

An Easter sermon delivered by the Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, Sr. Minister, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, Easter, April 8, 2012, dedicated to my mother, Lorene Kellermeyer Ahrens, my sister Deborah, my wife Susan Sitler, my daughters Thalia and Sarah, and my daughter-in-law Kirs, to the ordained and commissioned women of First Church and the UCC and beyond, to all the Dominican Sisters of Peace and associates, to women of faith everywhere who are witnesses each day for God's love and justice, and always to the glory of God!

“Trauma and Ecstasy: The Prayer and Action of Easter Women”

Acts 10:34-43; Mark 16:1-8

***(Part VIII of VIII in the sermon series
“Great Prayers of the Bible”)***

Today we come to the end of the sermon series, “Great Prayers of the Bible.” We have reflected on the prayers of Nehemiah, Abraham, Moses, Hannah, Jeremiah and Jesus. Today, we look at the prayers of women at the tomb and their contemporary sisters. My sermon NEW title is: ***“Trauma and Ecstasy: The Prayer and Action of Easter Women.”***

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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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We have come to see the Risen Christ! Through city streets, across regional highways, around orange barrels, even figuring out closed exits, we have made our way to downtown Columbus this glorious Easter morning! With brass, timpani, two grand organs, the choirs of angels, the fragrance of flowers, children's joy, Easter

Communion, our Sunday best and, of course, the “Painted Lady” butterflies, we are enveloped in the spirit of joy. Our senses are heightened by the beauty we behold through our eyes, our ears, or touch, our tastes and the fragrance of life this Resurrection Day!

Listening to St. Mark’s Gospel, we hear that Mary Magdalene, Mary, James’ mother, and Salome rise earlier than all of us to go to the place where Jesus’ dead body has been laid so that they might anoint it with spices. As they get closer things become increasingly more practical: “Who will roll away the stone in front of the tomb?” No one planned for this. But, strangely they arrive to find the stone rolled away. They enter and find no body. Rather, they encounter one young man, dressed in a white robe (an angel perhaps?) who tells them to tell the others **“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. Stay with us a bit longer. There is more to this story.

In 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. She was a teenage mom, now 47 and faithful to her son beyond belief - how long would Mary stay silent?

Salome was Mary's sister, Jesus' aunt. Many believe she was present at Jesus' birth and assisted the midwife. She who NEVER abandoned her sister or her nephew and watched Jesus grow into the greatest rabbi of the ages - would Salome 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 men. She was called by many, "The First TRUE Apostle." Would Mary Magdalene remain silent?

Out of trauma comes ecstasy AND GRACE! And we know that ecstasy cannot be silent for long. Rather, 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 - from a heart that is given to God*" (from my 2012 Ash Wednesday sermon). Theirs was a "pondering silence," a silence waiting to be born out of stillness.

This pondering silence was like the silence of Mrs. Rosa Parks when ordered to move out of her seat on a cold December 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 silence we encounter here in Mark - silence turned into graceful and just action.

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

Easter women's silences in times of trauma produce action and results. The Rev. Dr. Barbara Lundblad, Joe R. Engle professor of preaching at Union Seminary in New York City writes:

"Of all the Easter gospels, Mark's story invites 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. The narrative is left for us, the readers, to complete."

Joan L Mitchell writes in *Beyond Fear and Silence*:

*"The silence of the last disciple characters surviving in the narrative bring the readers and hearers to their own thresholds of faith, to the limit of words to speak the unspeakable...and to the limit of human experience to trust Who or What is beyond death . . . In our foremothers' silence, the narrative still calls the disciples of the next generation to speak for themselves, and bring the gospel into dialogue with their lives. (Joan L. Mitchell, *Beyond Fear and Silence*, p.115).*

Dr Lundblad continues: *"These three 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.*

*"Whatever they said to the disciples, their testimony was shaped by those two words: **trauma and ecstasy**. This was not a testimony so absolute that it cancelled other possibilities. This was not a word that demeaned the experiences of others. This was not a witness that proved they were right and everyone else was wrong. **The testimony that grew from their silence was always invitation rather than coercion** ("Reflections for Easter", April 2012, <http://blog.beliefnet.com/onscripture>).*

- You and I have been shaped by 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 forgotten ones and the forsaken ones, shaped by abuse and trauma, battered, beaten, and silenced by a world that hurts rather than helps. Silently, quietly, effectively, peacefully, and powerfully, women have delivered a faith in action that makes sense.

Their silence may be at sunrise pondered in their hearts, but by noontime it is transforming lives, by night it has delivered hope. That is what Mary, Salome and Mary do. It is what so many women do.

Like Rosa Parks facing 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.

In our own times, I am inspired by my Dominican Sisters of Peace, who three years ago trusted God, the Risen Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit to create a whole new community of faith. Out of hearts filled with God, with prayer and discernment, seven former communities were born on Easter Sunday and a new creation emerged from this prayer for peace:

Prayer for Peace

*Ever Creating God,
Still Point of Eternal Peace,
Stir up within us
Your dream that all may be one.
Free us to be instruments of your peace.*

*Jesus, Word birthed from creative love
Word spoken and broken,
Unending Word of Peace,
Enable us to be preachers of that Word,
Bearers of the message of your peace.*

*Holy Spirit of Unfolding Peace,
Breath of God's Love,
Enkindle in us the desire to be
Embers of your peace
With a passion that will set the world on fire. Amen.*

Like the Dominicans Sisters of Peace, there are many women whose lives are guided by “the breath of God’s love” and are setting the world on fire with non-violent peace and justice making.

I think of **Sister Carol Keehan** fighting for health care for all Americans and often facing her greatest opposition from leaders within her own church; the **Rev. Jennifer Butler**, who built Faith in Public Life from an idea that people of faith could work together, stand on common ground and positively influence and shape policy and opinion in the public square too often divided by mean-spirited divisions; and **Bishop Minerva G. Carcaño**, of Phoenix, Arizona, the first Hispanic woman to be elected to the episcopacy of the United Methodist Church (UMC), who grew up in a poor community and has dedicated her life to defending immigrants rights and standing up for the LGBT community in a state (and a church) where it isn’t popular to do so.

In our denomination, I think of **the Rev. Dr. Susan Thistlethwaite**, former president and current professor of theology at Chicago Theological Seminary who, as our first woman president of a UCC seminary in 1998, took over CTS and transformed it from an aging, struggling institution with old buildings and old understandings of justice and peace into a vibrant community of transformational faith.

While Susan was president the average age of the incoming classes dropped from 38 to 25 years old. A whole new generation of pastors and theologians are being trained because of Susan’s steady and strong hand of leadership. Susan has taken blogs, Youtube, Facebook and the revolution of communication in the virtual world of cyberspace and spread the good news of progressive Christianity with clarity and hope. It is a beautiful sight to behold!

Each of us can name the women of faith who have inspired us to move from **tromos – trauma** - and **ecstasis – ecstasy** - from terror and amazement 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 wives or our life partners. They may be our daughters or grand-daughters. They may

be our friends, our co-workers or neighbors. They may be poets, prophets or problem-solvers who turn trauma into grace-filled ecstasy and hope. Give thanks to God for them today.

On the first Easter, God was wise to send three women to the tomb of Jesus. God knew that the women who witnessed the crucifixion of Christ would not mess up the resurrection. The women had stayed present in prayer at the foot of the cross through each agonizing moment while men cowered and hid. 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 we leave here today, how will we tell this story? Will we leave space for those whose stories are different from ours? Will we insist that we alone are right and others are wrong? Will we invite others in or coerce them?

Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Salome are standing beside 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, it is their prayer that proclaims the good news of God's resurrection in Christ Jesus our Savior!

Thanks be to God! Amen.