

# *“Risking All for the Truth”*

*Seventh Sunday of Easter*

*Acts 1: 15-17, 21-26; 1 John 5:9-13; John 17:6-19*

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From the Pulpit  
St. John's United Church of Christ  
Lansdale, PA

A sermon delivered by The Rev. Dr. Timothy Carl Ahrens, Sr. Minister, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio at St. John's UCC, Lansdale, PA, May 13, 2018, Easter 7, dedicated to my mother Carol Lorene Kellermeyer Ahrens on her 90<sup>th</sup> birthday, to my wife Susan Sitler, my daughter-in-law Kirsten Ahrens, my sister-in-law Ann Ahrens, to all mothers in our family and in the church on Mother's Day 2018 and to my sister Deborah Kay Ahrens who celebrates a special birthday this month and always to the glory of God!

**“Risking All for the Truth”**

Texts: Acts 1:15-17, 21-26; I John 5:9-13; John 17:6-19

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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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Today is the Seventh Sunday of Easter – the last before the arrival of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. And we all know, a church without Pentecost cannot shout “He is Risen!” loudly enough to sustain Easter for seven straight Sundays. By the seventh Sunday of Easter, all churches everywhere have

experienced some sort of Post-Easter Sunday slump. We often call the Sunday after Easter “Low Sunday” (no that is not an actual Sunday on the church calendar).

The special efforts to keep attendance up and attention focused on the Risen Christ often lose out to beautiful weather calling people – like the sirens’ songs - out into their yards, into the woods, out to the lakes, down to the shore, onto the golf courses and ball diamonds and more. Do you know how hard it is for Pastors Sue and Addie to keep you focused on the Risen Christ when you get caught up in planting and hiking? Spring “calls us out” while the texts of these beautiful Easter stories are “calling us to stay together.” God’s Creation is a tough match-up for God’s Word.

The challenge of keeping the Sabbath Day in Spring reminds me of a sermon I heard from this pulpit years ago, delivered by The Rev. Dr. John Touchberry – my mentor as a young man. John said, *“God did not create the Sabbath for Humanity. God created Humanity for the Sabbath. In other words, God calls us to find Sabbath rest – to take a break and be restful.”* That was music to my ears! THAT day, when I sat down to Sunday dinner, I told my mom and dad I didn’t need to go to church anymore on Sundays because Dr. Touchberry had said we could sleep in and did not have to come to church. As mom served one of her delicious roasts, she responded, *“That is not*

*what he said and that's not what he meant. We go to church on the Sabbath Day. We don't sleep in.*” **I told her we did not hear the same sermon.** And, thus began my lifelong pursuit to misunderstand preachers and misinterpret the Word of God – all while loving my mother’s great cooking. Nothing ruins a roast for a mom more than a mouthy teenage boy.

Face it, Dr. Touchberry was right, mom. People need a break once in a while – not necessarily you and me. We are clearly designed to be here each week. But, lots of other Christians need to sleep in and rest once in a while. Especially in Eastertide. It is hard to keep Sabbath in Eastertide with Spring breezes blowing and green grass growing.

But, since you are here and come in from the lures of Springtime to celebrate Eastertide, let’s take one last look at this amazing Easter season of love, light and life. Easter is not only about shouting “He is Risen” and singing the loud hymns of praise. Easter is also about **waiting and praying for the coming of the Holy Spirit.** It is also about **truth-telling.**

**There is a lot of waiting, praying and listening to Jesus in these texts of Easter.** The disciples spend the 50 days of Easter waiting for the Holy Spirit to strengthen them and guide their hearts and feet. Jesus spends these 50 days praying for his disciples and building deeper relationships with them.

As he prays for them, he also prays for us. And Jesus' praying for us is essential to our Gospel story. At first it may not seem all that important that Jesus prays for his followers. But, I believe it is one of the most important things that happens in the Gospels. He wants the early church to know **"they will be okay."** Through the trauma of crucifixion and the ecstasy of resurrection, his followers will transcend all they have seen and translate that to a world which needs loves such as his love. His Easter prayers save the soul of the church. Prayer has the power to do that. When we pray, peace comes. Healing comes. Hope comes. Prayer is the great equalizer which transcends differences and brings hope.

Prayer works! We know that. We have experienced the prayer's power in our lives and in the lives of our loved ones. We also know prayer works because Harvard told us so. That's right. Years ago, Harvard University did a research project in which some fields of plants were prayed over, and some were not. In fact, there were some fields prayed over A LOT and some a little. The fields prayed over the most produced the greatest yield of crops. Harvard issued the report announcing prayer works. Now we really know it's true because Harvard said so. 😊

But wait wait...there is more. In John 17:17-19 Jesus “sanctifies” the church in truth. In other words, he sets us aside to be bearers of TRUTH for all generations to come.

**We are set aside for truth-telling.** Being set aside for truth-telling is more important today than it was 2000 years ago because we are currently living in a truth vacuum. Lying is the way to go. Truth-telling is called “fake” and liars are sanctified as leaders. That is sick.

In The Washington Post on Tuesday, May 8, Margaret Sullivan wrote an article with the headline, “*Giuliani’s bumbling media blitz might be a calculation not a mistake.*” Sullivan writes, “*It wouldn’t have seemed possible a mere week ago, but this Administration’s notorious problems with truth-telling have hit a new low. And oddly enough that might be on purpose...*” She chronicles Rudy Giuliani’s movement from one media appearance to the next with “*no regard to consistent adherence to the facts.*” By normal criteria these appearances would have been at best puzzling and at worst disasters for Mr. Giuliani’s client. But normal criteria disappeared in the presidential campaign of 2016 and may never return. Liars rule the day. Truth-tellers are treated badly. As I said, this is sick.

Lies and misstatements seem to have few consequences these days. That has become the way it is in the past couple of years. Pinocchio's nose has grown so long that he has toppled over from the weight of the lies. It is easy to make jokes out of it and try to laugh it away. But, this is a serious problem – a crisis of truth-telling.

**Have we, the followers of Christ, succumbed to accepting our place in this new twisted reality show in the age of lying?** Last Sunday, I was going over something with my confirmands as they prepare for their Confirmation next Sunday. One of them simply lied to me about something. It wasn't big – but it was a lie. And all his classmates knew it. When I challenged him on it, he said, *“The President lies all the time. What's the big the deal if I say a little lie once in a while?”* I responded, *“It is a big deal to me and it should be to you. Are you being confirmed into the faith of the President or the faith of Jesus Christ?”* He said, *“Jesus Christ.”* And I said, *“Then stop lying – big or small because Jesus tells us over and over again to tell the truth. So be truthful and follow Him. Got it?”* *“Yes, Rev. Tim,”* he answered. We are not done with this conversation....

**You and I are not only told to tell the truth.** We are **“sanctified”** for truth telling. God sets us apart to as truth-tellers. As followers of Christ, we should all be able to pass every lie-detector test every time we are wired-up for it. That is

how honest and truthful we are called to be. That is what “sanctified in truth” looks like.

**Our pedigree is truth.** Truth begins in God who created the universe and each one of us. Truth comes to us through Christ. Then, down through the ages, through the apostles and the church, we are sanctified for truth-telling. Imagine, if the church was a completely truth-telling body. That is, imagine if each of us sought the Truth in our families, in our towns, cities, nation and world. We would become the impenetrable witness for God that God intended us to be. What if we lived each day and each moment as if every word mattered? What if we were so deeply committed to truth-telling that we lived it? Believe me – such a truthful witness would start a revolution which would save our nation and our planet.

**Let me tell a story of truth-telling in our times.** I am one of the founding pastors of a congregation based-community organization in Columbus, Ohio called BREAD (Building Responsibility Equality and Dignity). For 22+ years, BREAD has challenged Columbus to look in a mirror and face the truth about the gaps we have in education, transportation, housing, crime on our streets, pay-day lending practices, care for those with mental illnesses and treatment of immigrants and refugees in our community – to name a few things. We

point out things that need to be addressed and changed - while public officials often try to hide from them.

Last Monday night, 2542 people representing over 20,000 members from 40 congregations – Protestant and Catholic, Pentecostal and Evangelical, Reform Jews and Conservative Jews and Muslims, Black, White, Hispanic - gathered to call our city and county government to accountability about the affordable housing crisis in our region. I co-lead our recent research team to figure out how we can better serve our youth and families in Columbus. What we discovered was devastating.

We discovered there are two elephants in the living room of Franklin County (the county in which Columbus sits). First, we have over 54,000 households in our county who can't afford their housing. This is a major crisis. While the formulas are complex and can spin your head, I will tell you people are spending 50-70% of their meager incomes on housing alone. You all know this is NOT sustainable.

Second, outside of Austin, Texas, Columbus, Ohio is THE most economically segregated city in the nation, which also makes us one of the most racially segregated cities as well. The distinction between rich and poor is wrong. We have suburban communities committed to housing regulations

which keep out low-income people. Plus, we are one of the worst violators of evictions in the country. Worse than New York City or Chicago.

Two elephants in one living room are two too many. One no disputes that we have an affordable housing crisis in our county (and I bet you have one Montgomery County, too). But, no one is willing to face the truth – except BREAD. BREAD has called the mayor, the city council, and the county commissioners to deal with both these disparities. We have called for \$200 million dollars in the next ten years for over 30,000 new housing units for the poor and housing unstable in our county. Money would be granted through our Housing Trust Fund (which BREAD established in 2002). There will be housing built across the city for low and very low-income people so that hope may come to their lives of instability. You could call us whistle-blowers if you like. But, I prefer truth-tellers. And we are not going away.

**It is risky business to be truth tellers.** But we follow a Savior who risked all for the truth. So, let us follow the Risen Christ. Pray without ceasing and be sanctified truth tellers. You can do this. I believe in you. Amen.

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