind-blowing insight into the Love of Christ Rising. Fr. Rohr is a Franciscan priest who is a gifted spiritual writer and teacher. In a piece he authored this week, entitled, "Once we were stardust, and what we will be is the good surprise" (*National Catholic Reporter*, Mar 31, 2021) he wrote of our real and cosmic connections to resurrection.

Fr. Rohr points out that most preachers on the resurrection are drawn to the dramatic line of Paul's "*If Christ has not been raised, our preaching is in vain and your believing is useless*" (1 Corinthians 15:14b). But Fr. Rohr points out they always start the verse at the end. They have to go to the beginning, and there at the beginning of that same verse you will find this, "*If there is no resurrection of the dead, Christ himself cannot have been raised.*"

Isn't that extraordinary?! The universal principle comes first, and then and only then is it illustrated and "guaranteed" in the risen Christ. SO... Jesus Christ is the universal example and promise representing the resurrection of all creation.

Let me say this again. Resurrection from the dead precedes Jesus' rising and Easter glory. It has been with us since the beginning of time. The mystery of resurrection is first of all the constant and universal pattern, which is then made dramatic, daring and trustful in the personal body of Jesus!

Thank God for Science which is helping us to think this way. For example, did you know that the same number of atoms in the universe that there were five seconds after the Big Bang happened approximately 13.8 billion years ago are still with us? They just keep playing musical chairs and by all evidence — at an even higher level of complexity and consciousness.

Fr. Rohr writes: *"It is not poetry to say that we were all once stardust, and what we are yet to be — is the good surprise, gift and pure grace of God.... it no longer seems like a huge act of faith in a onetime miracle that no one can prove.*

*It is right always-already-now, breaking through all kinds of suffering, tragedy and pain. I have seen it in my lifetime, and the lifetimes of my family and friends in a thousand forms. Admittedly, often shrouded by grief and sadness, and that is why we need an example (like the Risen Christ) to lead us and help us across "the tragic gap" that human existence always is."*

**Science keeps teaching us.** Nothing is the same forever.

Ninety-eight percent of our bodies' atoms are replaced every year. Geologists with good evidence over millennia can prove that no

landscape is permanent. Water, fog, steam and ice are all the same thing, but at different stages and temperatures.

**“Life is not ended. It is merely changed”** (from the preface to the Funeral Mass in the Catholic Liturgy). Science is now giving us helpful language for what we have rightly intuited and imaged all along. Essentially, we are blessed with language that predates science but is supported by science.

Apparently, God could not wait for modern science to give history hope. People just needed to believe that Jesus “was raised from the dead” so that the hope and possibility of resurrection could be planted in our deepest unconscious.

Jesus’ first eternal life, his “necessary” death, and his resurrection into the ongoing Christ-life is actually the archetypal model for the entire pattern of creation from the beginning of time till now. He is the microcosm for the whole cosmos, he is the map of the journey. If you need one look Jesus, follow the map.

Our Christian narrative is saying that reality’s true story from the very beginning has always been Incarnation, that God’s hiding place and the place of God’s epiphany in the world is physical. Resurrection is, therefore, not a one-time anomaly in the body of Jesus, rather that Jesus is the pattern revealing the pattern everywhere that God has created in the cosmos.

**Easter is not one day, but Easter is apparently every day and everywhere and always.** (Fr. Richard Rohr, OFM, “Once we were stardust, and what we will be is the good surprise” *National Catholic Reporter*, March 31, 2021).

Thanks be to God for Richard Rohr for revealing this mystery of resurrection! He has shown us all how Easter is everyday and Love brought to life in the resurrection of Jesus since the Big Bang – not just a theory my friends. We are cosmic stardust in the mind and heart of God!

From the Stardust back to 444 East Broad St. in Columbus, let me bring it home and close for today.... the Incarnation we know together.

Maybe I am just speaking for myself. But I know I need Resurrection to be real more today than ever before! I need Love Rising in my life right now! How about you? I believe, we need to know that Love Wins over Hate and defeats death. We need to know that our Savior saves us when our backs are against the wall. We need to know that love conquers death and destruction – the little deaths that tear our hearts and our lives one paper cut at a time and the big death itself looms over us and mocks us but Jesus mocks death and says go away, leave them alone, let them live..

We need to feel the heartbeat of love. We need to taste the victory of love. We need to hear our names spoken in such a loving way, that our hearts delight and we throw our arms around Love and say, ***“Rabbouni...Teacher.”***

There have been too many days in the past year, that I have been in this sanctuary alone and wondered how you were, where you were. I have sat alone here and looked at the pews you once weekly occupied and I have prayed for you. The hymnals haven't been opened for 55 Sundays. The Bibles that haven't been opened for 55 Sundays. No notes have been written in the pew pads. Your

hugs, your smiles, your laughter, your singing, your love – all missing in here.

Like Mary, I have come to the empty tomb and found the stone rolled away and I have wondered, *“Where have they taken my congregation? Where are my friends? Where is my church family?”*

Last evening, I came down to church to be alone, to sit alone with God and pray for you.

I started in Parish Hall. I sat on the stage and looked out to see you all laughing and enjoying one another – with children darting here and there. I listened to Tom, Nancy and Marti on the piano as we join in singing morning prayer. The tables are full of children and morning treats. I carried kids back from Nursery while trying to keep the boys from running into Parish Hall and making lots of noise. I saw the little ones serving communion – and offering the Body of Christ and the Blood of Christ to the adults in bread and grape juice, while taking a few extra pieces of the delicious loaf along the way – delighting in the saving grace of the bread and the cup. I am filled with joy.

Then I walked upstairs into the sanctuary. The sun was setting to the west as I took a seat in the southeast corner of the sanctuary. In my mind’s eye, I saw you all here. I sat next to you. I held your hands. I hugged you. I heard your voices. I saw your smiles. I kissed the babies! I blew kisses to the little ones. I held my hand to my heart.

I gave Leslie Boltz a hug. I waved to Larry and Diane Dixon as they walk in the westside doors. I exchanged handshakes and some greeting words with Tom Kuhn. I welcomed John Bachman as

he waited to talk about the final four and who he was picking for the champion this year. I waved to Emma Dean. I reached out and touched Twink Starr's arm as I processed to the chancel. I passed the peace of Christ with you. I sat beside you in the pew as we listened in awe of Kevin's postlude and the room filled with amens.

You were all here with me last night on Easter Eve. We were all together again. There were even new people who had come to be part of us who had never stepped foot in our building before – except through YouTube and Facebook Live and Zoom.

As the last of Saturday's sunlight burst through the stained-glass windows to the west, the window with the single candle was lit up like fire. I heard Jesus say this, *"Tim, everything will be alright. All their lights are shining tonight. They are a glow with my light. Tim, believe the good news. I am shining in all the members and friends of First Church. I am shining on them and in them and through them to others."*

With that, the window darkened and twilight peace descended in our sanctuary. As twilight gave way to darkness, the one thing stood out in the darkness. It was the white linen cloth hanging from the cross, and then my eye caught the bright white flowing movement through the new creation banner by Deb Anderson.

My brothers and sisters in Christ, we are a Resurrection People. We are Rising with Christ's Love. We're designed to Rise. We have been created from the moment the universe started to be Love in this world. Just as Jesus Christ has shown us in his Rising to Love.

I close with words I offered when we started "our Journey back to love" on Ash Wednesday:

*I implore you to take this journey of the heart. Figure out the things you are carrying on the journey back to love. Look closely at the things that weigh you down and bring out the worst in you. Name them. Claim their existence. Then, let go of them because they weigh you down and bring out the worst in you. Hang on to the things that you carry which are beautiful and healing and hopeful. Keep your eyes wide open. Keep your heart wide open. Keep all your senses wide open for the steps ahead and be grateful for everyone who cares about you, heart and soul.*

Jesus Christ is Risen Today!

Hallelujah. Amen.