

A sermon delivered by the Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, senior minister at the First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, August 25, 2013, Pentecost 14, Proper 16, dedicated to the innocent victims in Syria who were killed and wounded this week in a nerve gas attack by their government, to the family of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. who lost their dreamer and dad much too young, and to the family of my neighbor, 4-year old Adam Musa, who was killed in a tragic accident on Thursday, and always to the glory of God!

“Jesus is Resurrected Life!”

Jeremiah 1:4-10; Luke 13: 10-17

**(Part IV of V in the Sermon Series
“What a Difference Jesus Makes”)**

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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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Let us consider the Easter story in Mark’s Gospel as a launching point for today’s reflection. Three women (Mary, Jesus’ mother, Salome, Jesus’ Aunt, and Mary Magdalene, Jesus’ dear friend and close disciple) appear at the tomb of Jesus in the just after dawn hours on Easter morning to anoint his beaten, blood-stained and recently deceased body – now less than 36 hours in the grave (although we count three days). Instead of Jesus’ body they find the stone rolled away and the tomb empty – with one huge exception – “a man in a white gown” (we are told) is sitting in the place where Jesus had been laid. He tells them to find their risen Lord in Galilee. Torn between trauma and ecstasy, the women run from the tomb “saying nothing to anyone because they are afraid.” (Mark 16:7)

We know they said something to somebody or we wouldn't be here today. Eventually they tell the others where they might seek and find their risen Lord. With this simple story, Mark's earliest version of Christ's resurrection comes to life. (I invite you to read 14 years of Easter sermons on our church's web site if you want to delve deeply into my beliefs and our beliefs on resurrection).

Similarly, the other Gospel writers tell stories of encounters with the risen Christ by the Garden Tomb, in the Upper Room in Jerusalem with Thomas and the disciples (when Thomas touches his side and hands as proof of that this is his once crucified body), in Galilee by the seaside (when Jesus asks for breakfast on the beach and even helps the fisherman catch what they need and encounters Peter in a reconciliatory exchange) and on the road to Emmaus (where he walks, talks, listens and breaks bread with two disciples and reveals his real presence in the time after his death and following his Easter resurrection. Finally, his Ascension into heaven is seen by many on the Mountain of Ascension by the Sea of Galilee.

All of these Gospel stories speak clearly and vividly to the risen nature of Christ. All these stories I hold as sacred texts uplifting and supporting my beliefs in the physical resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Nevertheless, for many Christians down through the ages, (we who have not seen and yet seek mightily to believe in the Risen Christ), there is a constant wrestling with questions about the Risen Christ and what difference he makes in our lives.

In over 65 comments shared with me over the past several months on the meaning of Jesus in your life, very few of you even mentioned the resurrection of Jesus.

Quite honestly, it is fair to say, that most of you don't put all your marbles in the resurrection bag. You are focused on the life of Jesus over and against his death and resurrection. You are followers of the Lord of life itself!

Rev. Sarah Reed, one of 17 pastors who are members of First Church, a Children's Hospital Chaplain, a clinical pastoral education (CPE) director and our current church moderator writes:

“My faith and life have changed more as a result of Jesus' life than from his death. His examples of being in relationship are ones that I keep in mind as I strive to be in relationship. They are also significant in my work in pastoral education. For example, I want students to leave their CPE experiences thinking about how they may develop a relationship based on love, even when they don't like the other person or have a very different theological perspective than her/him. I ask them to find the holy in the 'holy other.' What is the one square foot of common ground that you share with another person? Through that connection, ministry and relationship become both easier and more meaningful.”

Kathryn Bamberger adds from her reflections these thoughts on Jesus' resurrection:

“The resurrection of Jesus Christ helps me hope for an afterlife free of pain, loss, violence and turmoil. The resurrection gives me hope of an afterlife of beauty, harmony, unity, peace, and wide-open spaces (that must be the Oklahoman in me to see it that way.)”

I really like that last part!

Marcus Borg writing on Easter in his new book *Speaking Christian* (taken from Chapter 9) reflects on the different **“what happened”** approaches taken in Christian faith to the resurrection accounts found in Mark, Matthew, Luke and John. Dr. Borg contends that the **“meaning”** of the resurrection is more important than the physical realities of the resurrection. Many of us would say, “Amen!” the others “What?”

Dr. Borg points out that there are two primary **“meanings”** that emerge in the Gospels and the rest of the New Testament.

First, Jesus Lives. Second, Jesus is Lord.

“Jesus Lives” means that Jesus is not just a figure from the past, but a presence of God that continues right up to this present moment. The first three weeks of your reflections have all pointed to the living reality and centrality of a “Living Jesus” in your lives of faith. His spirit is alive and well in your hearts, minds and mystical encounters which aligns with people down through the ages. Surveys suggest that about half of surviving spouses have had at least one vivid encounter with their deceased loved one. (I believe the number is actually higher because folks won’t share their stories quite often for fear that others may think they have lost their minds - which is not the case). This has raised for people through time the question, “*Are they somehow still alive?*” It certainly can feel that way. Nevertheless, this doesn’t lead the survivors to conclude, “My beloved is Lord.” Of course not.

But, with Jesus, we feel his living presence and yet, we proclaim that he is “Lord of our lives” - placing him in a position of authority and power over all other gods of our lives. He is (as one of my children used to say), “The boss of us.” This places his dominion over heaven and earth; all the empires and powers of this world; and over our little gods of material things which too often dominate our realities.

In this regard, “**meaning**” trumps the “**What really happened**” every time. The “factuality” of the empty tomb doesn’t really matter in this view of the Risen One. It is not about finding the bones of Jesus (as some are still seeking to do to prove he never rose from the tomb). Instead it is about following the way of Jesus in life, in death and beyond his grave!

If we approach the resurrection this way, Jesus’ rising from the dead has the power of metaphor and parable. In other words, the powers of this world can’t kill Jesus. They can’t seal him in a tomb. They can’t make him go away by hanging him on a cross on a Friday morning in the year 30 AD. He is loose in the world! He is a force for love, for good, for peace, for nonviolence, for grace, for healing that can never be stopped. He is a flame that can never be extinguished. He is alive!

This spirit is captured well in a new song by Bruce Springsteen. In *We Are Alive*, Bruce writes:

*There is a cross up yonder up on Calvary Hill
There is a slip of blood on a silver knife
There is a graveyard kid down below
Where at night did come to life
And above the stars, they crackle in fire
A dead man's moon throws seven rings
Well, we put our ears to the cold grave stones
This is the song they'd sing*

*We are alive
And though our bodies lie alone here in the dark
Our spirits rise to carry the fire and light the spark
To stand shoulder to shoulder and heart to heart*

Going on, Bruce lifts up the memories of martyrs down through the ages who have risen and called us to “Carry the fire and light the spark.”

*A voice cried out, I was killed in Maryland in 1877
When the railroad workers made their stand
Well, I was killed in 1963 one Sunday morning in Birmingham
Well, I died last year crossing the southern Desert
My children left behind in San Pablo
Well they left our bodies here to rot
Oh please let them know*

*We are alive
Oh, and though we lie alone here in the dark
Our souls will rise to carry the fire and light the spark
To fight shoulder to shoulder and heart to heart*

Coming back from Chicago the other day, I heard an hour and half of news from the BBC coming out of the Middle East from Syria, Egypt and Lebanon. The stories coming out of Syria, the government attacks on their own people with nerve gas bombings in the suburbs of Damascus killing well over a 1,000 people and

seriously injuring thousands of others, the refugees of war – over a million children alone from Syria going every which way – to Jordan, to Lebanon, to Turkey. In addition, more stories were coming out of Egypt of the killing there (including one report in which a friend of mine was shot, wounded and interviewed on the BBC).

Interwoven in each story of civil war and despair being wrought in these nations of the Middle East were stories of the relief agencies caring for the victims – the International Red Cross, Save the Children, and House of Hope. And I would add the United Church of Christ is present in Middle East as well. My cousin Andrew Long-Higgins is in Lebanon right now where suicide bombs are exploding in Tripoli and Beirut. Every single relief agency named in the story for doing works of compassionate care was Christian. Caring for the millions of victims of war, Christian doctors, nurses and humanitarian relief workers were risking their own lives to care for the wounded, dead, dying and refugees of war.

When asked about “the contradiction” of serving as a Christian in predominately Muslim countries, one nurse said, *“There is no contradiction. Jesus is alive for me. He calls me into the holy land that he called home to care for my brothers and sisters in need. For Jesus, we are all his brothers and sisters. No contradiction at all.”*

You see, I believe Jesus is alive! This is the true meaning of the Resurrection! The Resurrected Christ is alive and well in the character, the Spirit, the nerve and the fiber of his faithful followers. During this week, in which we remember the 50th anniversary of the March on Washington (which happened on a Wednesday, August 28, 1963), we would do well to keep alive the dream of freedom that the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. infused into the soul of America 50 years ago this week.

One of the greatest followers of the Risen Christ laid down his life for our nation. Standing on the steps of Lincoln’s Memorial – another great American who laid down his life for this nation on Good Friday, no less, 50 years this Wednesday, Dr. King invoked these words of freedom’s cry:

*When we allow freedom to ring, when we let it ring
From every city and every hamlet, from every state **and**
Every city, we will be able to speed up that day **when**
All of God's children, black men and white men, Jews **and**
Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics, will be able to join
Hands and sing **in the words** of the old Negro spiritual,
"Free at last, Free at last, Great God almighty, we are free at last."*

With this spirit, the meaning of Jesus' resurrection will live forever. May we be part of the flourishing spirit of the living God going out into the world – loose and free, alive and well, building relationships and shining God's light in a world with too much darkness. Living in the faith of the risen Christ, we will be free at last! Amen.

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