

# *“The Resurrected Mind”*

*(Fourth of Five in the Series,  
“Mental Illness: The Journey In, The Journey Out”)*

*22<sup>nd</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time  
Jeremiah 2:4-13; Hebrews 13:1-8, 15-16; Luke 14:1, 7-14  
Sermon Text: John 20-1-18*

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From the Pulpit

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A sermon delivered by The Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens, Sr. Minister, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, Proper 17, 22<sup>nd</sup> Sunday of Ordinary Time, August 28, 2016 dedicated to our Organist/Choir Master Emeritus, G. Dene Barnard for 43 years of life among us through which his music has lifted us up and touched us, to Matthew Thomas and his life lived for others and always to the glory of God!

*“The Resurrected Mind”*

*Part 4 of 5 in the sermon series:*

*“Mental Illness: The Journey In, the Journey Out”*

*Jeremiah 2:4-13; Hebrews 13:1-8, 15-16; Luke 14:1,7-14*

*Sermon text: John 20:1-18*

*John 20:1-18 New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)*

20 Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb. <sup>2</sup> So she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, “They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him.” <sup>3</sup> Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went toward the tomb. <sup>4</sup> The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. <sup>5</sup> He bent down to look in and saw the

linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in. <sup>6</sup> Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there, <sup>7</sup> and the cloth that had been on Jesus' head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself. <sup>8</sup> Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; <sup>9</sup> for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead. <sup>10</sup> Then the disciples returned to their homes.

<sup>11</sup> But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look<sup>[a]</sup> into the tomb; <sup>12</sup> and she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet. <sup>13</sup> They said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping?" She said to them, "They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him." <sup>14</sup> When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. <sup>15</sup> Jesus said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?" Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away." <sup>16</sup> Jesus said to her, "Mary!" She turned and said to him in Hebrew,<sup>[b]</sup> "Rabbouni!" (which means Teacher). <sup>17</sup> Jesus said to her, "Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, 'I am ascending to my Father

and your Father, to my God and your God.”<sup>18</sup> Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, “I have seen the Lord”; and she told them that he had said these things to her.

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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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Have you ever found yourself heartbroken and sleepless - having lost a loved one? The person has passed away and there you are alone, in the middle of the night, sitting straight up in bed wondering where you are and what has happened to them? “Is she at peace? Is he with God? Is God comforting them?” you wonder as you squirm and struggle in your own intense discomfort and pain.

Have you found yourself slipping out of bed, standing by the window and looking out on a world in which he is no longer present? From which she is gone? Have you stepped into the morning air thick with grief, not knowing exactly where you are going or what you are doing but knowing you must move so that you do not slip back into the pain of unknowing, the emptiness of loss, the hole that is now in your soul?

This is the picture I have of Mary Magdalene in the pre-dawn hours of the first Easter. Having been saved by Jesus, having walked with him through his ministry all the way to the cross, having watched him die in excruciating pain, having carried him to the tomb and laid him there, it must have been similar heart-stopping feelings which awakened Mary on the first Easter. These feelings caused her to get out of bed, go out the door and head into the hostile darkness and the dangerous and winding streets of Jerusalem all the way to the garden tomb of Jesus on the first Easter morning.

Through her tears, through her body-aching pain, Mary is traumatized all over again as she finds the tomb of Jesus empty. All alone. In the dark. Heart stopping. Breath stopping. Tears flowing. And then a voice speaks. At first these words shock her. But they become words that will soon reassure and bring hope.

They are the first words of resurrection spoken by Jesus the Christ to anyone. *“Woman, why are you weeping?”* A question. Yet one more question from the lips of Jesus that asked 381 other questions in the scriptures. She knows the questioning voice. It is her rabbi, her teacher, her Lord, her friend. She cannot hold onto him. She must trust and let him go. In that moment, in the pre-dawn hours of the first Easter,

her trauma is turned to hope. Her tears are turned to dancing. Her broken heart is mended. Her words and prayers become the stuff of joy - Easter joy! Resurrection Joy!

Healing words and prayers most often find their first voice in the presence of pain. They are hidden from us in the intensity of our pain. But, they are revealed to us when we move from death to resurrection.

*“Woman, why are you weeping?”* This question is first asked by the angels in the tomb. It is echoed by our Risen Savior. The question seems odd to me. Why is she weeping? Jesus was crucified, dead, buried and now his body has been taken from the tomb. **Isn't it obvious why she is weeping?!?!? She was in pain and now she inconsolable.** Now, just the sound of his voice awakens within her the truth of his presence. The Risen Christ cuts through grief and gets to joy in his rising from the dead and speaking her name, **“Mary.”**

As you know, it is often hard to get to resurrection in the battle with brain diseases, brain disorders or brain illnesses.

Sarah Griffith Lund, author of **“Blessed are the Crazy: Breaking the Silence about Mental Illness, Family and Church”** knows this too. On Eve Easter this year March 25, 2016, Sarah

Griffith Lund wrote “The Resurrected Mind” in her blog post. In the piece she tells the story of her brother Scott’s chronic and severe Brain Disease. Through a difficult month in which he “*blamed his family for keeping him alive because they loved him so much,*” Scott found a way to live. To live was a true struggle. There was pain for everyone involved, but somehow, some way – through the grace of God – Scott found a way to live. Sarah writes:

*There were so many times when my brother almost died that we’ve grieved in anticipation of his life tragically ending. Despite all the treatment of new drugs, therapy, electroconvulsive shock therapy, and prayer, his bipolar disorder truly disabled him. He could not find anything that worked. We all began to think he would live with chronic mental pain until his last breath.*

*When Scott had finally communicated so clearly to me why death was the only way for him to find relief, during his stay in Jacksonville, he experienced a breakthrough in his treatment—a new cocktail of medications. It is a new medication combination that in the past month has provided incredible relief to him from his mental pain and suffering. For the first time in over a decade, Scott reports experiencing feelings of wellness.*

*Today I hardly recognize my brother. Yet, if I stretch back far enough in my memory I start to see the resemblances. The witty sense of humor, the teasing big brother, the love of adventure.*

*That's who Scott is and he's coming back to us. We thought we had lost him forever.*

*In every sense of the word, my brother's mind has been resurrected. His mind was once locked in a dark lonely tomb, behind a cold stone blocking any hope of light.*

*Depression is a tomb. Mental illness is a betrayal and crucifixion.*

*I am one of the women standing at the empty tomb. His mind has been raised from the dead. The stone is rolled away. He lives. My brother lives.*

Where are we in the story of the resurrection of the mind? How are we fighting our way out of the tomb to new day dawning?

Statistics for brain diseases can be overwhelming. One in five Americans experiences a brain disease. As I said last week, when one in five in a family of five experiences mental illness or it also affects the other four members of family in some way. Let me offer a breakdown of the major brain diseases:

- 1 in 100 people live with schizophrenia
- 1 in 40 live with bi-polar disease.
- 1 in 14 live with major depression
- 1 in 6 live with anxiety disorder.

Of all the people in the four categories, only 50% receive treatment.

Depression is the leading cause of disability in the workplace worldwide.

Mental illness effects workplace dynamics significantly. 4% of all the global Gross Domestic Product (GDP) is lost due to brain illnesses. In the US alone, the lost earnings due to Serious Mental Illness (SMI) amount to \$193 billion.

**These statistics can overwhelm our hope for a resurrected mind.** I know this all too well. So, we need to find small places inside ourselves where our minds or the minds of our loved ones are resurrected. We need to find and claim places of joy. No matter how small that place is, we need to find it and claim it and the joy will burn out the pain that is trying to take over.

In her book *“Fight Back with Joy,”* Margaret Feinberg tells how she found joy in the midst of her two battles with cancer. **As you hear Margaret’s words, I want to you replace cancer with brain diseases as you seek to claim a resurrected mind.**

Margaret was writing a book when cancer hit the first time. She says now, “Cancer wrecked my first book.” But when it hit the second time, she had read over 400 passages of scripture addressing the joy of faith in God.

*“Take joy into the battles with you,”* writes Margaret recommends, *“Because if we’re honest, all of us are in a fight. Sometimes you pick the fight. Sometimes the fight picks you. Our struggles may differ, but no one escapes life unscathed. I know firsthand what it’s like to be on the battlefield.”* She now sees joy everywhere - wrestling with joy, dancing with joy, sleeping with joy and also crying with joy. She says, *“Joy is the best God-given medicine I ever had.”* Through joy she now chooses to face each day with hope, and faith and love. It is JOY that opened all the other doors of faith.

We need to take joy into the battle with brain diseases. We need to fight for joy. And this not a fight that one person alone fighting in their isolated darkness. This is a fight for all of us to engage. Just this week word got out to the Suicide Hotline that I was doing this sermon series. So, we were asked to invite folks to join them in covering the hours in which they need help on the hotline. There is legislation that is currently moving through the statehouse and is stuck in the Capital in Washington. Here is Ohio,

Senate Bill #162 stops the state from executing someone who is clearly diagnosed with a brain disease at the time they commit their crime. In Washington, Bill #2680 is intended to strengthen care and services for those with Brain Diseases.

Here in Columbus, we must support our sisters and brothers who fighting for their lives in their battle with brain diseases. **If we don't speak for them and with them, who will? If we, the people who claim resurrection at the heart and soul of faith, don't step up and support the resurrecting of the minds of our loved ones, who will?**

Alicia Cohn writing in Christianity Today, penned an article on August 3rd entitled, *“What I Needed from the Church During My Depression.”* She offers three ways our communities can support mental health. I commend her beautiful piece to all of us to read. I will include it as an appendix on my sermon today. Alicia lifts up a few ideas **with which I will end today...**

She calls us to pay attention to those around us. She writes, *The sick brain can't see the sick brain. More often than not, someone in the midst of a depressive episode or panic attack can barely put forth a cry for help.*” Pay Attention – first and foremost. Her three offerings are these for all us in

community. First, **“Faith is something better.”** Stand strong in the faith that you have and be present in standing with others. Second, **“Resilience.”** Alicia is a Millennial – you know people who are now 18-39. She says 40% of unemployed people are millennials. They are marrying later, starting families later, and moving back with parents. As she says, **“no wonder we have the greatest depression rates in American society.”** She says the scriptures are filled with stories of resilience. Teach it, preach it, believe it, share it – Alicia tells the church! Finally, there is **“The Seasonal Perspective.”** Ecclesiastes tells us there is time and purpose for everything under heaven. She says, we in faith communities need to approach brain diseases from a seasonal perspective. Brain diseases are cyclical. Holding a long view of the illnesses will give hope if we journey through this together.

The first words of our Risen Savior to Mary come in the form of a question. **“Why are you weeping?”** As we seek to build a beloved community to support those afflicted and affected by brain diseases, I believe we should start with these first words of resurrection – **“Why are you weeping?”** Then, let us sit down and listen. There the seeds of new life will take root and joy will carve out a niche for hope in the resurrected mind. Amen.

Next Week, my final sermon in this series is entitled, “Blessed are the Stigma Busters.” I hope to see you here.

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Alicia Cohen’s article:

## What I Needed From the Church During My Depression

AUG 3 2016

*3 ways our communities can support mental health.*

*Alicia Cohn*

Speaking at the Democratic National Convention last week, the singer Demi Lovato took advantage of the powerful platform to advocate for mental health care in America. “Like millions of Americans, I am living with mental illness,” she said. “Too many Americans from all walks of life don't get help, either because they fear the stigma or they cannot afford treatment.”

“Mental illness” is a scary-sounding category that encompasses a broad array of invisible struggles. Look around you on Sunday. Most likely, there are Christians next to you suffering

silently from anxiety or panic disorder, bipolar disorder (from which Lovato suffers), dysthymia or major depressive disorder (from which I have suffered). Whether through personal experience or through someone we know, those of us whose lives have been touched by mental health struggles know that getting help can be the hardest part.

Women are twice as likely to experience mental health struggles as men, thanks to major hormonal challenges such as pregnancy and menstruation. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), 30 percent of women between 18 and 44 years of age are affected by depression, and many of them don't get the help they need. (My own disorder went undiagnosed for almost six months before I got help from doctors and therapy, and even then, the recovery process has been hindered by bad advice, mistreatment, and poor choices about whom I can rely on.)

Unfortunately, many of us who have spoken up in church communities have been told to “pray harder” or “have more faith.” These suggestions might be well intentioned, but they often discourage and isolate those of us in desperate need of support. “It’s a knee-jerk reaction to judge people when they’re vulnerable,” wrote actress Kristen Bell of her own story. “But there’s nothing weak about struggling with mental illness. You’re just having a harder time living in your brain than other people.”

**She's right:** Struggling with an illness of any kind makes a person vulnerable, and a sick brain puts a person in a particularly vulnerable state because it's often impossible to discern the problem from the inside. The sick brain can't *see* the sick brain. More often than not, someone in the midst of a depressive episode or panic attack can barely put forth a cry for help.

As people living in Christian community, we should be ready to offer practical knowledge and gracious support to people experiencing mental health crises. With that in mind, here are three ways I believe every church is best positioned to help:

### **Faith in something better.**

“Have faith that on the other side of your pain is something good,” Dwayne “The Rock” Johnson told the Oprah Presents Master Class. He wished someone had relayed this idea to him during a low point in his life when he was “crying constantly.” His message mirrors the “It gets better” campaign, but many people suffering from depression or other mental health issues know that sometimes it gets worse. Everyone needs a reason to keep trying. I've been in enough therapy groups and doctors' offices to know that the only reason people keep looking for answers in the face of crippling despair is because they believe *something* will help: drugs, doctors, relationships, therapy, or

sometimes the sheer freedom of living at rock bottom. Nonetheless, I've seen the best results when I (and others) put faith not exclusively in doctors or drugs or therapies, which have their limits, but also in God. He is the reason I still believe in “something good” on the other side of my pain. If you know someone in your church like me who is suffering, come alongside her. Pray for her. Avoid cheap platitudes like “have faith” and instead offer practical support by checking in on a regular basis to let her know she’s not alone, or by asking about her treatment, which is a way of acknowledging that the illness is real.

## Resilience.

Millennials are on more antidepressants than any other generation. According to the CDC, more than 6 percent of 18- to 39-year-olds have been prescribed antidepressants. My generation might as well define ourselves as “behind” in our careers (40 percent of unemployed people are millennials), salaries, and personal lives (marrying late and moving back in with our parents). No wonder we’re depressed. On top of that, the hours we spend in psychiatrists’ or counselors’ offices dealing with symptoms of a disorder (or the side effects of medication) often feel like “lost” time. While dealing with my mental health problems, I have burned through a lot of time and money as well as emotional and relationship capital—all

resources that I feel could have been spent better elsewhere. I find it reassuring to know that Christianity offers a promise of restoration greater than anything lost (Joel 2:25; Job 42:10–17). In the Bible, people often fall down, their lives fall apart, and yet God raises them up again. With that in mind, if you encounter someone in your church who is struggling with suicidal ideation or any form of hopelessness, first affirm their pain, then offer them the grace of optimism.

### The "seasonal" perspective.

“For now” is the mantra my therapist gave me to get through depressive episodes and hard days. Ecclesiastes 3 provides a similar mantra: “To everything there is a season.” Mental health, too, is composed of seasons. I am currently in a season for antidepressants, and although it may be cyclical, I hope it will eventually end. For most people, circumstances change, the brain’s reactions change accordingly, and the appropriate therapy also changes in sync with the situation. With mental health challenges, maintaining a long-range perspective is key to survival. The hardest, most important thing to do is simply to persevere.

If someone near you is facing a discrete mental health episode or a lifelong challenge, encourage her to name the season she’s

in, remind her that seasons often change, and journey with her as she takes it one day at a time.

“I don't think I'm fixed,” Lovato shared in the MTV documentary about her “recovery” in a residential treatment facility. “People think that you're like a car in a body shop. You go in, they fix you, and you're out. It takes constant fixing.”

Much like spiritual health, mental health is an ongoing need for every human being. Although those of us who struggle are each responsible for ourselves, we also rely on the powerful support of our community to ensure that we get the care we need. It starts with awareness within each local church. Just as an increasing number of secular figures have spoken up publicly, Christians should step forward to be, as Lovato put it, “proof that you can live a normal and empowered life with mental illness.”

The Bible is filled with exhortations to care for the most vulnerable among us—those who cry out for mercy and feel they have nowhere to turn. Those of us who face mental health crises are among the most vulnerable. We need your recognition. We need your prayers. We need your presence. And we need to be part of the church community, especially as we struggle to find extra grace.