

“He Is Risen”

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First Presbyterian Church of Kirkwood**

**Sunday, April 16, 2017
Easter Sunday**

Readings from Scripture: Jeremiah 31:1-6 and John 20:1-18

At that time, says the Lord, I will be the God of all the families of Israel, and they shall be my people.

Thus says the Lord:

*The people who survived the sword
found grace in the wilderness;
when Israel sought for rest,*

*the Lord appeared to him from far away.
I have loved you with an everlasting love;
therefore I have continued my faithfulness to you.*

*Again I will build you, and you shall be built,
O virgin Israel!*

*Again you shall take your tambourines,
and go forth in the dance of the merry-makers.*

*Again you shall plant vineyards
on the mountains of Samaria;
the planters shall plant,
and shall enjoy the fruit.*

*For there shall be a day when sentinels will call
in the hill country of Ephraim:*

*‘Come, let us go up to Zion,
to the Lord our God.’*

Jeremiah 31:1-6

Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb. So she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, ‘They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him.’ Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went towards the tomb. The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying

there, but he did not go in. Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there, and the cloth that had been on Jesus' head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself. Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead. Then the disciples returned to their homes.

But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb; and she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet. They said to her, 'Woman, why are you weeping?' She said to them, 'They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him.' When she had said this, she turned round and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to her, 'Woman, why are you weeping? For whom are you looking?' Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, 'Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away.' Jesus said to her, 'Mary!' She turned and said to him in Hebrew, 'Rabbouni!' (which means Teacher). Jesus said to her, 'Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, "I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God."' Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, 'I have seen the Lord'; and she told them that he had said these things to her.

John 20:1-18

Let us pray. Gracious and loving God, we open our hearts, our minds, our imaginations and our faith to you on this, our most sacred day. I ask that you would take the words and images, the worries and joys that each of us carry within, the words that we've offered in song and in prayer, the words that we have heard read from the prophet and the gospel, and the words that you have laid upon my heart this morning to share. Touch, bless and transform all of these that they might become the living word of Jesus Christ, and that that word would do its work within us, among us, between us and through us so that the mission and ministry of Christ might continue through all that we do and all that we say. We ask this in Christ's faithful name. Amen.

Last Thursday night we had a Maundy Thursday celebration with a supper out in the Gathering Space and then a nice service of Tenebrae, where we had readings and the extinguishing of candles in the Chapel. It's one of the special services because it is very quiet and I love that in the middle of all the busyness of Holy Week there is a time to get really quiet and to settle down. After that service on my way out to the parking lot, I stopped and sat right in the corner of the cross aisle back there and had the privilege of listening to the choir and the brass as they practiced for this morning. I sat there by myself for I don't know how long, just letting the music kind of wash over me and through me. At one point I found myself pulling out a legal pad and starting to take notes, for the images that the music evoked in me and the energy that was in the room was the image of someone like a cheerleader at a football game with one of those enormous flags, where the standard bent back and they are running around and they are whipping it to and fro and I felt like the flag that we are going to wave today on Easter Sunday is the flag of life. That there is a flag that we can plant as Christians in the world and say we know what it means to have eternal life. And they kept singing and I kept thinking about someone running around, to and fro, and I thought, wouldn't it be great to have that kind of confidence that we could wave that flag in all that we do and in all that we say?

I had that image in my head from Thursday night as I went to prepare on Friday morning. I ran across a blog from someone whose job title is "Minister of Online Engagement". I thought, man, I want that kind of job title, "Minister of Hip Online Cool Engagement" but that's not me. I get it. The blog started first with a picture and it was a seed. It was green and had a little shoot of

new life coming out of it and then these words: “A fresh start. A new beginning. New life. Each spring we look around and we see signs of new life all around us, yet many of us feel like—eh—it's not for us. We stuck in perpetual winter. Are you craving more? Do you want something better? A fresh start? A new beginning? New life? Why, God's grace is for you!” And as I read it in these staccato sentences, I thought, “I'd better hide my credit card. He's going to want me to buy something at the end.” But for a lot of Christians, today is about waving the flag, that Jesus is resurrected from the dead. And while I believe that that power is available to each of us, if we have that sense of what Easter is, I believe that we don't do justice to the biblical story. Because the biblical story is not about waving a flag, it's about something else.

In anticipation for preaching this sermon, one of the questions I had is what would be a contemporary image of the tomb with the stone rolled away? As I was wondering about that, I found myself driving down Manchester and I thought, I know. I'm going to go to Bopp Chapel and see what a casket really looks like. And so unannounced, I pull in to the parking lot and I walk through the door and two seconds later a young man comes around the corner. “Oh, how may I help you, Sir? Are you here about a loved one?” And I said, “Oh, no. I just want to see an empty casket.” He's like, “What?” And I said, “Wait a minute. Is Chip here?” Chip is someone that Karen and I work with all the time. And he's like, “Yes, he is. Let me go get him.” So Chip walks around the corner and he's like, “David, you want to do what?” And I said, “Chip, I realize I've never seen an empty casket. In my job I've seen a lot, but I've never seen an empty one.” And he's like, “All right, come on. Let's get on the elevator.” So he takes me downstairs to the fancy room that has quarter caskets of every type, from the most expensive to the least expensive. You get to see about a foot of one side, two feet of the other and the top. They are all laid out on the wall and he's like, “You could have brass, you could have metal, you could have....” I said, “No, no, no. Chip, you don't understand. I want to see an empty one—the whole thing. I want to bang on it. I want to feel what it feels like inside. I want to get the whole picture, so that when I preach, there is some sense of integrity about it.” And he's like, “Well, okay.” Then he walks out the door towards the underground parking lot. He said, “Do you have any preference, wood, or metal or anything.” And I said, “Yes. Please just make sure it's empty.”

He wheels in one of the most stunningly beautiful mahogany caskets I've ever seen. It was gorgeous. I got to lift the handles and rattle it around, knock on it to see how hollow it sounded and then I'm like, “Okay, I want to open it up and see what it's like on the inside.” He stopped and looked at me. He said, “Wait a minute. I gotta go get the key.” I'm like, “Chip, it's a casket.” He said, “Yes, I know. Let me go get the key.” So he goes into some room, he comes back with a giant Allen wrench with a huge metal handle and he goes up to the casket and he sticks it in and he turns it and it snaps and he opens the top part. And then he does the same at the bottom. I kept standing there thinking to myself, why on earth would they need to lock the door to a casket? And how amazing it would be to have the key.

How many times do we find ourselves in situations where we are struggling and we're not sure what's going to happen, we are unaware of God's presence and we wish we could do it ourselves? The church often tells you if you just had a little more faith, if you just waved that flag a little higher, you could help yourself get better. But I learned at Bopp it takes someone else with a key to unlock you from those places of death. And what I think is amazing is that I believe that I have found the key in the scriptures. The key is not have more faith but the key for us to have the kind of faith we want and to be the kind of people that Christ wants us to be is to be more and more like Mary, who stands firm in the place of death and weeps. The disciples are running around to and fro, trying to figure out what did they do with Jesus, where is he, what's happening? And

Mary just stands there in the pain, in the grief, in the heartache. She stands there long enough to be found by Christ. So rather than having just a little more faith, maybe for us to be a people of Easter we need to have the courage to stay in those darker places that we don't want to be in. We need to trust the psalmist that Yea, though we walk through the valley of the shadow of death, we have a presence that goes with us. I believe that's what Mary is demonstrating for each of us. We do not find Christ, Christ finds us.

Years ago I was at a conference in Baltimore and one of the things that I loved to do there and here and everywhere is to wake up early with a cup of coffee as the sun is rising. The conference center has beautiful grounds and there is this big valley and kind of across the field, way out there is the horizon, and you can sit in benches and just watch the sun rise. Morning after morning I found myself sitting there and I noticed that one of my colleagues in the ministry was there as well. She sat a couple of benches away, a pastor from Baltimore. About the third or fourth day, I went over and said, "Do you mind if I sit with you." And she said, "No." I'd known a little bit about her from our time in the gathering. She was not Presbyterian. She was extremely progressive and she was committed to contemplative practices. The church she served was in the city of Baltimore and faced some significant struggles.

One morning as we were sitting on the bench, we were talking about faith and prayer and icons and Jesus and the rising sun and all this stuff, and I happened to ask sort of out of the blue, "Have you ever seen the resurrection?" I was almost kidding as I asked it. But without missing a beat, she swung her face towards mine and said, "Yes." And she told me this story. She told me that there was a family in her church, four people—a devout mother, an earnest father, a dutiful son, and then a prodigal daughter named Amy. She was a late teenager, ran away from home. They had heard rumors she was into drugs and other kinds of trouble. They didn't know just what was going on. The pastor had gotten to know the family, as the mother and father scheduled appointments to speak with her about what they could do to help their daughter, besides prayer. Over the course of that time, my pastor friend learned that the daughter had run away and that the mother and father had spent countless hours driving around in the streets of Baltimore looking for her but to no avail. They met with her regularly to try to figure out what to do and to not go crazy from fear and grief.

My friend told me that after a year or so of spending time with this family, she was standing in the mother's bedroom. The mother was now in hospice care, dying of cancer, unconscious and lying in her bed. The husband was sitting in a chair next to his wife, holding her hand and my friend was standing in the corner, silently offering a prayer, not knowing exactly what to do, but aware that a memorial service was not very far away. Then she said at one point, completely unexpected, the silhouette of a young woman was standing in the doorway almost like a ghost, and she said, "Daddy." The husband turned slowly and said, "Amy?" with a question in his voice, trembling. The pastor said the two of them then just crashed together, crying and hugging. I'm bawling like a baby standing in the corner and I'm watching this moment of holiness as they look at each other, trying to untangle themselves. Both then go to the side of the bed together. Later on, she said, as I was driving back to church wiping the tears off of my face, I thought to myself, "That's resurrection."

I sat there on the bench for a while in silence, not sure what to say. I did not want to interrupt the beauty of that moment. Then I blurted out, "That husband's a lot like Mary Magdalene lingering at the tomb." And my friend responded, "Yeah, and who knew Jesus would show up as a 20-year-old, drug-addicted runaway and save her father."

Brothers and sisters, I want to invite each of us on this Easter Sunday where we celebrate the greatest promise that God has for us and for all people, to have the courage to stand firm, like Mary, in those places of death and darkness so that we, too, like her, might be found by the living Christ and be able to say, "I have seen the Lord." Amen.