

An Easter sermon delivered by the Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, senior minister at the First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, April 12, 2009, Easter Sunday, dedicated to the memory of Henry Hunker, who was raised to eternal life, April 10, 2009, Bishop Frederick Campbell, recovering from surgery, to the beloved memory of my grandmother, Josephine Magdalene Mathias Kellermeyer, who was raised to eternal life on this day, and always to the glory of God!

“Jesus and Christianity”

Phillipians 2:1-11; Mark 16:1-8

***(Part VIII of VIII in the sermon series
“Jesus Before and AFTER Christianity”)***

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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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The close of Mark’s gospel is one of the strangest endings to a glorious new beginning one could ever imagine. You just heard it: “The women fled and said nothing to anyone because they were afraid.” In *The Message*, Eugene Peterson, rephrases Mark 16:8: “They got out as fast as they could, beside themselves, their heads swimming. Stunned, they said nothing to anyone.” Astonished. Beside themselves. Stunned. Fearful. Silent.

If the three women at the tomb on the first Easter said nothing to anyone, how do you explain women (and men) of faith who later said

everything to anyone because they were filled with joy? How do explain the faith of Saints Lucy, Perpetua and Felicitaa – first century saints who lived and died for the risen Lord? How do explain Kateri Tekakwitha, “the lily of the Mohawks?”

Kateri was the daughter of a Mohawk warrior born in upstate New York in 1656. At 4 years old, her mother died of smallpox and the disease attacked Kateri, disfiguring her face. Adopted by her two aunts and her uncle, Kateri converted to Christianity as a teen-ager and was baptized at the age of 20.

Because of her conversion, Kateri faced great hostility from her tribe. Suffering for her faith, Kateri remained firm in her belief that Jesus Christ, crucified and risen, was her lord and savior. She served him faithfully each day as a nurse and teacher until she died at the young age of 24.

Because of her purity of heart and conviction of faith, each year thousands of people visit Kateri’s grave in Auriesville, N.Y. She is the first Native American to be declared blessed by the church and is known as the patron of the environment and ecology.

If Christ was never raised from the dead, and the women who found his tomb empty early on Easter morning said nothing to anyone out of fear, Kateri Tekakwitha would never have converted or been baptized into him. She would not have been raised with him in glory. There would be no communion of saints. There would be no church. There would be no Christmas, no Easter, no Pentecost. There would be no baptism or holy communion. There would be no reason for us to exist as a community of faith. We would all be somewhere else today if Jesus Christ had never been raised and the women had said nothing to anyone out of fear.

So what happened that first Easter morning that shaped the future of this world as we know it?

We know something deep inside Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Salome stirred them to rise on the first Easter

and go to his grave to anoint Jesus' 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 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, a "young man" (some say an angel) told them to tell the other disciples that Jesus was raised from the dead and had gone before them to Galilee. But, according to Mark, the women fled the tomb in astonishment, fear and trembling. They didn't whisper a word of this to anyone. That's how Mark ends. Apparently, even the most faithful and most compassionate of Jesus' followers fall silent when overcome by fear and trembling.

But, this story is unfinished. Mark gives us a gift. The gift the gospel writer gives us is that you and I are called to become the storytellers! We have to figure out how this story ends. We have to figure out how the "good news" gets lived out.

We, the church, wag the tale of resurrection. Moreover, Jesus remains in control – always going before us in new appearances in Galilee, in the world and in our daily lives. We never know where and when we shall see him. We only know that he is loose in the world, turning the world upside down.

As storytellers, we have come full circle, for we end today where we started on Ash Wednesday. And we begin all over again. Today, we resurrect the question **"Who is Jesus?"** Through our answers, we will know him as we meet him in our hearts, in our minds, in our lives of prayer and practice. When we meet him on the streets of Columbus or your town, on the prairies of the Midwest or the mountains of Appalachia, we will know the risen Christ!

First and most important, we the storytellers, need to know that 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. He is living and breathing 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 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 known him. Allow me share a few I have come to know. **As the Incarnation of God, Jesus embodies 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. “His compassion was spontaneous for people and precluded any kind of alienation or artificiality. He lived his life with 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 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 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.

Jesus is 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.

As storytellers, we need to always remember that Jesus didn't just embody truth, compassion, faith, justice and love long ago. He is alive and well today. He is risen in all of us. Through the resurrection of Jesus, we come to know he is alive now! God has vindicated Jesus' crucifixion in Christ's resurrection.

We are God's storytellers. We are the ones God has chosen to tell of Jesus in our times. Before Christianity got a hold 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 2:1, Paul tells us to do everything possible to live a life worthy of Christ throughout time:

“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.

Forty-nine days ago, we opened this sermon series speaking of mosaics in Ravenna, Italy’s Fourth and Fifth century cathedrals. I described mosaics buried in Ravenna dating back as far as the First century of our Christian faith. In these mosaics, Jesus is shown as simple shepherd, with small bone-structure and gentle features. He is not emblazoned with gold and set apart from his people. He is a humble Savior.

In one of the great 21st century cathedrals, Our Lady of Angels in Los Angeles, 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. You will find

Kateri Tekakwitha here. Twelve of Nava's saints are unnamed, symbolizing the twelve apostles. Their visages are drawn from men, women, and children from Los Angeles. They are God's holy ones, chosen and beloved.

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, or 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.

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 Web site www.olacathedral.org). These are the ones who shine God's beauty!

The saints of God are God's story in human form! Tell the story of Jesus. Live the story of Jesus. Be the whole, strong, hopeful human beings God is needing in this world today! Amen.

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