

# “Joy-filled Prayers”

(9 of 9 in the Lenten series, “Prayer”)

Acts 10:34-43; John 20:1-18

The Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens  
Senior Minister

*March 27, 2016*

From the Pulpit

The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ

444 East Broad Street, Columbus, OH 43215

Phone: 614.228.1741 • Fax: 614.461.1741

Email: [home@first-church.org](mailto:home@first-church.org)

Website: <http://www.first-church.org>

An Easter Communion Meditation delivered by The Rev. Dr. Timothy Carl Ahrens, Sr. Minister, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, Easter, March 27, 2016, dedicated to John Carter and Rev. Mary Kay Beall who lives each day as resurrection people, to all the people who need resurrection joy in their lives and always to the glory of God!

***“Joy-filled Prayers”***  
***(The final sermon in the nine-part series, “Prayer”)***  
***Acts 10:34-43; John 20:1-18***

Today we come to the end of the sermon series on “Prayer.” Beginning in the cold of Ash Wednesday a moving through February and March, Emily and I have shared this journey with you. We have lifted up eight sermons on prayer: Confessing Prayers, Wild Prayers, Ceaseless Prayers, Thirsty Prayers, Compassionate Prayers, Communing Prayers, Crying and Courageous Prayers and Suffering Prayers. Each sermon and service is available on CD, on-line or printed format in our information racks. Now I invite you to join me in prayer for the final sermon, “Joy-Filled Prayers.”

++++  
*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.*

++++

Have you ever found yourself heartbroken - having lost a loved one? Following the death of your loved one, have you found yourself sitting straight up in bed in the middle of night wondering where you are and what has happened? Have you found yourself slipping out of bed, standing by the window and looking out on a world in which he or she is no longer present? Have you stepped into the cold morning air, 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?

It must have been similar heart-stopping feelings which awakened Mary Magdalene. These feelings caused her to get out of bed, go out the door and head into the dark 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, she 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 is speaking – first words that shock, then, words of reassurance and bring hope.

Not believing it is Jesus, Mary faces down “the Gardner,” only to find when he speaks her name, she knows him. 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, Mary’s pain is turned to joy. Her trauma is turned to hope. Her tears are turned to dancing. Her broken heart is healed. Her prayers become the stuff of joy – **Easter joy!**

Joy-filled prayers often find their first voice in the presence of pain. They are hidden from us when we are hurting. But, they are revealed to us when we move from pain to joy.

Joy-filled prayers are daring prayers. To give voice to joy when we are moving out of pain feels somewhat treacherous. Are we faithful enough to find joy and speak it aloud? Are we brave enough to pray joy? Are we strong enough to trust that joy can indeed fill us again – after heart-breaking losses?

In *Surprised by Joy*, C.S. Lewis writes about his awakening to joy through his walk from atheism to theism and then from theism to Christian faith. Joy showed up and surprised Lewis. Joy came upon him without warning or explanation and departed just as it had come. His first experience one might write off as mere nostalgia:

*As I stood beside a flowering currant bush on a summer day there suddenly arose in me without warning, and as if from a depth not of years but of centuries, the memory of that earlier morning at the Old House when my brother had brought his toy garden into the nursery. IT WAS JOY.... There is the essence of Joy. It is a longing for... something so otherworldly that even our desire for it seems alien: Joy is an unsatisfied desire which is itself more desirable than any other satisfaction...Joy is never in our power.”*

*Joy is never in our power.* Joy burst into this world through the resurrection of Jesus. It is not as though it had never been there before. But, on Easter Morning Joy could not be contained. It could not be explained. Joy entered the garden in the risen Christ and spoke to Mary Magdalene with the voice of eternal and everlasting love.

Joy cannot be summoned or commanded. Its elusiveness is maddening to our human nature. In fact, I believe it is easier to stay stuck in the muck of pain. It is easier to pitch our tents in depression and never risk coming **into the fullness of God's joy and God's love.** But, I believe staying stuck in the muck of pain and loss keeps us from being fully alive as humans. And it most certainly keeps us from being Christians. It keeps us from being resurrected people. It keeps the prayers of joy off our lips and out of our hearts.

In the words of Joseph Campbell, *“Find a place inside yourself (not matter how small a place that is) where there's joy, and the joy will burn out the pain that is trying to take over.”*

How true! Like the stone rolling away from the entrance to the tomb, joy burns out the pain. Joy blows the rock away!

In many respects I find an un-resurrected Jesus easier to accept. It can be easier to keep him in the tomb. Easter makes him dangerous. Because of Easter, we have to listen to his extravagant claims and can no longer pick and choose from his sayings. Moreover, Easter sets Jesus loose out there somewhere.

In her book *“Fight Back with Joy,”* Margaret Feinberg tells how she found joy in the midst of her two battles with cancer. She 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

reach day with hope, and faith and love. It is JOY that opened all the other doors of faith.

I have seen so many of you fight for joy. Sometimes you pick the fight and sometimes it has come to you. I have seen you battle with cancer and come through cancer – resurrected in the joy of living! I have seen you struggle with mental illnesses - depression and more – and battle through to the other side. I have seen you go through loss in your life and find a way to be joyful again. You inspire me.

I have received a special gift from the children this Lent/Easter. One by one, you have come to me and recited “**The Lord’s Prayer.**” I know the challenges that some of you have faced – coming through surgeries and the challenges that come with growing up in these times. Yet, you stand eye to eye with me and pray. Wow! You inspire me! All of you!

On this Easter Sunday, I encourage each one of you to rise again and fight back with joy.

Are you ready to be Easter people? Are you ready to be surprised by joy? To Fight Back with Joy? Are you ready to open yourself to the joy-filled and loving spirit of God alive in this room and in this community of faith? Are you ready to be Christians? Staying stuck in the muck of pain will not get you there. Tears that can never be dried will not get you there. Instead, allow the still small voice within you to

speaking. Allow it to be heard. Allow it to pray joy-filled prayers.

God is loose in this world with the unbounding joy of resurrection. May our last prayer of this season and the first prayer for the Easter season opening before us be a joy-filled prayer. May it fill you with love and hope. May you come back to life – believing that our God who can raise the dead (and Only God can raise the dead!) – that our God is calling us to live joy-filled lives.

In John 16:22, Jesus offered these prayerful words: “*So you have pain and sorrow now. But I will see you again. And your hearts will rejoice, and no one can take your joy from you!*” These words are trustworthy and true. May the joy of the Risen Christ be with you today and forevermore. Alleluia! Amen.

Copyright 2016, First Congregational Church, UCC