

“Jesus: Rising Now and Forevermore”

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

IX of IX in the Sermon Series “Jesus”
Jeffrey Window panel “The Ascended Christ”

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From the Pulpit

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An Easter meditation delivered by The Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens, Senior Minister, First Congregational UCC, Columbus, Ohio, Easter Sunday, March 31, 2024, dedicated in thanksgiving to all the women, men, children and youth who shared their love, nurture, care and support for my ministry through the past 39 years and to Katie Geis Deliman on her birthday and always to the glory of God!

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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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Dr. Albert Schweitzer penned these words about Jesus long ago in *The Quest for the Historical Jesus* (1909):

He comes to us as One unknown, without a name, as of old, by the lakeside, He came to those folks who knew Him not. He speaks to us the same words: “Follow thou me!” and sets us to the tasks which He has to fulfill for our time. He commands. And to those who obey Him, whether they be wise or simple, He will reveal himself in the toils, the conflicts, the sufferings which they shall passthrough in His fellowship, and, as an ineffable mystery, they shall learn in their own experience Who He is.”

Who is Jesus to you? How has he revealed himself to you in the toils, the conflicts and the suffering you have passed through?

On Good Friday, I received a text from my friend, Sr. Barb, a Dominican Sister of Peace. She wrote: *“I met Jesus yesterday when I washed the feet of our infirmity sisters and I saw their eyes light up. His light was shining through them.”* She met Jesus washing the feet of her beloved sisters.

I have met him, too. I have met him in the eyes of newborns who are delivering heaven to earth and in the eyes of those on their final ascent from earth to heaven. I have met him sitting with the children at 9am or here on the steps with the children each Sunday morning at 11am. I have met him peeking through the eyes of Confirmands who have stories to tell, but often struggle to give voice to their lives as they are turning from childhood to young adulthood. I have met him in the Deacons who show up and share their love with all of us each Sunday morning. I have met him in your homes, by your hospital bedsides in those moments when you have faced the agony of your souls and you have been vulnerable as you open yourself in your hurt. I see him here in your eyes, in this room, as we are carried away with the bliss and beauty of music, prayers, and more.

I believe you have met him too – *in the toils, the conflicts and the suffering you pass through* – in this experience we call life. Only you can say.

On the first Easter – the three women who knew Jesus best – rose before sunrise in the midst of their deep pain and suffering and went to his tomb. These three women came in their grief and their deep need to connect with Jesus one last time. They came to wash and anoint his dead body.

Consider very carefully who these three Easter women were.

Mary, the Mother of James is Jesus’ mother! You know her. She gave birth to Jesus in Bethlehem. She was a young teenage mom, the woman who gave us the Magnificat glorifying God and praising God’s justice and presence for the poor, now only 47 years old and faithful to her son beyond belief, Mother Mary is there.

Salome was Mary's sister, Jesus' aunt. Many believe she was present at Jesus' birth and assisted the midwife. She NEVER abandoned her sister or nephew and watched him grow into the greatest rabbi and healer of all the ages. Auntie Salome is there.

And Mary Magdalene. Who Jesus loved back into life only a few years before. Mary – who was by Jesus' side through everything he faced. She was more faithful than Peter or any of the 12 apostles. I call her “The First TRUE Apostle.” Mary Magdalene is there.

These three women are the unmovable, incorruptible, solid bedrock forming the foundation of our faith. Nothing ever kept them from the side of Jesus. Nothing would ever separate them from the love of God they came to know in Christ Jesus. And yet, the Gospel of Mark ends with the women leaving the empty tomb, he writes: **“they fled and said nothing to anyone because they were afraid.”**

Let's be honest, this ending doesn't make any sense. The ending is so stupid that several centuries later some unknown “Exegetes” (translated – editors who change the end of poorly written stories) cut and pasted a whole new ending on Mark's gospel – which made it even worse. Did these guys seriously believe that no one would notice?

If there is anything we can say and testify to this morning it is that Mary the Mother of Jesus, Salome, and Mary Magdalene **said something to someone because they were NOT AFRAID.**

Here's what I think. I think Mark was afraid. I also believe he was upset that women got the credit for witnessing Christ's resurrection and leading the followers of Jesus to become the greatest movement of believers in God that ever existed. Mark was afraid. Not Mary, Mary, and Salome. It was Mark's issue not theirs.

Mark was not the first man (nor will he be the last) to question women's discovery and witness to truth and justice. Am I right? I think Mark was

slower to accept their words. But, men are often slower than women in picking things up. If you need more evidence of this, turn to our reading from Acts 10:34-43.

It takes Peter quite a while to understand the powerful, inclusive love of God in Jesus Christ. Peter finally gets it when the Centurion comes to him to be baptized along with his family. This happens long after Christ's ascension and well after Pentecost. Peter actually says, "*Now I get it! (HIS WORDS NOT MINE!). 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).

Whether you are a fast learner like the women or a slow learner like Peter, it's okay. Some of us are quicker and some slower to see our failings, and shortcomings, and admit them. No matter which speed we work on, 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. **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 love you! God wants you. If you want God, the door is open.

Now back to those fast learning women. We must admit this – if the women had actually said nothing to say to anyone out of fear, our faith would be a farce. There would be no church. There would be no Christmas, no Easter, no Pentecost. There would be no baptism or holy communion.

Our cathedral of grace would not exist. There would be no communities of faith in Jesus. Perhaps we would have gathered today to celebrate some beautiful pagan festival of Spring replete with eggs, jellybeans, peeps, and

chocolate bunnies if Jesus Christ had never been raised and the women had said nothing to anyone out of fear... (which wouldn't have been a bad thing). But we wouldn't have a church.

The reason we are here today is the powerful witness of three women to the resurrection of Jesus Christ. **They were as they always were** – courageous, strong, forthright, vocal and FEARLESS. When the Peter and the disciples were fleeing from Jesus' side in his time of trial and death, the women were there. While the men ran away, the women moved closer Jesus. They stuck with him.

We know something deep inside the three women stirred them to rise on the first Easter and go to Jesus of Nazareth's grave to anoint his dead body. They loved Jesus. They knew Jesus was the son of God. HE was their Messiah. That's what got them up and moving.

They had watched Jesus die on the cross. Their only fear – seeing the mangled, beaten and bloodied dead body of Jesus once again – was blown away by their experience of the empty tomb. The “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.

If they were silent, they were only silent for a second. God was setting the story of his son into a whole new gear. God unleashed the Holy Spirit and set Jesus free to keep his commandment of Love alive and growing. The Spirit of God was loose in the world – and absolutely nothing can stop the Holy Spirit – although other darker spirits try to stop it all the time.

We know that from our own times. The times we are living in feed off of anxiety and hopelessness. Like a predator looking for weakness in its prey, there is an energy in our world today that seeks to cut down and destroy the goodness and resilience of others.

But, Easter people – Rise!

And The truth is – You can't stop the Holy Spirit. You can't kill the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is our daily hope in combating the evils of this world.

Think of this way – The unsettled ending of Mark is God's way of allowing us into this and complete story. Those three women multiplied through the centuries. In our time I have known many women – like Rock Stars of our faith – who by mentioning one name, bring a smile to your face and starts a fire in your bones: Arlene, Dorothy, Marguerite, Ruth, Lillian, Rosa, Barbara, Elizabeth, Betsy, Lola, Joan, Josephine, Ethel, Septima, Blanche, Maya, Ruby, Fannie Lou, Coretta, Ella, Ruth, Odessa, Eleanor and Esther. The list goes on!

When fire meets joy and the Holy Spirit is loose, watch out for women.

There will be no stopping any of us with the Holy Spirit loose and the wonder women of faith leading us.

Our Risen Savior is not done with us. And we are not done either.

Paraphrasing Dr. Schweitzer, Jesus is speaking to us the same words he used so long ago: **“Follow me!”** He will set us to the tasks which He has to fulfill for our time. And we shall know him. And we shall learn in our own experience “Who He is.”

Alleluia! Amen.

