“Resurrection Faith: Modeled by Easter Women Rising!”
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. Timothy C. Ahrens, Sr. Minister, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, Easter Sunday, April 5, 2015, dedicated to Sarah Garbe and to the memory of Gunter Garbe who rests in eternal peace on this Easter Sunday, to my wife Susan Sitler and all the women of First Congregational Church, UCC who teach me everyday what resurrection faith is all about & always to the glory of God!

“Resurrection Faith: Modeled by Easter Women Rising!”
Acts 10:34–43; Mark 16:1–8
(Part VIII of VIII in the sermon series: “The Essence of Christianity”)

Today we come to the end of the sermon series, “The Essence of Christianity.” Beginning in the snow and cold of Ash Wednesday and trudging through the five Sundays of Snow in February AND March 1, Emily and I have lifted up seven themes: Courage, Loving, Following, Compassion, Justice, Hope and Love as the Essence of Christianity. Now we come to Resurrection Faith. Each sermon and service is available on CD, on-line or printed in our information racks.
Would you join me in prayer?
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.

Amidst the fanfare of this day, our Easter Gospel lesson from Mark has a stark and strange ending – “they were afraid.” You just heard it a minute ago, Mark 16:8: “The women fled and said nothing to anyone because they were afraid.” Fear - not faith - grabs the last word in the gospel. So, what is going on with Mary Magdalene, Mary, James’ mother and Salome?

They rise earlier than all of us did today to go to the place where Jesus’ body has been laid so that they might anoint his three day-dead body with spices. As they get closer, their conversation becomes increasingly more practical: “How are we going to get that boulder away from the entrance to the tomb?” (Aside: Remember, all the big strong fishermen were hiding!) Surprisingly, when they arrive the stone has been rolled away. That in itself should create some fear and suspicion because it takes about four men and some serious leverage to move those tomb stones.
They enter and find no body. No “Jesus” body – but there is some-body – a young man, dressed in a white robe (an angel we wonder?) who says, “He is raised. He is not here. Go. Tell the others!” He continues, “He is headed to Galilee (home to everyone). That is where he will meet you, just like he promised.”

This is a truly radical beginning to a day that will never be the same for the rest of human history. But, instead of going and telling the others, Mark’s Gospel ends, “They went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them, and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.” The words for “terror” and “amazement” are even stronger in Greek: tromos – trauma, and ecstasis – ecstasy.

Trauma and ecstasy seized them. With this, Mark’s Gospel ends in silence. Jesus never appears. Seems like we won’t be seeing Jesus today…. according to St. Mark, at least. Pick up your eggs and head for the exits. Right? Wrong! Please hang around just a little bit longer. To quote the great public theologian, Paul Harvey, “Now for the rest of the story.”

Here is the rest of the story - It is the midst of trauma and ecstasy Easter Women Rise! Consider the three Easter women of whom it was said, silence had seized them.
Mary, the Mother of James is Jesus’ mother! She gave birth to him in Bethlehem. Fearless throughout scripture and sinless throughout life, Mary was a teenage mom and now 47 and faithful to her son beyond belief - how long do you think Mary would stay silent?

Salome was Mary’s sister, Jesus’ aunt. Many believe she was present at Jesus’ birth and assisted as a midwife. She who NEVER abandoned her sister or her nephew and watched Jesus grow into the greatest rabbi of all the ages – how long do you think Auntie Salome would stay silent?

What about Mary Magdalene? She was by Jesus’ side through everything he faced. She was more faithful than Peter or any of the remaining11 disciples. She was called by many, “The First TRUE Apostle.” Mary wasn’t going to let terror have the last word!

Just watch these three Easter Women Rise! Out of trauma comes Ecstasy AND GRACE! And we know that ecstasy cannot be silent for long. Consider their silence to be like Mary’s silence at Jesus’ birth. Luke’s Gospel tells us that Mary beheld her son and “pondered these things in her heart” before speaking them aloud. God knows that the greatest prayer each of us can offer is within our hearts. It is waiting to find the seed of stillness. It is waiting to grow into a great prayer of proclamation- from a heart that is given to God.
These Easter Women possess a “pondering silence.” These women’s silence is waiting to be born again. This **pondering silence** was like the silence of Mrs. Rosa Parks when ordered to move out of her seat on a cold December 1\(^{st}\) night in Montgomery, Alabama in 1955. Mrs. Parks sat quietly while city bus driver, James F. Blake did all the talking. He told her to get up. She gracefully refused. When he turned his order into threat of arrest, Mrs. Parks spoke. She simply said four words, “You may do that.” That is the kind of powerful silence we encounter here in Mark - silence turned into graceful and just action.

This is the **pondering silence** of a tune that won’t leave your head after the words are forgotten. It keeps moving around in your mind until your lips find new words that make sense - and then nothing can stop you from singing.

**Easter women’s silence in times of trauma produces action and justice.** Of all the Easter gospels, Mark’s story invites all of us to stand where those first trembling witnesses stood. Those three women didn’t see Jesus. Neither do we. They didn’t hear Jesus call their names. Neither have we. They weren’t invited to touch his wounded hands. We haven’t touched Jesus’ hands either. Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Salome are our silent sisters. This narrative is left for us, the readers, to complete.
These three Easter Women can be our guides for telling the story and speaking words of faith. They can help us to bring the gospel into dialogue with our own lives. Mark couldn’t have done this because he didn’t know what our lives would be like. Between the women’s experience at the empty tomb and Mark’s writing, these three women did speak – or we wouldn’t know the story. They went back home to Galilee as Jesus had invited them (these thoughts inspired by Barbara Lundblad).

And there – my friends – is the rest of the story!

Whatever they said to the disciples, their testimony was shaped by two words: trauma and ecstasy. Theirs were not testimonies so absolute that they cancelled other possibilities. Theirs were not words that demeaned the experiences of others. Theirs was not a witness that proved they were right and everyone else was wrong. The testimony that grew from their silence was always invitation and never coercion.

This is the essence of Christianity. When our resurrection faith is real and beautiful and good and true to our Risen Savior – our faith invites others to join in. It is never coercive, it is always invitational. This is the resurrection faith that shines through our Easter Women as they teach us how to invite others to see the love and grace of God. Our lives have been shaped by Easter Women such
as Mary, Salome, and Mary - women who have silently and powerfully wrapped their arms around us and invited us to live good news.

For many of us, we need look no farther than our own mothers. But, all of us have been deeply influenced by women beyond them. These Easter women have held onto our children and the children of others. They have welcomed the orphans, the refugees, other women, those whom others have forgotten and the forsaken. They have invited in those traumatized by abuse, battered, beaten, and silenced by a world that hurts rather than helps. Silently, quietly, effectively, peacefully, justly and powerfully Easter Women have risen and delivered a faith in action that makes sense.

Their silence may be at sunrise pondered in their hearts, but by noontime it is transforming other people’s lives, by night it has delivered hope and new life. That is what these women do. It is what so many women do.

Like Rosa Parks looking into the eyes of James Blake, women of faith move us deeply as they work to change the trauma of a violent and violating world through a few words and a ton of ecstasy in action.

Each of us can name the women of faith who have inspired us to move from tROMOS — traUMa and ECSTASy — ecstasy - to faith and action. I begin with my mom. You
may begin with yours. These Easter women in our lives may be other mothers or grandmothers. They may be our sisters. They may be our wives or life partners. They may be our daughters or granddaughters. They may be our friends, our teachers, our co-workers or neighbors. They may be poets, prophets or problem-solvers who turn trauma into grace-filled ecstasy and grace. Give thanks to God for them today. Our faith was saved on Easter day by women such as these!

On the first Easter, God was wise to send three women to the tomb of Jesus. God knew that the women traumatized as witnesses of Jesus’ crucifixion would not mess up on his day of resurrection. They stayed present in prayer at the foot of the cross through each agonizing moment while men cowered and hid far from that hill of death. These same women were sure to find a way to get the story out! 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! So as you leave here today, how will you live your resurrection faith? How will you tell this story? Will you leave space for those whose stories are different from yours? Will you insist that you alone are right and others are wrong? Will you invite others in or coerce them?
Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Salome are watching 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 trauma and ecstasy. In the end, they hold the key to the essence of Christianity – a resurrection faith that is unafraid – a faith that rises from trauma and moves to ecstasy and then to grace – a faith that is able to claim God’s resurrection in Christ Jesus our Savior! You can ponder in silence now, but by tonight I expect you to be living this story! It is the greatest story the world has ever known and we are blessed to call it ours. Alleluia! Amen.

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