

## ***Rocks in the Garden***

A Morning Message for Worship on Easter Sunday  
United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT  
March 27, 2016  
Text: John 20:1-18

Easter Sunday is one of the most intimidating, if not *the* most intimidating Sunday of the year to be a preacher. I am not saying all preachers in Christian churches feel that way, but I certainly do and I think a lot of my colleagues do too. That's because on this Sunday, more than any other, we are seen as the experts on the most baffling, confusing and perhaps downright crazy aspects of Christianity – the Resurrected Jesus. On this Sunday, we preachers are asked to explain the unexplainable. How is it that a gentle, God-loving man is murdered by an evil empire aided and abetted by some of the very people Jesus had come to minister to? Why is this horrific act considered to be something “good” for Christ's followers? And the biggest question of all – what's up with the empty tomb and resurrected Jesus? These are the questions confronting Christian preachers on this day and none of them are easy to answer. Nor should they be.

After all, Jesus, a healer and teacher did nothing more than preach justice for all, God's realm coming on earth where the poor and the powerless would be lifted above the powerful and the greedy – both concepts straight out of the Hebrew Scriptures. Nothing new in his message. But how Jesus taught it, how he

interacted with people, how he embodied God's love for the people – that's what was new. And it brought him to a horrible death on a cross surrounded by criminals. This fact confounded people two thousand years ago when it happened and it confounds us still.

The thing is, though, this is not the end of the story. It's also where the story goes into that realm of the unexplainable. Jesus dies on the cross and is placed in a garden tomb, just as the Jewish Sabbath was beginning on Friday evening. This fact is important to remember since Jesus, and all of his followers at this point in time, were Jews. Jesus had to be buried so quickly that there was no time to properly anoint his body but he is wrapped in grave clothes with the customary handkerchief-like cloth placed over his bruised and bloody face. Then the tomb entrance is sealed shut with a rock. Darkness falls on Friday. Saturday dawns, the day unfolds as any other, and darkness falls once again. We can imagine Jesus' followers hunkered down together someplace on that unbelievably long and painful Sabbath. Perhaps they were in that upper room where just two days earlier they had enjoyed the Passover with Jesus. Now they just huddled together, overcome with grief and confusion about how things had changed course so fast. Jesus was dead and buried. They were terrified the same thing could happen to them. What should they do? They just didn't know. In that awful numbness that always

follows the unexpected death of a loved one, all they could do was wait for inspiration about what they should do next.

Finally, dawn on Sunday morning is approaching. Mary Magdalene couldn't just sit around anymore. She had to do something. So she followed her heart to the tomb where she knew Jesus' body lay. Perhaps she was going with the hopes of doing some of the preparation of the body there hadn't been time for on Friday. The other gospels hint at this but John's Gospel which we read this morning doesn't make that assumption. John simply acknowledges that Mary Magdalene went to the tomb while it was still dark. When she arrived at the tomb there was just enough daylight that could see the stone had been removed from the tomb. She was so shocked and frightened that she just turned around and ran back to town to get the disciples. Peter and the other disciple, identified only as the one whom Jesus loved, run back to the tomb. The other disciple beat Peter to the tomb and looks in, but doesn't go in. Peter does go in as soon as he gets there and finds the grave clothes lying there and the cloth which had been on Jesus' face rolled up and place separately from the shroud which had covered the body. By now, the other disciple has found the courage to go in. The text is very specific that the other disciple believed Jesus had been resurrected in that first moment. But not Peter. Then they both just left.

But Mary Magdalene didn't. She stood in the garden weeping. She finds the courage to look into the tomb at last and when she does, she sees not grave clothes but two angels who offer her no words of comfort or explanation. They only ask her why she is weeping. She doesn't answer them but instead asks a question – where have they taken Jesus' body, she wants to know. They don't answer her so she turns and leaves the tomb, going out into the garden once more where she encounters someone she assumes is the gardener. He too asks why she is weeping. She responds with her same question but this time she gets an answer. "Mary!" Jesus says. And suddenly Mary recognizes that it is Jesus and he is no longer dead. She reaches for him but he tells her she can't hold on to him, an interesting response. He says something about being not yet ascended to God and then he tells her to go and tell the disciples what she has seen and heard from him. And she does.

So, this is the crazy story I am supposed to make comprehensible to you because I am the expert on this stuff. Well, the truth is, I'm no more of an expert on this than any of you. I've undoubtedly done more reading about it, more pondering of it, more wondering about it than most of you. But that just makes me more of a biblical scholar than you. It doesn't make me an expert because the only expert in this whole situation is Jesus. Only Jesus knows what happened in that tomb as

Saturday night slowly became Sunday morning. Well, Jesus and God know. We don't and we never will. That moment – whatever it contained, whatever transpired, whatever it was or wasn't – is between Jesus and God. And it will always be.

We enter the story in the same way Mary and Peter and the Beloved Disciple do – hearing the story and finding ourselves standing outside that empty tomb wondering what the heck happened. And their reactions pretty well sum up the range of reactions we have to the whole situation. Peter says nothing when he sees the empty tomb and the folded grave clothes and we don't know what he thought when Mary ran back with her story of talking with the resurrected Jesus. Obviously at some point, Peter decided he did believe because he went on to become the greatest of the apostles performing miracles and teaching as Jesus had done. But this was not an immediate thing. It took time. Mary was confused by the empty tomb, still thinking someone had stolen Jesus' body. It was only after Jesus called her by name that she realized he was not dead, but alive once more. Pretty hard to do otherwise when he was staring her in the face and calling her by name. The direct evidence of Jesus in front of her convinced her and she did exactly what he told her to do – go and tell the disciples what she had seen and heard. This one action makes Mary Magdalene the first preacher of the Resurrection, a fact too soon overlooked and discounted.

Only the Beloved Disciple, the one never named, believes Jesus was resurrected as soon as he saw the grave clothes and the empty tomb. He believed from the first moment, with no proof other than how much he loved Jesus and trusted that everything Jesus had told him was true. Now, there has been a lot of debate about who this beloved disciple might have been. It is more than a little curious that this person is not named in such a foundational story to the faith. Over the centuries, scholarly consensus has identified the Beloved Disciple as John but it is important to note that nowhere in any of the texts is the Beloved Disciple specifically named as John. I recently encountered a new theory on this beloved disciple that I think is very compelling.

D. Mark Davis is a theological author who writes a weekly blog called “Left Behind and Loving It.” It’s an unusual blog because he provides his own translation of the text from the ancient Greek to the vernacular English, and then offers his own thoughts in response to that translation. Mark has posed the possibility that the Beloved Disciple was not John, but Lazarus! Yes, *the* Lazarus who was himself resurrected out of his tomb by his dear friend Jesus just a few weeks before Jesus’ death. We know Jesus loved Lazarus deeply because he is described as weeping when he arrives only to find his friend has died before he could get there, the only time Jesus is described as weeping over another person. It being Lazarus also explains why the Beloved

Disciple would be hesitant to go into the tomb. He'd been in one before. He knew better than anyone what it was like to die and be sealed in a cold, dark tomb. But he soon found the courage to go in and he believed as soon as he saw the empty grave clothes. Of course he believed immediately because he alone knew firsthand what resurrection meant. He had experienced it! He knew through and through that with God all things are possible. He was literally living proof!

I confess this is one of those times when I really feel like all my reading and studying and pondering of so many biblical commentaries paid off in an amazing and unexpected way. I *LOVE* this notion that the Beloved Disciple who believed from the first moment was Lazarus! I had never even encountered a whisper of this before I found that blog on-line. Lazarus! Of course! Who better to understand the incomprehensible than someone who had lived through it himself? Who better to guide us through our own encounters with the Risen Christ than someone who understood Jesus' experience from the inside out?

So, dear friends, it is the Beloved Disciple – Lazarus or whomever you think it might be – who invites us, encourages us, urges us – to ponder for ourselves what we think of this incredible, amazing, miraculous, crazy story about the Empty Tomb and the Risen Christ. That is the real truth of Easter, and the invitation of Easter to each of us. What will you believe as you

stand at the entrance to the empty tomb? Only you can figure that out for yourself. You can believe without question or doubt, as the Beloved Disciple did. You can be totally stumped by the whole situation and allow God's truth to seep slowly into your mind and heart like Peter did. You can admit your confusion but keep your heart open to all possibilities with God, like Mary Magdalene did. Or you can decide the whole thing just doesn't matter because it's just so beyond your ability to process. The choice is yours and yours alone.

As you ponder what you think and what you will decide, or have already decided, about this key Christian story of the empty tomb, I have an Easter gift for you. I invite you to take with you as you leave worship today one of these Easter eggs. Inside you will find a small rock. I invite you to think of that rock as representing the one that sealed Jesus inside that long ago garden tomb. Something moved that rock away. Something happened inside that tomb that changed the world forever. This rock is your invitation to ponder what that moment means to you, beyond your thoughts about the resurrection of Jesus. What needs to be resurrected or given new life in your life? What do you need to be freed from? What do you need to be enlived for? Only you know for sure. Well, you and God. Amen.