

What Is Truth?

United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT

March 31, 2024 – Morning Worship on Easter Sunday

Text: Mark 16:1-8

Christ is risen! *Christ is risen indeed!*

This year, as it is every year, I start thinking about my Easter Sunday sermon in January – wondering what to talk about, what should be the focus of a sermon on this most important day of the Christian year. I always kick around a number of possibilities as the weeks of winter and spring slip by, listening to what is on people's hearts and minds. This year what feels relevant and pertinent to life outside these walls seems to me to be one question that we all carry around in our hearts every day. The thing is it's a question that is literally as old as the Christian faith itself. Older even, since it is a question posed by someone to Jesus while he was still alive. And we've all been pondering it ever since, inside the church and outside the church. We don't even realize we are carrying this question around inside us and yet, there it is, taking shape only when someone gives it voice.

What is truth? That's the question. What is truth? And it's a real question which we too often treat as a rhetorical one. In this age of "alternative facts" and legal maneuvering to avoid accountability by way too many on both sides of the political and religious divides in this country, truth – what it is and what it isn't – has become both more vitally important and less discernable than ever before, at least in my lifetime. And I'm guessing you feel the same. So our task at this moment is to figure out together what exactly this question has to do with our Easter celebration this morning.

First of all, this question – what is truth – is part of the Easter story itself as we find it in the Gospel accounts of what we call Holy Week. In fact, the exchange where this question is posed was one of our readings last week during our Palm Sunday symbols service. Does

anyone remember who posed this question and to whom it was addressed? (*Pause for responses.*) The question was posed by Pilate, the Roman authority in Jerusalem, to Jesus during his interrogation of him. In the way of a quick recap, Jesus was brought before Pilate by the temple authorities because they wanted someone to solve the “Jesus problem” permanently and they did not have the authority to deal with it. However, these same religious authorities knew that if they brought Jesus to Pilate and accused him of claiming to be a king, this would be a direct threat to the Roman imperial order and Pilate would have to act.

The exchange between Jesus and Pilate is one we read every year, but all too often we sort of rush through it, not pausing to see what is really happening in this exchange. Jesus has been accused of claiming to be a “king of the Jews,” which would be a direct affront to the long-standing arrangement between Rome and the religious authorities governing local matters. These religious leaders knew what would happen if they brought these kinds of charges against Jesus. Pilate, who was the Roman *prefect* in Palestine¹, wasn’t especially excited to be in Jerusalem in the first place. It was a backwater post in an area prone to sectarian violence. Nobody liked him because he was both heavy-handed and wishy-washy at the same time. So when Jesus appeared before him, brought there by the very religious authorities he had already been sparring with over the whole Roman view of Caesar as a god thing, he was not happy. He talked to Jesus trying to figure out what was going on. Legend has it that his own wife tried to talk him out of becoming involved with this situation because of a dream she had warning Pilate to stay out of the whole thing because Jesus was an innocent man. ² But he didn’t for whatever reason, and ended up condemning Jesus to death on the cross, a

¹ <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Pontius-Pilate>

² *Ibid.*

brutal punishment reserved for political or religious agitators.³ In his final conversation with Jesus, they are debating whether or not he is truly a king. Jesus' answer was, "You say that I am a king; For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice." (John 18:37b) To this Pilate responds, "what is truth?" (John 18:38) Then he sends Jesus off to his fate.

What is truth? This was the final question Pilate posed to Jesus. There is no response from Jesus recorded in the scriptures. Dear ones, I suggest this question – Pilate's question – has been bouncing off the walls and corridors of history, inside and outside the church, ever since. In the final analysis, this is the real question of the entire Easter story. And it always has been, for many reasons. For one, the accounts of the discovery of the empty tomb on Easter morning – the centerpiece of the Easter celebration – is recounted differently in each of the four Gospels. In Mark, the oldest of the Gospel accounts and the one we read this morning, three women – Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome – traveled to the tomb together to complete the anointing for burial. When they arrived, the stone had already been rolled away and an angel was waiting for them in the tomb. He told them not to be afraid, that Jesus was risen and they should go and tell the disciples that Jesus would be coming to them soon. It ends with the women running away, too afraid to say anything to anyone.

In John, Mary Magdalene goes to the tomb by herself and discovers the stone has been rolled away. She then runs back to Peter and the other disciples to tell them. Peter and "the beloved disciple" run back to the tomb where Peter looks in and the other disciple goes into the tomb where they find the folded grave clothes but nothing and no one else. No angels. No Jesus. They go back to town leaving

³ <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Pontius-Pilate>

Mary weeping in the garden where she encounters a man she thinks is the gardener but he is, in fact, Jesus. He tells her to go back to the disciples and tell them what she has seen. She does.

In Matthew's account, Mary Magdalene and another woman identified only as "the other Mary," go to the tomb and as they arrived there was a great earthquake. They realize the earthquake had been instigated by an angel as he rolled the stone away from the tomb. The guards at the tomb, whom Matthew insists were placed there by Pilate, were so shocked by all this they fainted. The angel told the women not to be afraid, and that Jesus had risen. They were to go and tell the disciples what had happened. As they were running back to the disciples, Jesus appeared to them and told them again to go and tell the disciples what had happened.

Luke offers yet another account of this miraculous scene. He says there were four women who traveled to the tomb at sunrise that day – Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and "the other woman." When they arrived, the stone had already been rolled away, but the tomb was empty. As they were standing there confused, "two men in dazzling clothes" appeared to them to ask "why do you look for the living among the dead?" They reminded the women what Jesus had said about his own death and resurrection, which they then remembered. The women then went back to tell the disciples about all this but, the disciples did not believe them because "these words seemed to them to be an idle tale." Then Peter decided to check it out anyway and going to the tomb which he found empty. But he didn't see Jesus. In Luke's version, no one sees Jesus until he appears to two of them walking later that day to Emmaus.

So, here we have four Gospel accounts of the same event which are radically different from each other. Earthquake, no earthquake. One woman, three women, four women. One angel. Two angels. No angels. Jesus is never there, only an empty tomb, some with grave clothes and some with nothing. The women are too afraid to say

anything. The women tell everyone everything and no one believes them. What the heck! What is truth here?

Well, simply put, we don't know. We don't know which version is an accurate and truthful account of what happened at that long ago empty tomb. We don't even know for sure where that tomb was. Yes, you can visit a church in Jerusalem that claims to be built over the tomb but no one knows for sure that's where it was. It was Helena, mother of Emperor Constantine in the 3rd Century CE, who after converting to Christianity traveled to Palestine, and Jerusalem in particular, with the intent of discovering the places significant to Jesus' life while she was there. It was she who identified the place where Jesus was born, the place where he was crucified and the place where he had been buried. All of these places now have churches built on them, with the Church of the Holy Sepulchre built on the site where Jesus' empty tomb supposedly was.⁴ A Roman Empress in the 3rd century traveled to Jerusalem by herself with nothing but her newly discovered and passionately held Christian faith to guide her, and she found all these places still held as sacred to this day. Dear friends, what is truth here? Again, in spite of commonly held traditions and beliefs, no one really knows.

But the search for truth didn't end here in the annals of Christianity. It only intensified as the years and eventually centuries passed by. What we know now as the Roman Catholic church slowly took shape, as the Orthodox churches did too on a parallel course but with key theological differences. Then in the 16th century the Protestant reformation rattled everything yet again as the role of Scripture, access to Scripture, the role of clergy, the meaning and number of the sacraments, all changed dramatically. And still the story of the empty tomb remained key to all as the twists and turns of different Christian traditions and beliefs slowly formed.

⁴ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Helena,_mother_of_Constantine_I

So where does all this leave us today? What is truth for us today? That dear ones, depends on who you ask. My entire three years of study in preparation for ordination were devoted to answering this one question – what is truth – when it comes to the life of faith for individuals and for the church. The differences between the many varieties of the Christian faith we have surrounding us in just our own community are staggering and those differences are very real. The sad thing is those differences only add to the divisiveness which is tearing our society and our world apart. The divisiveness within some of our own churches isn't helping either. And when you remember that the whole reason Jesus came among us as human in the first place was to invite all who desire to love and follow God to come together to do so, the divisions which divide us still are both surprising and frustrating.

What is truth? I find this question even more on my mind and heart these days as I ponder the divisiveness – religious and political – all around us. In just this past week – Holy Week – I have had two rather intense conversations with conservative Christian colleagues on just how much our beliefs differ about Jesus, who he was and why he matters, about Scripture and what it's role is in the life of faith. Dear ones, I found those conversations to be encouraging and frightening at the same time. The differences between what we believe and how we practice our common Christian faith could not be more pronounced. And yet we all realize that our differences and the problems and dissension they cause were never God's plan for us. We are all – progressive Christians, conservative Christians, Roman Catholic Christians, Orthodox Christians, Mormon Christians, Quakers, and so many more beside – we are all equally beloved of God. So are our Jewish brothers and sisters, our Muslim brothers and sisters, our Buddhist brothers and sisters, our Hindu brothers and sisters and so on and so on. To me, my brothers and sisters in faith in this church on this glorious Easter morning, this is the only answer to the question “what is truth.” And what is that answer? God. Just God.

Dear ones, God's truth, God's reality in our lives is so much bigger than the differences which divide us in matters of faith. Our continuing problem is that we continually insist on making God way too small and that is just wrong.

God is far bigger, far more expansive, far more loving than we can even begin to comprehend. God is big enough to love us all just as we are. However we mere mortals seek for God is just fine with God. God doesn't look for the labels that we so intensely insist on putting on each other. We are all the same to God – we are the beloved community, God's beloved people and the diversity among us is God's greatest gift to us because it is in that very diversity that the breadth and depth and richness and miraculousness that is God becomes clear for all to see. That, dear ones, is the challenge of life these days when divisiveness runs rampant, when truth is multivalent, when things are just plain scary. God's reality in each of our lives is what helps us find our way as we navigate the differences that threaten to rip us apart. We must never forget the one and only truth of which we can be certain. In the Jewish faith, this is the *shema*, the prayer recited multiple times a day: "Hear O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might." (Deuteronomy 6:4-5) Jesus expands upon this just a bit when he says the greatest commandment is to love God with all of your heart, mind, soul, and strength and the second is to love others as much as you love yourself (Mark 12: 29-31).

What is truth, dear ones? In the final analysis, it's love. Just love. Love of God however we understand God. Love of people, neighbors and strangers, friends and foes. Love. That's it. That's all. That's enough. That is more than enough. May you find this truth in your life, this day and always. May you believe that God is ever with you, that you never face life alone because of God's loving presence. Happy Easter! Christ is risen! Christ is risen indeed! Amen.