

“Designed to Rise”

Jeremiah 31:1-6, Acts 10:34-43, John 20:1-8
Part IX of IX in the sermon series: “Christianity 101”

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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 12, 2020, dedicated to my amazing wife, Susan Sitler, Dr. Anthony Fauci, Dr. Amy Acton, Governor Mike DeWine, Todd Franko; to the memories of Gina Harris, Arlene Weems and Rachi Sterling who have all died from COVID19; and to Dayna McCrary, Melissa McFadden, Amanda Butler, Robyn Petras, Dr. Karl Danneberger, Dr. Andrew Thomas, Pat Liebchen and Peter Murray and each one of their families and always to the glory of God!

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Please pray with me: 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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She grew up in a small fishing town by a lake. She had a heart filled with love and kindness. She was seemingly uncomplicated and genuinely caring and compassionate. Her intentions were to

serve others – to offer them love and mercy in their distress and suffering. And she was loyal to and trusting of the man of Nazareth - to whom she had dedicated her life and faith.

Her name was Mary Magdalene. In today's Easter Gospel, John tells us that Mary goes to the garden tomb alone on the first day of the week intending to care for the corpse of her rabbi, Jesus. She arrives and finds the huge stone in front of the tomb rolled away.

Without hesitation, she runs to tell Peter and John what has happened. They run and find the tomb empty, say nothing to each other and simply “return to their homes.” Mary comes back and stands alone weeping outside the tomb. In time, she looks in and sees two angels (neither of which were seen by Peter and John) seated where Jesus' head and feet had been laid. She asks the angels where he is. No answer. Then she turns and looks at the Risen Christ but doesn't really “see” him. She speaks to him as though he were the gardener asking him to show her where Jesus' body is. Then she hears his voice, “*Mary.*” Through her tears, she now recognizes him, crying out, “*Rabbouni*”- “teacher.” After a few more words, he ascends to God and she runs to tell the others, “*I have seen the Lord!*”

Through the tears and witness of Mary, the First Easter comes into full view. **Jesus Christ is Risen – today! Alleluia!**

There will be eleven more appearances of the Risen Christ across the four gospel stories in the days and weeks to come. He appears to as few as two and as many as 500 people before

his final ascension to God. But Mary is the first witness to the resurrection (note: Mary is joined by other women in Matthew, Mark and Luke's gospels).

What are we to make of Easter and the resurrection of Jesus Christ on this day when you are in your homes and I am standing here with only five witnesses in the sanctuary of First Church? What can we take away from Easter in a pandemic? When Pope Francis and most pastors and priests throughout the world today have nothing but cameras and technology covering our witness – what are we all to say about the Risen Christ in face of Coronavirus COVID19?

Let's note the similarities. There was social distancing on the first Easter as there is today. Different reasons, but the same result. A couple of angels, three people and our Risen Lord are the only ones engaged in the first day of resurrection. And yet, that was enough people and angels to fuel the Jesus' Movement that became Christianity. Let's use our numbers today to spread God's love in such a magnificent way! Share the good news my friends! Share it!

Allow me to share three brief reflections before I sit down today.

First, ancient ordinary things really matter. There is not a lot of pizzazz to this – but there is a lot of truth. The Easter gospel stories (outside of John) tell of Mary and the other women bringing spices and oil to purify and preserve the body of the deceased. They come to wash and clean the body as a sign of

love and respect. It is an ancient, ordinary act to honor the dead. This ancient ordinary act really matters.

In a recent UCC daily devotional, Rev. Dr. Mary Luti, talks about ancient ordinary acts that really matter. She references a March 10th article by science writer Ferris Jabr entitled, “Why Soap Works” in which Jabr writes on the molecular properties of soap that make it our most effective defense against invisible pathogens. He says, “just a single drop of soap in water is enough to disrupt and kill all manner of nasty bugs including COVID19.”

Reminder to everyone – if you want to kill this microbiotic terrorist called COVID19 – use soap!

Although we are not sure who first discovered soap, we know it has completely altered the course of human history. With wondrous drugs, robotic surgery and gene therapy, it is still soap which saves lives every day. **It is an ancient ordinary thing that really matters.**

Dr. Luti goes on to name other ancient ordinary things that have stood the tests of time like: the Lord’s Prayer, an old hymn sung from memory, table grace before a meal, “Now I lay me down to sleep” at bedtime, a forgiving word, a graceful action, a card sent in sympathy or gratitude, a covered dish for a neighbor, patience in hard times, thankfulness at all times, calling on the name of Jesus in our time of need (Daily Devotional, UCC, April 7, 2020, Mary Luti, “An Ancient Ordinary Thing”).

What Ancient ordinary thing could you use in your life this Easter? How about a dose of prayer, patience, forgiveness, grace and then, more prayer? This Easter, look for ancient ordinary things and bring them back into your daily life. Soap is essential. But discover and add other ancient ordinary things, too.

Second, we learn in the Easter story that witnessing to the truth really matters! After her face-to-face meeting her Risen Lord, Mary goes directly to the disciples and proclaims, *“I have seen the Lord!”* She becomes God’s chosen witness to the truth. Those five simple and direct words of truth begin a Resurrection Revolution. The world has never been the same since Mary proclaimed, *“I have seen the Lord!”*

Witnessing to the truth in desperate times is Necessary.

Witnessing to the truth in a pandemic is Essential.

There are two super Doctors who are blessing us with their witness to the truth this Easter— America’s Doctor, Dr. Anthony Fauci and Ohio’s Doctor, Dr. Amy Acton. Dr. Fauci is a legend. At 79 years young, he has advised six Presidents across 36 years in times of crisis and pandemic outbreaks all the way back to the AIDS pandemic. He states the facts. Like a Hebrew scripture prophet, Dr. Fauci clearly declares, *“Thus saith the science! Here is the data. Here is the evidence.”* In this crisis, he is often contradicting the President with the truth of the matter – sometimes within moments of a presidential statement. Truth and honesty matter. As Dr. Fauci says, *“Facts don’t lie.”*

In Ohio, Dr. Amy Acton has stepped up to the microphone each day at 2:00 pm and gently and clearly presented the often uncomfortable and uncompromising medicine we need to get Ohio through this crisis. Because of Dr. Acton and Governor Mike DeWine and their courageous leadership and witness, Ohio, the seventh most populated state is ranked 17th on the list of cases and 16th on the list of deaths from COVID19. She and Gov. DeWine are leading us to “bend the curve” together with their truthful, honest leadership – leading and saving Ohio each day in this crisis.

As I listen to Dr. Acton, I feel like I am listening to Mary Magdalene proclaiming the truth simply and clearly. Mary presents the truth of our faith. Dr. Acton is proclaiming the truth associated with the science of bending the curve - “Stay Home.” “Stay inside.” “Wear masks.” “Be safe.”

Who are these two calm and clear superhero doctors serving the public good in our pandemic times? What planet were they sent from to save our planet and state? Believe it or not, they both come from earth!

Anthony Fauci grew up in the Bensonhurst section of Brooklyn, NY. His dad was a pharmacist and his mother worked the cash register in the family owned pharmacy. Both parents were born to first-generation Italian-American immigrants. Graduating at the top of his class from Cornell Medical School, Tony worked his way up the ranks of public health until he became one of the

world's leading experts on infectious diseases as the director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases.

Dr. Amy Acton was selected as Director of the Ohio Department of Health by Gov. DeWine in February 2019. Born and raised in Youngstown, Ohio, she “lived in 18 different places in a 12-year period including a tent in the winter outside Youngstown” where she was being abused by her step-father. All the abuse, abandonment and neglect by her mother and step-father finally forced the courts to grant custody to her father. She recalls of her father, *“My dad always told me I could be in life whatever I wanted to be.”*

Amy graduated from Liberty High School, even became Homecoming Queen. As she said in an interview with the *Youngstown Vindicator* in August 2019, *“nobody in my high school knew what I had been through...It's hard to tell people about this because it makes kids uncomfortable, so you just keep it all in”* (Todd Franko, “State health director's passion comes from Youngstown,” *Youngstown Vindicator*, August 31, 2019).

All of the challenges of her early life prepared Dr. Acton for this moment. In a video chat with TIME magazine this week, she said, *“I think because of the childhood I had, I'm at my best during a crisis.”* How true!

In our Easter story, we see how witnessing to the truth really matters. It is the truthful leadership lived out in this crisis by a faithful Catholic from Brooklyn and a faithful Jew from Youngstown that is turning the tide in this pandemic. Thanks be

to God for Dr. Anthony Fauci and Dr. Amy Acton. Their honesty will save us and set us free!

Finally, I believe God has designed us to Rise! As human beings, God creates us to overcome so many diseases and life-threatening circumstances. God fills us with breath, and life, and hope and desire to face and overcome all sorts of mental, physical, emotional conditions.

But I believe God adds a special design feature to our Christian DNA. I believe we are especially designed to Rise in difficult circumstances. We follow a Savior whom God raised from the dead. God raised Jesus to point the way of overcoming life's challenges and death's domain. In the words of Paul to the Romans 8, no matter what we face as Christians, we have Christ Jesus to guide us through them. He writes in Romans 8:37-39, *“In all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us... nothing in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”*

This is powerful stuff! No matter what we face, **NOTHING** can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord! We are designed to be overcomers. We are designed to face down death and rise with new life. We are designed to find a way where there is no way. We are designed to find ways to give, to serve, to live in joy and share that joy. We are designed to rise.

In the beautiful film, *Mary Magdalene*, released in 2018, we come to know a compassionate Mary Magdalene. Though silent through most of the film, after seeing our Risen Savior, she

comes and tells the disciples, “*I have seen the Lord.*” Then she teaches them the true meaning of Jesus’ life and resurrection. She says:

This whole time we have been looking for a change in the world but it’s not what we thought. The kingdom is here now. It’s not something we can see with our eyes. It’s here within us. All we have to do is let go of our anguish and our resentment and become like children – just as he said.

The kingdom can’t be built through conflict - not by opposition, not by destruction. It grows with us with every act of love and care, with our forgiveness.

We have the power to lift the people – just as he did. Then we will be free – just as he is. We have the power to relieve the suffering of the poor. It is up to us. The world will only change as we change.”

Then she finishes, “*I will not stay and be silent. I will be heard.*”

Believe me, we have heard Mary Magdalene - the first witness to Jesus’ resurrection! She was designed to rise and she did! Let us rise too!

Let us hold fast to the ancient ordinary things that work. Let us be witnesses to truth and honesty especially in these pandemic times. Let us live fully into God’s design for us to rise and to become true reflections of the Kingdom of God alive right now.

Christ is Risen! Alleluia! Amen.

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