

From the Pulpit

The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ

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“Sabbath: Rest as Resurrection”

Jeremiah 31:1-6; Acts 10:34-43; John 20:1-18

(9 of 9 in the sermon series, “Sabbath, the Seventh Day of Rest”)

April 20, 2014

The Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens

Senior Minister

An Easter Meditation delivered by The Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, Sr. Minister, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, Easter Sunday, April 20, 2014, dedicated to our First Church Staff who work hard every day serving God in Christ in the heart of our capital city and to the members of First Church who are the most amazing community of faith I have been honored to serve and with whom it has been my privilege to live for Christ in the heart of the city for 14¼ years and always to the glory of God!

“Sabbath: Rest as Resurrection”

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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 God, our rock and our salvation. Amen.

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Poet and author John Updike writes of Christ’s Resurrection in his poem, *Seven Stanzas at Easter:*

Make no mistake: if He rose at all
it was as His body;
if the cells’ dissolution did not reverse, the molecules
reknit, the amino acids rekindle,
the Church will fall.

It was not as the flowers,
each soft Spring recurrent;
it was not as His Spirit in the mouths and fuddled
eyes of the eleven apostles;
it was as His flesh: ours.

The same hinged thumbs and toes,
the same valved heart
that—pierced—died, withered, paused, and then
regathered out of enduring Might
new strength to enclose.

Let us not mock God with metaphor,
analogy, sidestepping, transcendence;
making of the event a parable, a sign painted in the
faded credulity of earlier ages:
let us walk through the door.

The stone is rolled back, not papier-mâché,
not a stone in a story,
but the vast rock of materiality that in the slow
grinding of time will eclipse for each of us
the wide light of day.

And if we will have an angel at the tomb,
make it a real angel,
weighty with Max Planck's quanta, vivid with hair,
opaque in the dawn light, robed in real linen
spun on a definite loom.

Let us not seek to make it less monstrous,
for our own convenience, our own sense of beauty,
lest, awakened in one unthinkable hour, we are
embarrassed by the miracle,
and crushed by remonstrance.

We step into Easter today believing that 1984 years ago on Easter Sunday, the rock to Jesus' tomb was rolled away, Jesus Christ rose triumphant from the grave and the Sabbath of the Christians was born as the Savior of the world was raised from death to life by God.

Today we join with over 2.18 billion Christians in every country of the globe and proclaim with one voice - ***"Christ is Risen! He is Risen Indeed, Alleluia!"*** This joyful, soulful, heartfelt invocation reaches out in every tongue in every land! Today we share Christ's Resurrection with our Orthodox sisters and brothers - a rare and special day indeed! All of us celebrate Easter today! We are Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Protestant, Pentecostal, Evangelical, Independent - all in Christ - speaking in all tongues, in all races, in all places - and all 2.18 billion of us lift our voice and sing, ***"Christ is Risen! He is Risen Indeed, Alleluia!"***

I would love to tell you today that on this Easter, we - though many in voice - are of one accord. I would love to tell you that all 2.18 billion Christians - or 1/3 of the 6.9 billion global citizens - are truly "One in Christ." But I can't even tell you that for the 247 million Christians in America (11.3% of the global church). I can't tell you we are "One in Christ" because I know we are a rowdy, diverse, highly independent, extremely bright, overly creative & a very opinionated body in Christ - and I am only talking about the people of faith in this sanctuary!

Each of us brings to the Resurrection Story a different understanding and interpretation. As I opened with Updike, I know that not everyone in this room was in agreement with *"the dissolved cells reversing, the molecules reknit, the amino acids rekindled."* I know that we have many opinions about the reversed, reknit and rekindled Jesus of Nazareth and his physical resurrection. DO you think I was born yesterday? I know that some of you think you belong to Everyone Has Their Own Belief United Church of Christ. That is EHTOBUCC for short! But really we are FCCUCC!

While many of us focus on the spiritual nature of rising in Christ, many others join Updike in believing that if He is not physically resurrected the whole enterprise called the “Christian Church” falls apart. I honor all your beliefs that are different than mine. That is the nature of our covenant in Christ!

Be that as it may, in the resurrection of Jesus Christ – we can all agree that Sabbath shifts for his followers from Saturday to Sunday. As Christians, we acknowledge that the “Lord’s Day” or the “Sabbath of our Savior” is no longer the Sabbath of the Jews. We celebrate each Christian Sabbath as a Day of Resurrection! By so doing, we claim and proclaim ours as a “Resurrection Faith.” **We are a people of Resurrection!**

As “Resurrection People” we have to get clearer on what this looks like and feels like to us. The Resurrected Christ is our ground of being and our Alpha and Omega - our beginning and end.

So what do we believe and practice as a people of resurrection?

In our United Church of Christ, it may surprise many of you that our one true statement of faith can be found in our Denomination’s Constitutional preamble: “We believe that Jesus Christ is our Lord and Savior.” That’s right – we are not Unitarians Considering Christ (although there is nothing wrong with my Unitarian sisters and brothers). We believe in the Risen Christ. Our UCC Website opens the “what we believe” section with: “**We believe in the triune God:** Creator, resurrected Christ, the sole Head of the church, and the Holy Spirit, who guides and brings about the creative and redemptive work of God in the world.”

Everything we say and do is rooted in the Resurrected Christ. We are people of Resurrection. As People of Resurrection in the United Church of Christ, we believe many other things.

As people of Resurrection, “**We believe that each person is unique and valuable.**” In the eyes of God all are loved and accepted. Leave your prejudice, your hate, your bullying, and your judgment outside the doors because in this room, in this church none of that holds sway. Each of us is unique, beautiful, valuable and beloved beyond imagination!

As people of Resurrection, “**We believe that each person is on a spiritual journey**” - and that each of us is at a different stage of that journey. We treasure this truth!

As people of Resurrection, “**We believe that the persistent search for God produces an authentic relationship with God,**” engendering love, strengthening faith, dissolving guilt, and giving life purpose and direction.

As people of Resurrection, “**We believe that all of the baptized 'belong body and soul to our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.'**” No matter who – no matter what – no matter where we are on life's journey – notwithstanding race, gender identity or expression, sexual orientation, class or creed – we all belong to God and to one worldwide community of faith. In other words, all 2.18 billion of us are united by our baptism – no matter how or when it happened.

As people of Resurrection, **“We believe that all people of faith are invited to join Christ at His table for the sacrament of Communion.”** Everyone is welcome to the Lord’s Table. You may choose not to come, but you are welcome here because we believe it is not our table. This table of grace is the table of the Risen Christ. In him we are all invited into a relationship of love and grace.

As people of Resurrection, “We believe the UCC is called to be a united and uniting church.” “That they may all be one” is not just a passage of scripture spoken by Jesus and found in John 17:21. This belief guides our faith. We believe “In essentials—unity; in nonessentials—diversity, in all things—charity.” Even though we will join with the church universal today and speak together the Nicene Creed, we are non-doctrinal. I don’t expect you to agree with the whole Nicene Creed – (in fact I know that won’t happen) - since we express no rigid formulation of doctrine or attachment to creeds or structures. But I do expect you to live the one commandment of Jesus in John 15 – “to love one another as God has loved you.” That is our creed. That is our commandment. It is all we truly need.

As people of Resurrection, “We believe that God calls us to be servants in the service of others” and to be good stewards of our personal resources and the earth's resources.

As people of Resurrection, “We believe that God calls us to be a prophetic church.” As in the tradition of the prophets and apostles, God calls the church to speak truth to power, liberate the oppressed, care for the poor and comfort the afflicted. As such, every one of us is called to do social justice.

As people of Resurrection, “We believe in the power of peace.” And we will work for nonviolent solutions to local, national, and international problems.

As people of Resurrection, “We believe we are a people of possibility.” In the UCC, members, congregations and structures have the breathing room to explore and to hear ... for after all, we believe, “God is still speaking,”

So, as you see, we have lots of beliefs at First Congregational Church in the United Church of Christ. And all our beliefs begin in the clear and simple belief in the Risen Christ – however we choose to express that belief!

As you see, there is a lot of Resurrection going on!

Having spoken of our beliefs as Resurrection People in the UCC, I must add - belief is never a simple thing.

William Cantwell Smith wrote an essay several years ago, “Believing: An Historical Perspective,” that asked us to consider the way in which the concept of belief has changed in recent centuries. “To believe” in Latin is *opinor* or *opinari*. You’ll recognize that as the root of the English word “opinion,” which was not typically a religious word. Instead, Latin used the word *credo*, which means, “I set my heart upon” or “I give my loyalty to” as the word to describe religious “believing.” In medieval English, the concept of *credo* was translated as “to believe,” meaning roughly the same thing as its German cousin *belieben*, “to prize, treasure, or hold dear,” which comes from the root word *Liebe*, “love.” So, in early English, “to believe” was to “belove” something or someone as an act of trust or loyalty. Belief was not an intellectual opinion. Belief was an act of the heart.

In this way, to say, “I believe in the Risen Christ” means “I hereby pledge to Christ and give God my heart and soul. I choose to be loyal to God.” “I believe God in Christ.” With this said, we move away from cognitive speculation and offer our hearts to God.”

So our hearts claim God and then we trust in faith that God will take care of bringing our heads along, too. For all of the Thinkers in the crowd, this is not so comfortable. I count myself among you. But, today, beloved ones – believe and BE-LOVE in the Risen Christ.

When you follow your heart to resurrection joy, you will experience resurrection as real. Resurrection is very real.

I have seen resurrection too often not to believe in it! This last year alone, I have witnessed Teresa Polo, Sharon Walquist, Jane Weddle, Karen Mazingo, Gracie Glaros and Rebekah Salzer rise from the ashes near death and through the power of our Healing God - rekindle, reknit and regather themselves to live! They embody resurrection in real life! Their experiences are heart-opening and life-changing. But, I have also seen other members and friends of First rise from the ashes of homelessness, unemployment, underemployment, intense loss; pain and suffering and rise to new life. I have witnessed resurrection in this body when it reknits, rekindles and regathers each week on the Sabbath day to worship and praise God in Christ.

Believe beloved ones! We are a people of Resurrection who follow a Resurrected Savior. On this the greatest Sabbath Day of our Faith, may you find rest for your souls in Him.

Christ is Risen! He is Risen Indeed! Alleluia! Amen.

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