

“The Resurrection Place”

Easter Sunday

Jeremiah 31:1-6; Acts 10:34-43; Matthew 28: 1-10

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From the Pulpit

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A communion meditation delivered by The Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens, Sr. Minister, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, April 16, 2017, Easter Sunday, dedicated to my grandsons, Rylan Antonio born on 3/19/17 and Benton Myles (6/25/15) and to Susan, Luke, Kirsten, Daniel, Perla, Thalia, Tim P. and Sarah and always to the glory of God!

“The Resurrection Piece”

Jeremiah 31:1-6, Acts 10:34-43; Matthew 28:1-10

Throughout the Lenten season we have looked at the six words that form the focus and direction of our Long-Range Plan. They are **Welcome, Connect, Engage, Build, Communicate and Worship**. We have done this through our great Young Preachers – for whom I am so grateful: Sarah, Anthony, Amanda, Shea and Emily. We have done it through 43 daily Lenten meditations online, small groups in homes, and teaching in classes at church. Today, we come to a seventh piece of the puzzle. It forms the framework for the puzzle - The Resurrection Piece.

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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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In the half-light of dawn, in a graveyard, it might have been tempting to believe that their eyes were playing tricks. But the body the women had come to anoint was indeed gone, and the proclamation rang out through the eeriness and emptiness of the place, “He has risen.”

Mary Magdalene and the “other Mary” fled from the place “with fear and great joy,” according to the passage from Matthew’s Gospel. It was a case of mixed emotions entirely appropriate to the occasion. The women were bursting to tell the news, and yet they were afraid of what had been revealed first to them.

Before they had reached the others, they encountered their risen Lord. He greeted them and then offered them words of reassurance they most needed to hear, “Do not be afraid.”

As you and I know, “**do not be afraid,**” is almost a mantra in our faith which follows our Risen Lord. Before he is born, Mary, Joseph and Zechariah hear these words at the announcement of his coming. On the night of his birth the

shepherds hear this from angels in the fields outside Bethlehem. Jesus tells Peter not to be afraid when he calls him as his disciple. Then he repeats these words again when Peter steps out the boat in the storm to walk upon the water. At the Transfiguration, trembling disciples are told to discard their fears and the ruler Jairus is told this when his daughter is teetering on the edge of life and Jesus heals her. Peter is afraid again in the courtyard before Jesus is charged and executed. Because of his fears, Peter lies and denies him three times and then in his shame and fear he hides.

When Jesus dies on the cross, Joseph of Arimathea fears his own colleagues will do something to the body of Jesus, so he secretly asks for his body to bury. Nicodemus comes with spices to anoint his body but is filled with such fear that he comes under the cover of night – just as had to meet Jesus the first time. The authorities who put him to death are afraid that he will actually rise from the dead (or his disciples will steal his body), so they send tomb guards and offer them extra money to say that Jesus' disciples stole his body on the day of his resurrection from the dead.

At birth, in his ministry, at death and even on the day of resurrection fear attends each proceeding. “Do not be afraid” becomes a common phrase for all to embrace. It is a mantra for our faith. In spite of all this fear, the women are faithful.

They are the most fearless of Jesus' followers (drawn from Joyce Hollyday, "An Invitation," *Sojourners*, April 1987).

Fear drives so much of what happens in our world. We are fearful that gun violence will erupt in our schools, theatres, nightclubs, churches and on our streets. We are fearful that attacks will come to our homeland. We are fearful that the stock market will belly-up, health care will be dropped, our jobs will be lost, our children won't make it in this world and our families will fall apart for any number of reasons. We are fearful of refugees entering our land and North Korea and other nations attacking us and our allies. Hundreds of Billions of dollars a year are generated by industries which play on our fears and turn huge profits as a result.

In the midst of our fears, we could make the case – and defend it quite well – that in our times as in Jesus' times, it is the women who show up, overcome fear and step most fully in faith. Exhibit One - the Global Women's March on January 21st for starters – close to 1,000,000 women in Washington DC and over 5 million women worldwide marched for Freedom and Overcoming Fear - Fearless and free!

In the face of fear, we follow a Savior who blows away our fears! We follow a Lord who embodies Resurrection faith. He is the faithful witness and presence of a Faithful God. He is

the Lord of Life and Love! Mary Magdalene and the other Mary got him. They loved with such perfect love, they shed their fear. They lived the words which John proclaimed, “There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear” (I John 4:18).

So much of what we carry – between our fears and our faith – is influenced by the trauma of our lives and times. Dr. Shelly Rambo is a witness to the Resurrection and has dedicated her life work to the space between death and resurrection – the place between fear and joy.

In her book, *Spirit and Trauma: A Theology of Remaining*, Dr. Rambo writes, “*I believe the promise of resurrection doesn't eliminate suffering -- and in witnessing this suffering, we are about the work of redemption.*” “*Trauma,*” she says, “*exposes the extreme vulnerability of human persons in relationship to larger historical forces.*”

Dr. Rambo became interested in the field of trauma studies while at Yale University in the 1990s, where researchers were studying the effect of The Holocaust on survivors. She has continued to explore the theological issues of suffering and witness with military chaplains and others who have experienced trauma – including the soldiers themselves, women, police, children and youth.

Trauma is the Greek word for “wound.” Trauma can come as a wound to living tissue caused by an extrinsic agent. It can come as a disordered psychic or behavioral state resulting from severe mental or emotional stress or physical injury *or* emotional upset.

We arrive at Easter Sunday following a week of trauma and drama. There have been traumatic interactions between Jesus, his disciples and the religious-political-military establishment around him – ending in his death. Even Easter opens with traumatic events - an earthquake, an angel descending from heaven who frightened the guards around Jesus’ tomb so much so that “they became like dead men.” And of course, the fear and joy of our two Marys. I am reminded of Emily Dickinson’s words, *"To live is so startling it leaves little time for anything else."*

Today, I want to suggest that we linger with the startling and suffering nature of our story. I don’t want us swept away by the triumph and the trumpets and therefore to miss the subtlety of the suffering in this story and our own stories. Even in the face of suffering – extreme suffering – we have good news in the end.

We are “good news” people who live in a Good News faith. Like the Risen Christ, who days ago was pounded to a tree to

die, we show the signs of our trauma in our lives. Like our Savior, our hands have wounds. Our feet have wounds. Our bodies carry surgical wounds. Even our hearts and minds have wounds. Although they are part of who we are, we will not let our fears, our traumas and our wounds define us.

We are so much more than our wounds and our traumas. We are resurrection people. We are God's "Yes" in this world – a "yes" sung and shouted above the "no's" to "the powers that be" - the empires of violence, injustice and greed that still try to rule our lives today just as they killed Jesus long ago. But God, said "no" to all that and "yes" to Jesus. Jesus, who told us that everyone would know that we are his followers if we love each other. And there is the key to everything. It is LOVE!

Today we celebrate Christ's Resurrection. It is about faith, and joy and hope – but most of all Christ's Resurrection is about LOVE.

SO here it is - **The Resurrection Piece**. The piece which holds together our puzzle of faith and life is **Love**. Love is the framework for our First Church puzzle with the pieces of **Welcome, Connect, Engage, Build, Communicate and Worship** inside.

Resurrection Love conquers fear. Resurrection Love takes trauma and turns the wounds of life to hope and healing.

Resurrection Love conquers death. “I give this new commandment,” says our Risen Lord, “Love One Another.” My sisters and brothers of faith, let us embrace the healing, hopeful framework of our faith today – right now! Let us live as Resurrection people! Let us **love one another!** Alleluia! Amen.

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