

“Rising with the Forgiving One”

Easter Sunday

Isaiah 25:6-9, Acts 10:34-43, Mark 16:1-8

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From the Pulpit

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An Easter sermon delivered by the Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens, senior minister of the First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, April 1, 2018 Easter Sunday, dedicated to my father the late Dr. Herman C. Ahrens, Jr. and to my mother, Ms. Carol Lorene Kellermeyer Ahrens who turns 90 in 43 days and always to the glory of God!

“Rising with the Forgiving One”

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(Part VIII of VIII in the sermon series “Forgiveness”)

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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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Rev. Corzine just read the final words of the Gospel of Mark. We all said, “*Thanks be to God!*” Really? Let’s listen again to one of the strangest endings to a glorious new beginning one could ever imagine. You just heard this: “*The women fled and said nothing to anyone because they were afraid.*” We should have all said together, “**Say what?**” Let’s try it again, with “**Say What?**” as the response.... “*They said nothing to anyone because*

they were afraid.” **The word of God for the people of God...**
“Say what?”

In **The Message**, Eugene Peterson, rephrases Mark 16:8:

“They got out as fast as they could, beside themselves, their heads swimming. Stunned, they said nothing to anyone.” Running for their lives. Beside themselves. Heads swimming. Astounded. Stunned. Fearful. Silent.

This doesn't sound at all like the women who followed and worked with Jesus. These women were courageous, forthright, strong, vocal, fearless. When the disciples were fleeing from Jesus' side in his time of trial and death, the women were there. While the men ran away, the women moved closer Jesus. They stuck with him.

Consider these three Easter women of whom it was said, **“silence had seized them.”** Mary, the Mother of James is Jesus' mother! You know her. She gave birth to Jesus in Bethlehem. She was a young teenage mom, the woman who gave us the Magnificat glorifying God and praising God's justice and presence for the poor, now 47 and faithful to her son beyond belief - how long would Mary stay silent? Not long at all!

Salome was Mary's sister, Jesus' aunt. Many believe she was present at Jesus' birth and assisted the midwife. She who NEVER abandoned her sister or her nephew and watched Jesus grow into the greatest rabbi and healer of all the ages - would Salome stay silent? Not a chance.

What about Mary Magdalene? She was by Jesus' side through everything he faced. She was more faithful than Peter or any of the 12 apostles. She was called by many, "The First TRUE Apostle." Would Mary Magdalene remain silent?

"Say What?" I don't think so.

If the women ultimately had nothing to say to anyone out of fear, our faith would be a farce. There would be no church. This cathedral of grace would not exist. We wouldn't exist as a community of faith. There would be no communion of saints. There would be no Christmas, no Easter, no Pentecost. There would be no baptism or holy communion. Perhaps we would have gathered today to celebrate the second day of Jewish High Holy Day of Passover or some beautiful pagan festival of Spring replete with eggs, jelly beans, peeps, and chocolate bunnies if Jesus Christ had never been raised and the women had said nothing to anyone out of fear. (OOPS – my Easter basket – FORGIVE ME).

So, what happened that first Easter morning that shaped the future of this world as we know it?

We know something deep inside the three women stirred them to rise on the first Easter and go to Jesus of Nazareth's grave to anoint his dead body. I believe it was their love of God and Jesus Christ which got them up and got them going. They had watched Jesus die on the cross. They knew exactly what they would see upon arriving at the tomb. They knew they would find a mangled, beaten and bloodied dead body. Nevertheless, they went in faith and compassion to care for his bloody remains. Faith and compassion will do that to you. Faith and compassion will move you to do things you never imagined possible.

When they found the empty tomb, a "young man" (some say an angel) told them to tell the other disciples that Jesus was raised from the dead and had gone before them to Galilee. But, according to Mark, the women fled the tomb in astonishment, fear and trembling. Even the most faithful and most compassionate of Jesus' followers can fall silent when overcome by fear and trembling.

Has that ever happened to you? Have you found yourself speechless in the face of trauma or fear... or utter joy? It happens.... You can't stay stuck in fear. Fear will kill you.

This story is clearly unfinished. God has called us here to finish the story. St. Mark has given us a gift - the gift of becoming the storytellers for The Forgiving One, our Risen Savior Jesus Christ. We have to figure out how this story ends. We have to figure out how the “good news” gets lived out.

You and I are the storytellers who give the forgiving one new life.

We are blessed in a community of resurrection stories. A few weeks ago, I received a call that I had to get to Riverside Hospital ASAP. Don Streibig had taken a turn for the worse. I flew out the door, parked quickly, ran into Riverside and took the elevator up to his room. I arrived to find him gone. The sheets were pulled back. No Don. I gasped. I went to the desk and asked the nurse where he was. She said, “Oh, he’s up walking around... I think he’s down in the lounge on the computer.” I started breathing again and soon was by his side. Delightful, as always; Don was a living presence of resurrection joy for me and all who know him. As he battles lung cancer this Easter, Don is a part of the resurrecting body of Christ.

In Nationwide Children’s Hospital earlier this week, I stopped to visit Jude Gelfius, son of Dr. Carl and Beth Gelfius. Jude was born February 8 with Downs Syndrome. Jude is such a

beautiful baby boy. He is getting stronger each day. As I made my way through the large NICU unit, past one enclosed area after another, I heard a gentle voice speaking ever so softly and sweetly to one of the children. I arrived at Jude's place and found the source of the gentleness as Beth read to her wideawake son who was eating and soaking in a story about bears and their baby. I sat and watched and listened as his "Momma Bear" showered her son with love and a story worth remembering as he looked on adoring his mother. Jude and Beth and Carl are part of the resurrecting body of Christ.

Over 90 years separate Don and Jude. In the space between, we have one person after another shining the love and light of the resurrected Christ in our congregation. Over 40 of those witnesses to resurrection faith marched in the March for our Lives in Columbus and Washington DC on March 24th.

Just a few days later, another young light was shining here at First Church.

At 13, Ben Mailer, was a witness to resurrection on Tuesday at the Ground breaking for our Washington Gladden Social Justice Park. He spoke with NBC-4's Rick Reitzel about our church being a presence for social justice in Columbus and across the nation. He claimed his own place and the place for the youth of his generation for speaking out and leading

justice concerns. He said, “It will be our world in five years, so we have to start speaking out now.” Another shining light for the resurrected Christ in our congregation.

In truth, we have over 1,000 points of light shining God’s love in the greater Columbus area and beyond. Thank you for being part of the resurrecting body of Christ.

You are the story-tellers for our Rising Savior!

No matter how you tell this tale, you must remember, it is Jesus’ story speaking through you. It is his story of love. His story of forgiveness. His story of grace. His story of healing. His story of transformation. He is always going before us in new appearances in Galilee, in the world and in our daily lives. We never know where and when we shall see him. We only know that he is loose in the world, turning the world upside down.

First and foremost, we storytellers, need to know that **Jesus is not a figure in a book but a living presence.** We cannot merely study Jesus. He is not some scientific experiment for us to dissect. He lives and breathes all around us.

And... a living presence is not just a memory. He is not a topic for discussion but someone to meet. Perhaps for some of us, we need to meet him again. For others, we need to meet

him for the first time. We can see his light and love glowing in the face of those around us – like I did in Don’s face, Jude and Beth’s face, in those marching for our lives and in Ben’s as well. He is alive in us. We are here to finish the story he started.

Second, to follow Jesus **we need to Know Him**, not just know about him. I know about a lot of people. This is true for all of us. Many of us know about many historical figures. The wisest and best theologians can know about Jesus with knowing him. While the humblest and most sincere servants of Christ can know him without knowing much about him. It is our calling as his disciples to know him more than we know about him.

Finally, **we need to Follow Him as the Forgiving One.**

Throughout Lent we have been receiving messages from Jesus’ words and actions about mercy, grace and forgiveness. Some powerful teachings have stuck with me through it all. Here is a taste of forgiveness....

Forgiveness is me giving up my right to hurt you for hurting me” said an *Anonymous* author. St. Augustine of Hippo reminds us to get in touch with God: *“Late have I loved you, O beauty ever ancient, You were within me but I was outside.”* One of my favorites was Kyle Gray who said, *“Forgiving doesn’t mean*

forgetting. It means choosing to remember love instead.” The best of course comes from Jesus himself as he dies on the cross, *“Father Forgive them for they do not know what they are doing.”* We must forgive. It is a mandate from our Lord who forgave every single one of us.

On the first Easter, God wisely sent three women to the tomb of Jesus. God knew that these women would eventually tell the story and change the world. As poet Adrienne Rich puts it, *“The connections between and among women are the most feared, the most problematic, and the most potentially transforming force on the planet.”*

Watch out for Easter women! They will change the world! Let us be like them. As we depart to serve today, how will we tell this story? Will we leave space for those whose stories are different from ours? Will we insist that we alone are right and others are wrong? Will we invite others in, so their voices may be heard?

Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Salome are standing beside us today. They want to make sure we get it right. In their initial silence they remind us that the life of faith is shaped by love and forgiveness. In the end, it is their prayer that proclaims the good news of God’s resurrection in Christ Jesus our Savior!

We are forgiven. Let us live into the promise of God's
forgiving love. Amen.

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