

Which One?

A Message for Sunday Morning Worship on Palm Sunday

United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC

April 1, 2018

Text: Mark 16:1-8 & John 20:1-18

“We are the Easter people of God” has long been the cry of the followers of Jesus as Easter dawns on the day we celebrate the empty tomb of Jesus. “Christ is risen! Christ is risen indeed!” is one of the most ancient of greetings within the church. We associate Easter morning with boundless joy and everything that goes along with it. Easter flowers adorn the altars of churches and the dining room tables of families around the world. Children hunt for brightly colored Easter eggs and everyone enjoys chocolate bunnies and jelly beans. When we think of Easter we think of happy things – smiling faces and beautiful flowers, sweet treats and all the promises of spring after a long winter. It’s all good! Wonderful, even! We need happiness and sunshine in our lives. We need all those smiling faces, all those reminders that spring is indeed on its way at last.

But, the thing is, if we only focus on being the Easter people, important as that is to who we are as followers of the living Christ, we’re missing something important because that’s not *all* that we are. It can’t be. It can’t be because we live in a Good Friday world every day. We live in a world of pain and suffering, of bad things happening to good people all the time. We live in a world where

betrayal, fear, anger and hatred – the very same emotions that nailed Jesus to the cross on Good Friday – are part of our reality every day. If we only focus on the joy and sunshine of Easter morning while we forget the sadness, grief and pain of Good Friday, we are overlooking the most crucial message of Easter. We are whitewashing our own lives, sanitizing out all the challenges, all the pain, all the times when life is so hard and so difficult that we just want to scream as loud as we can. I hadn't really thought about this myself until I read an article in the *Washington Post* this past week by Christopher Hale. But he is so right when he observes that “we cannot ... ignore the suffering and cross of Jesus Christ because to ignore his cross is to ignore the crosses of so many people in the world of 2018.” (Hale, “How to Make Good Friday Great Again”, *The Washington Post*, 3-30-2018)

To ignore the cross of Jesus is to ignore the crosses of so many in 2018. Kinda makes you stop and think, doesn't it? And it should. Jesus didn't die on the cross just so he could come back to life three days later if nothing else was going to change! Jesus died on the cross because the greed and anger and fear of others put him there. Jesus died on the cross because he reminded everyone of God's commandment to love the other as much as you love yourself – and a lot of people didn't like that. They just wanted to do what they'd always done – follow the rules laid down by religious leaders, do the “right thing” with the “right people”

and everything would be the way it had always been. Then along comes Jesus who says that what really matters to God is whether the hungry are fed and the naked are clothed. Then along comes Jesus who says love God with all that you are and all that you have and love your neighbor as yourself. Love. Don't hate. Don't judge. Just love. Love as God has always loved you. And dear friends we can never forget that it was this message of love that got Jesus killed. It is this message of unconditional love that still scares people today. It is also this message of unconditional love that has gotten lost over the years in a church that only celebrates being the Easter people in a Good Friday world.

So, how is it that we need to celebrate Easter as the people of God? What does it mean, this miraculous story of a crucified, dead and bloody Jesus coming back to life on a Sunday morning – the first day of the week? Well, let's think about that story a little bit and see what we can learn from it. The first thing to realize is that the entire New Testament presupposes the Resurrection. All of the Gospels, all of the epistles, accept the Resurrection as a given because every single word was written after the Resurrection had happened and the movement which became Christianity was taking shape. The actual descriptions of the Resurrection appear only in the four Gospels – Matthew, Mark, Luke and John and we read two of those accounts this morning. Mark is the oldest Gospel, written around 70CE putting it closest

in time to the life and death of Jesus, roughly 40 years after the fact. John, the most recent of the Gospels, was written sometime between 90 & 110CE meaning somewhere between 60-80 years after the fact. The difference in perspective of the two stories shows how the Resurrection story continued to be formed and take shape as the years passed and the Christian faith took hold.

Mark's version is simple. Mary Magdalene – the only constant person in every Resurrection account – and some other women go to the tomb to anoint the body because there had been no time when he had first been placed in the tomb as the Sabbath was beginning. The women get to the tomb, the stone is rolled away and a young man dressed in white tells them simply, “he has been raised, he is not here.” He also tells them to go tell his disciples and Peter what has happened. But they are too terrified so they run away and tell nothing to anyone. Except obviously they did because that's why the Gospel was written down in the first place. Mark's emphasis is on the fact of the Resurrection. Period. We don't see the Resurrected Jesus. Instead, Mark's version is intentionally open-ended inviting the readers into the story to make it their own.

John's account, on the other hand, is loaded with details. Mary Magdalene goes alone, realizes the tomb is open and goes back to find Peter and the disciple “whom Jesus loved” for help. They go back with her, running the whole way. The nameless

disciple looks in and seeing the grave clothes, believes immediately that Jesus has been risen. Peter goes in and sees the empty grave clothes just lying there and apparently doesn't know what to think so he and the nameless disciple leave, completely ignoring Mary and leaving her behind. She finally goes in and *she* sees two angels dressed in white sitting where the body had been. They said to her, "woman, why are you weeping?" She answers them telling them she just wants to know where Jesus' body is and before they can answer her she leaves the tomb and sees someone she supposes is the gardener. She goes up to him asking him where Jesus' body is. It is then that Jesus calls her by name and she realizes he has been resurrected. Again, he gives her a message to take to the disciples, after telling her not to cling to him. She left and told the disciples that she had seen Jesus. Significant in John's story is that Jesus calls Mary by name and shares the greatest revelation of the resurrection with her personally, and only with her.

Looking at just these two Gospel accounts it's very clear that the story of the Resurrection changes over time. When you add in the accounts of Matthew and Luke, the differences in the accounts only multiply. Matthew has the tomb guarded by two guards posted by Pilate just so Jesus' body can't be stolen and some fantastic story about his coming back to life circulated among his followers. The women show up, again with Mary Magdalene in

the midst of them, and this time there's an earthquake and the tomb opens and an angel takes a seat on the stone. The guards faint, the angel tells them "he has been raised" and they should "go tell" the disciples what happened. They run off and encounter Jesus along the way.

In Luke, the women go to the tomb with spices, the stone is already rolled away and two men dressed in dazzling clothes say to them, "why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here but has risen." Then they give a little longer speech ending with instructions to the women, again Mary Magdalene among them, to go back and tell the disciples what has happened which they do. Only in Luke, the disciples just flat out don't believe them. Peter goes back to the tomb and sees the grave clothes and "was amazed" but that's it.

So, if we consider all these different accounts of the Resurrection in the Bible, what are we to think of the Resurrection in 2018, in this Good Friday world in which we live? What does it mean? If there are so many different versions – at least four of them – what are we to think? Which one are we to believe? Which one tells the story of the Resurrection that Jesus intended? All of them? None of them? Who knows? But the thing is, which version of the story you believe really doesn't matter because the real evidence of the Resurrection – that something incredible, fantastic, unbelievable, miraculous, life-changing happened – is

not in any one story. It is not provable by science or history or any of the ways we think of determining the truth or fiction behind an event. We can't google the answer. We can't know the answer in the same way we know basic math or the words to the Lord's Prayer or the Pledge of Allegiance. The proof of the Resurrection, though, is all around us. The proof of the Resurrection is us – you and me, standing here almost 2000 years after that miraculous morning telling the story in one form or another. We are the proof that the Resurrection happened.

This is so, theologian and scholar William Barclay says, because of three simple truths each person who seeks to follow Jesus embraces. First is the truth that Jesus was not a historical figure but a living presence who touched people and touches people still. The second truth is similar, that Jesus is not simply a memory or a thought, but again a living presence whose reality is testified to in the lives of so many people over the millennia. And the third truth is that to be a Christian, to live as one who follows Jesus, one must *know* Jesus not merely *know about* Jesus. In other words, Jesus must be as real to you as the person sitting next to you. Jesus must be part of you, part of your soul and reflected in how you live life each day and it is that fact, that reality of *Jesus alive through you* that is proof of the Resurrection of Jesus. He was not a historical figure commemorated by statues long crumbled away. He was not a memory forgotten as soon as

something else came along to push thoughts of him into oblivion. Jesus was and is the living Son of God in ways we cannot fully fathom or understand or explain. And that, dear friends, is just as it should be.

Which one of those Resurrection stories should you believe? Take your pick! The proof of the new life Jesus brought forth out of that tomb isn't in any one of them but in all of them. It's in you and me and it always has been. That's why it matters so very much. We live in a Good Friday world every day. YOU live in a Good Friday world every day and it is through Jesus that you find your way to new life beyond everything that is difficult and discouraging, overwhelming and frightening. The joy of Easter morning is yours to claim as your own and yours to use to do what Jesus asked of all who loved and followed him. That message, dear friends, has never changed. Jesus told his followers and tells us still that in the Good Friday world we live in, the world surrounding the empty tomb of Easter morning we are to do two things. Just two things, every day and always. We are to love God with all that we are and all that we have and we are to love the other as much as we love ourselves. That's it. That's all. That's everything. Christ is risen! Christ is risen indeed! We're living proof of that. Happy Easter. Amen.