

“Forgiven and Risen”

Isaiah 65:17-25, Acts 10:34-43, John 20:1-8

Part VIII of VIII in the Lenten sermon series, “Forgiveness”

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From the Pulpit

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“Forgiven and Risen”

Matthew 21:1-11

An Easter Meditation delivered by The Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens, Senior Minister, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, Easter Sunday, April 9, 2023, dedicated to Jill Jeffrey Kingsley as she approaches 90 years young, to our Lenten “Forgiveness” preachers Rev. Amanda Conley, Rev. John Aeschbury, Rev. Sarah Reed, Rev. Larry Miller, and Rev. Joanna Samuelson, to Pope Francis I who for ten years has faithfully led the Roman Catholic Church and inspired all Christians everywhere to live fully into our faith as followers of the Risen Christ, and to all the children everywhere that we may see them and dedicate our lives to giving them a better world and always to the glory of God!

You all look beautiful today. It is such a blessing to be together for Easter 2023 and your presence makes this day so special. Thank you for being here today. Thank you also for your beautiful Easter flowers, musical gifts, and dedications. I want to share something. I am wearing a mask to honor my wife’s request as she faces a host of immune challenges. I also am wearing my mask for you and especially anyone here today for whom that is helpful. I want to thank my colleagues, our members, friends – Rev. Amanda Conley, Rev. John Aeschbury, Rev. Sarah Reed, Rev. Larry Miller, and Rev. Joanna Samuelson for preaching powerful sermons on Forgiveness throughout Lent.

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

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Her name was Mary. She came from a small fishing town named Magdala. Through time, we have come to know her as Mary of Magdala or Mary Magdalene – sometimes Magdalene or Madeline. Mary was the follower of Jesus who listened to him, learned from him, understood him, and stood by him. Mary was, in my belief, the top apostle and also the apostle to the apostles.

Mary always showed up. She was a true rock in the Gospel story. Since Jesus had come into her life, Mary was healed, forgiven, and transformed. Throughout his ministry, she was there. When he was arrested and tried (in a mockery of a trial), she was there. Through the entire gruesome and gory crucifixion, she was at the foot of the cross. She always showed up.

And on this day of Resurrection, John's Gospel tells us that Mary shows up once again. She goes to the garden tomb **alone** intending to care for the corpse of her friend, her rabbi. What she finds is an altogether different matter.

Mary arrives and finds the huge stone in front of the tomb rolled away. Without hesitation, she runs to tell Peter and John what has happened. They run and find the tomb empty, say nothing to each other and simply "return to their homes." Mary comes back and stands alone weeping outside the tomb. In time, she looks in the tomb and sees two angels (neither of which were seen by Peter and

John). The angels are seated where Jesus' head and feet had been laid. She asks the angels where Jesus is. They do not answer (which is kind of strange in the Bible where angels always seem to be talking).

Then she turns and looks at the Risen Christ but doesn't really "see" him. She speaks to him as though he were the gardener asking him to show her where Jesus' body is. Then she hears his voice, "*Mary.*" Through her tears, she now recognizes him, crying out, "*Rabbouni,*" – "teacher." After a few more words, he ascends to God and she runs to tell the others, "***I have seen the Lord!***"

It is through her tears and witness of Mary that the impossible becomes real – **Jesus Christ is Risen! He is Alive – AGAIN!**

There will be eleven more appearances of the Risen Christ across the four gospel stories in the days and weeks to come. He appears to as few as two and as many as 500 people before his final ascension to God. But Mary is the first witness to the resurrection – although I need to say, that in the gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke, Mary is joined by other women at the tomb. Only women show up – another sermon for the rest of these women for another Easter.

The evidence supports this truth – Mary is the best apostle of Jesus in the Gospels. She is loyal. She is present. She listens. She follows. She is supportive. She is constantly growing and evolving as a person of faith, and she never gives up on Jesus and his vision and who he is as her teacher, her rabbi, her "*Rabbouni.*"

But thanks to another Easter sermon delivered by Pope Gregory I in 591 AD, a twisted, misogynistic, judgmental version of St. Mary Magdalene appears. He calls her a prostitute who was saved by Jesus. He conflates several stories into one and – with no evidence

whatsoever – throws shade on St. Mary Magdalene. I don't know how many sermons I have heard, or people who have said, “she was a redeemed prostitute.” NO, SHE WASN'T! Mary Magdalene was a magnificent woman of God who followed Jesus Christ! That is all.

Not only is this twisted narrative about her wrong, it also damages her place in our Gospel story for the next 1400 years. Because Pope Gregory I was seen as a great scholar, a doctor of the church, his words became a new kind of Gospel truth!

Anyone who drank Gregory's 6th Century Kool-Aid, was given the freedom to run with his new narrative. This narrative unleashed fictional characterizations of Mary which declared her Jesus' wife and more. And for centuries, anyone who questioned the new narrative was questioned themselves.

For women then – as for women through the generations – words like “prostitute, whore, and wayward woman” get tossed around lightly and their damage is always devastating. Women are not only denigrated with such hatefulness, they also become marginalized and invisible, so much so, that men feel like they can make rules, pass laws and even pronounce judgements that further diminish women and take away a woman's right to decide about her own body, her own life and her own understanding about the sanctity of life.

Do see how this works? It begins when somebody makes something up about somebody else and the rumors, lies and half-truths spread as this new false or conflated narrative replaces the truth. It happened to Jesus. It happened to Mary, the woman who first encountered our Risen Christ. If people can get away with this with Jesus and with Mary Magdalene, they can get away with it with anybody, anywhere,

any time. It may have happened to you or someone you know and love. Others have lied about them and placed denigrating labels on them that spread and wounded them deeply. It can happen to any of us. The lies that are spread in one generation may take many generations to repair – literally.

Beyond individuals, and women, this has happened to whole tribes, nationalities, ethnic groups, and religious groups of people. It has happened to African Americans as they were enslaved, and the narrative created by white folks proclaimed that they were happy.

Nevertheless, and God is always in the “nevertheless,” people rise. They overcome twisted narratives and set the story right. It happened for Jesus as he rose from the grave. It happened to Mary Magdalene, too. In recent years, new popes, new scholars, and new people of faith have risen to reclaim St. Mary Magdalene and restore her to her rightful place. Thanks be to God for Mary Magdalene and all who have fought to restore her to her rightful and powerful place in our Easter Narrative – first witness to the Resurrection! Top Apostle! Top Saint of the Church!

Pope Francis I can fix this now and forever. He should rename the Vatican basilica – St. Mary Magdalene Basilica – or at least St. Mary Magdalene and St. Peter’s Basilica! Then he can see to it, that in the spirit of Mary, women are called to ordination as priests – and soon after as bishops, cardinals – and yes popes. In our tradition, we have now been ordaining women for 170 years. It’s time for Rome to catch up with us. As we embrace Mary Magdalene in all her grace and love, we ask God to forgive Gregory for his transgressions delivered in his Easter Sermon 1432 years ago today.

Speaking of St. Peter, we are not done yet. Acts 10:34-43 is calling to us to deal with Peter as well this morning. Peter – who abandoned Jesus, who denied he even knew him, who left him to die on the cross and hid during the whole ordeal and then ran from the empty tomb back to his house – yes – this Peter – sometime after Christ’s ascension, Peter is with Cornelius, the Roman Centurion and makes a faith proclamation before baptizing Cornelius, his wife, and children.

He says, “**Now I get it!** *It’s God’s own truth, nothing could be plainer: God plays no favorites! It makes no difference who you are or where you’re from – if you want God and are ready to do as he says, the door is open*” (Acts 10:34-35, *The Message*, Eugene Peterson). Some of us, like our beloved Peter, are slow learners. It takes us a while to see our sins and failings and admit them. But we can count on God, as God has always done, to love a repentant sinner back into the fullness of grace and the community of forgiveness.

When Peter finally gets it right, his words are radically transformational words. God shows NO Partiality! God plays no favorites. Simply translated – God loves and accepts everyone! It does not matter to God where you are from or what you are carrying; it doesn’t matter to God what someone said about you or even what things you say about yourself – good or bad! – God wants to be in relationship with you and loves you! God wants you. If you want God, the door is open.

Whether you are Mary Magdalene – on the scene, servant of the Lord, and 2,000 years later having to reclaim your rightful place as the first witness of Christ’s resurrection or you are Peter, risen to new life after working through your issues of denial and abandonment of your friend, leader, and savior. There is redemption in forgiveness.

You see, **Forgiveness** is at the heart of all of this. Resurrection faith is all about forgiveness and redemption. We have spent the last 46 days and nights focused on Forgiveness. Here we are on Easter with Forgiveness embracing Resurrection – face-to-face.

The heart of our Christian faith is Forgiveness. Forgiveness is the greatest and hardest work any one of us will do in our lifetime. In daily working toward forgiveness, remember Dietrich Bonhoeffer's words: ***“Christianity IS forgiveness; nothing more and nothing less.”***

Each of us has room to grow in living fully into forgiveness. But, on this day of Resurrection, when we proclaim that God raises God's son from death to new life, we must believe that if God will do this for Jesus, God will do it for us, too! God will raise each of us to new life – forgiven and redeemed.

No matter when it happens or how it happens, Forgiveness wants to move us forward to a new day. Let go. Let God.

Forgiving, Forgiven, Risen!

In the power of the Holy Spirit and the embracing love of the Risen Christ – let's move forward. Amen.

