

A sermon preached by the Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, senior minister at the First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, offered on January 23, 2010, at St. Peter Roman Catholic Church, Columbus, on the occasion of a service for Christian unity, dedicated to my sisters and brothers in the one holy Catholic Church, and always to the glory of God!

“The Prophet Rises”

Romans 8:31-39; Luke 24

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of eacone of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen.

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In his book, *One Generation After* (1970), Nobel Peace Prize Winner, Elie Wiesel tells this story from Hasidic lore. It is called “*The True Waiting*”:

Having concluded that human suffering was beyond endurance, a certain Rebbe went up to heaven and knocked at the Messiah’s door.

“*Why are you taking so long?*” he asked the Messiah. “*Don’t you know mankind is expecting you?*”

“*It’s not me they’re expecting,*” the Messiah answered. “*Some are waiting for good health and riches. Others for serenity and knowledge. Or peace in the home and happiness. No it’s not me they are awaiting.*”

At that point, the Rebbe lost patience and cried aloud, “*So be it! If you have but one face, may it remain in shadow! If you*

cannot help men, all men, resolve their problems, all their problems, even the most insignificant, then stay where you are, as you are. If you still have not guessed that YOU are bread for the hungry, a voice for the old man without heirs, sleep for those who dread night, if you have not understood all this and more; that every wait is a wait for you, then you are telling the truth. Indeed, it is not you, that mankind is waiting for.”

Then the Rebbe returned to earth, gathered his disciples and forbade them to despair. He said to them, “*Now, the true waiting begins.*” (Found in *The Oxford Dictionary of Jewish Stories*, edited by Ilan Stavans, New York, Oxford University Press, 1998, pp. 250-251).

While our “true waiting” continues for the second coming of Christ, let us prepare for the Messiah by drinking deep the 24th chapter of the Gospel of Luke, a powerful proclamation to our faith in the risen Christ!

In Luke 24, we celebrate the risen Christ as the messengers of God appear to the women by the empty tomb in the garden. Later, Christ himself appears to the men on the road to Emmaus, although they initially do not recognize him. On the road, Christ is prophet and teacher rising right out of the tradition of Moses and the Hebrew prophets. Christ is sacramental celebrant at the dinner table and reappears as “God with Skin on” in the Upper Room. He is a fish eating friend. He is the ascending savior!

In powerful proclamations packed into 49 verses of Luke 24, “The true waiting” for the Messiah both ends and (as the passage closes with the Ascension of our Lord), “the true waiting” begins again!

We are the faithful followers of Christ in this “in-between” time. For what and for whom do we live and move and have our being?

First, we know that Christ Jesus was raised from the dead. If Christ was never raised from the dead, we would have no faith. There would be no apostles, no believers, no followers, no saints and no communion of saints. There would be no church. No Orthodox, no Catholics, no Protestants, no Pentecostals, no Evangelicals. There would be no baptism and no Eucharist – no sacraments at all. There certainly would be no Christmas, no Easter, no Pentecost. There would be no reason for us to exist as a community of faith. We would all be somewhere else tonight if Jesus Christ had never been raised and women and the men who witnessed the resurrection had failed to tell the story and spread the good news to the four corners of the earth.

So what happened in the pre-dawn hours of that first Easter morning that shaped the future of this world as we know it?

We know something deep inside stirred the women to rise on the first Easter and go to Jesus' grave to anoint his dead body. They had been witnesses of the crucifixion, so they knew exactly what they would see upon arriving at the tomb. Having witnessed Jesus beaten and torn apart by nails, whips, spears and a crown of thorns, it must have been excruciatingly hard for them to even consider making this trip to behold this sight. Nevertheless, they went in faith and compassion to care for his bloody remains. Faith and compassion will do that to you. Faith and compassion will move you to do things you never imagined possible.

When they found the empty tomb, two men in dazzling clothes told them to tell the other disciples that Jesus was raised from the dead and had gone before them to Galilee. Mark's Gospel says the women fled the tomb in astonishment, fear and trembling, whispering not a word of this to anyone. Apparently, even the most faithful and most compassionate of Jesus' followers fall silent when

overcome by fear and trembling.

But like a relay team of resurrection faith, Luke carries the baton from this point. He places Jesus on the road to Emmaus and sets him in a great conversation with his grieving brothers of faith. They do not recognize him and he knows it. He plays them like a fiddle. He walks and talks for seven miles, opening their minds to Moses' teachings and the prophets witness of faith.

Four times Luke writes about the prophets of old. The risen Christ really identifies with the prophets and he wants us to as well. He breaks bread with them. He eats with them. He reveals himself to them. Always going before them and before all of us – Jesus is in the world and in our daily lives. We never know where and when we shall see him. We only know he is loose in the world, turning the world upside down. When we meet him on the streets of Columbus and Worthington, on the prairies of the Midwest or the mountains of Appalachia, we will know the risen Christ!

First and most important, we know Jesus is not a figure in a book but a living presence. We cannot merely study Jesus. He is not some scientific experiment for us to dissect (although he must enjoy ALL the science in this world). He lives and breathes all around us.

Second, (and in the same vein) he is not a memory but a living presence. He is not a topic for discussion but someone to meet. Perhaps for some of us, we need to meet again. For others, we need to meet him for the first time.

Third, to follow Jesus we need to *know Him*, not just know about him. I know *about* a lot of people and certainly all of us know *about* many historical figures. The wisest and best theologians can know *about* Jesus with knowing him. While the

humblest and most sincere servants of Christ can know him without knowing much about him. *It is our calling as his disciples to **know him** more than we know about him.* Each of us has our own insights into Jesus as we have come to know him. Allow me to share a few I have come to know.

As the incarnation of God, Jesus embodies LIFE - all of life!

Jesus is the embodiment of truth. While he did not claim divine titles or divine authority, he did claim to know the truth. In him, the truth had a way of finding expression. Jesus was uniquely in harmony with all that is true and real in life. When I pray, I feel he leads me into paths of truth, insights into the human condition – truth about myself and others. He is the embodiment of truth.

Jesus is the embodiment of compassion. In his book, *Jesus Before Christianity*, the Rev. Albert Nolan writes, “His compassion was spontaneous for people and precluded any kind of alienation or artificiality. He lived his life with no falsehood or illusion. One could say that he was absorbed by truth, or better still, that in him, the truth became flesh.” (Albert Nolan, *Jesus Before Christianity*, Orbis Books, Maryknoll, eighth printing, September 2008, pp.168-169).

Jesus is in complete harmony with God. His actions of compassion revealed the truth of God’s compassion for humanity. Jesus is the embodiment of compassion.

Jesus is the embodiment of faith. By this I mean that he is as good as his word, because faith is not a way of speaking or a way of thinking. Faith is a way of living. Faith is real when your words and your deeds are congruent. In this regard, faith cannot be contained in a creed but is practiced by the deeds we do. For you and me to say, “We believe Jesus Christ is our Lord and Savior,”

means that we uphold and maintain our lives and our experiences as one with God.

Whenever our lives of action are incongruent with our words, our faith needs a tune-up. We need some readjustments. What I have found is that we are much better at pointing out incongruities in others, than naming them in ourselves. I can't even begin to tell you how many times I have seen people do this and done it myself. But when the faith of Jesus is alive in us, our words and deeds are congruent. Jesus is the embodiment of faith.

Jesus is the embodiment of justice. When we say we believe in social justice, we must act in ways of justice. He spent his life trying to heal the world – in the Hebrew this is *"tikkun Olam"* or to "heal the whole world." He calls us to heal the world and the parts of ourselves that cause injustice in relationships and in community.

Fourteen years ago, I had the good fortune to be one of the founding pastors of the BREAD organization. In fact, I helped formulate and choose the name BREAD, which stands for "Building Responsibility Equality And Dignity." We have worked hard for justice in public education, jobs, health care, truancy and housing, to name a few issues. It is never easy work to be part of bending the moral arc of the universe, but it always bends toward justice!

I am so happy St. Peter is now a part of BREAD – as we go out together, across this great city and central Ohio region as faithful witnesses – which is justice driven among 50 plus congregations of Jewish, Christian and Muslim people. We, as Christians, are blessed to be part of this movement. After all, Jesus in the embodiment of justice.

Jesus is also the embodiment of love. When we say, we believe in love, we must act in loving ways, for this is way of Jesus!

Jesus embodied love in all his actions, not just words. Love is action. Love is seen more than it is heard and Jesus is the embodiment of love.

As we gather in this week of Christian unity, let us remember Dr. Martin Luther King's words of love and justice. He said, "*Love without justice can be sappy and sentimental. Justice without love can be cold and cruel. But when love and justice are bound together, God changes the world!*"

Jesus embodied truth, compassion, faith, justice and love long ago, and he embodies these same qualities today. He is risen in all of us. God has vindicated Jesus' crucifixion in Christ's resurrection. In the words of the rabbi from Elie Wiesel's story, "*The Messiah is bread for the hungry and a voice for the old man without heirs. He is sleep for those who dread night and the one for whom everyone is waiting.*"

And who are we in relation to the risen Christ? We are his storytellers. We are his hands and feet, his voice and presence in the world. We are God's storytellers.

We are the ones God has chosen to tell of Jesus in our times. As St. Francis of Assisi said, "*We are the only Bible that some people will ever read. So let his story shine in our lives!*" Before Christianity got ahold of Jesus, he was the greatest story God ever created. He was the embodiment of God in every imaginable way. Our job as his storytellers in the 21st century is to embody Jesus for others in telling the truth, in being compassionate, in living faith, in acting justly, in loving our sisters and brothers.

To embody Jesus for others, we need not be pure or faultless. Make no mistake about it. God chose the Apostle Paul to spread the Good News of Christ to the world. You know, Paul – killer of

Christians, an apostate before he was converted to apostle. Certainly, if God can use Paul, God can use each of us to be God's storytellers and Christ-bearers.

In Philippians 2:1ff, Paul tells God's storytellers throughout time to do everything possible to live a life worthy of Christ:

If you've gotten anything at all out of following Christ, if his love has made any difference in your life, if being in a community of the Spirit means anything to you, if you have a heart, if you care - then do me a favor, Agree with each other, love each other, be deep-spirited friends.

Paul implores us to do this, as Jesus did it, with humble hearts and lives.

As I opened with a story from Hasidic lore called *The True Waiting*, now, I close with images from one of the great 21st century cathedrals, Our Lady of Angels in Los Angeles. Here our "true waiting" finds a home. I find great hope for Christianity in the art of John Nava. Nava has created 25 frescos with 136 saints and blessed ones who span the church throughout history and across the globe. Twelve of Nava's saints are unnamed, symbolizing the twelve apostles. Their visages are drawn from men, women, and children from L.A. They are God's holy ones, chosen and beloved. They are unnamed because Nava wants us to see ourselves as these apostles.

Nava's tapestries, woven by Flanders Tapestries in Belgium, are set in earth tones, whose colors match the stones in Jerusalem on the Via Delorosa, the Way of the Cross. All the eyes of the faithful on the north and south walls are looking up. All behold the risen Christ who is literally rising from the cross of crucifixion.

Years in the making, John Nava tells the story of unrolling "the

beautiful group of humans” (as he calls them) when the tapestries returned from Belgium shortly after the terrible events of September 11, 2001. He wept as the faces of the saints slowly opened before him. He said, *“These people were seen as whole, strong human beings, full of hope . . . This is the time when we need to love humanity and see something that is really, truly uplifting and beautiful”* (From the church website: www.olacathedral.org). These are the ones that shine God’s beauty!

My friends, remember: You are the saints of God in our time. You are God’s story in human form! You are the prophets rising, the storytellers for Jesus. So tell the story and live the story of the risen Christ. Be the whole, strong, hopeful human beings God is needing in this world today! And now the true waiting begins. Amen.