

## ***“While It Was Still Dark ...”***

United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT  
April 20, 2025 – A Sermon for Easter Sunday Morning Worship  
Text: John 20:1-18

### **Christ Is Risen! *Christ Is Risen Indeed!***

The traditional Easter greeting, for over 2000 years. This morning's service is literally punctuated with it throughout. It is ***the*** foundational point, the key emphasis, of literally every Easter Sunday service everywhere around the world. But, if I asked you what it means, could you tell me? Could you explain it to someone who had no clue about Easter beyond chocolate eggs, jelly beans and chocolate bunnies? That's a legitimate question these days when more and more people don't go to church. It's entirely possible that those people you see buying Easter treats in the grocery store have no idea who Jesus is. For those of us of a certain age that is literally painful to think about it. But, if we're honest, we know that in some instances our own kids and grandkids are not connected to church as we had thought they would be. This is definitely not the world we were hoping for when we would imagine what the 2020's might be like, in so very many ways. That is more than a little disconcerting! Maybe even discouraging, and no one wants to feel discouraged on Easter.

But as someone is always saying in the Bible somewhere, “Fear not!” Even in these days when churches are not as full as they once were, when kids are not jamming our Sunday schools or our summer camps, none of that is really what Easter is all about. Easter is about hope, pure and simple. Hope that the impossible – a man brutally murdered emerging alive from the tomb – is always possible with God. It's certainly a fantastical story, this Resurrection of Jesus. It almost has overtones of the Marvel movie series heroes who always find a way to beat back and defeat the latest deadly villain – monster – alien – crazed robot – whatever, despite the odds. The Easter story is sort of like that. It's no Stan Lee story, but it's a pretty crazy one nonetheless. A peasant carpenter from some backwater town rises to such prominence just by what he says about God that he is deemed a rebel – some might use the word “terrorist” today since Jesus was all about upsetting the status quo and making sure the least of these were recognized and provided for. And then what happens? Like a bad movie script, Jesus is arrested, beaten mercilessly, accused of crimes against the state, convicted in a sham trial and then dies a horrible death with his family weeping and his friends having run away. Then, in a last minute plot twist, a kind stranger, a man of influence, intervenes so that Jesus' body can be removed from the cross and buried in a tomb he had purchased for himself. It is this tomb to which the women come on Sunday morning when they discover it is empty.

This is where the story gets really crazy. And I mean crazy! Each of the four gospels – Matthew, Mark, Luke and John – tell a different version of this key moment. Different people are present. Sometimes there's an angel or two. Sometimes there are Roman guards who have fainted. Sometimes the folded graveclothes are visible. Sometimes the undead Jesus speaks and other times he's not even there. It's crazy! Even the people at the time it happened thought the disciples and Jesus' other followers were nuts when they said Jesus had risen from the dead. Nobody survived crucifixion. In fact, crucified bodies were usually left on the cross to rot and be eaten by vultures and wild dogs. Not so for Jesus because of the kindness of one man, Joseph of Arimathea, who was influential enough to have Pilate, the Roman governor, agree to give him permission to take the body. Even that part of the story had to be crazy to the people who first heard it. Who gives away a tomb they had prepared for themselves? Who has enough juice to ask the Roman imperial governor for something like this and get it? Crazy!

Interesting point here. Did you ever wonder how the women knew where the tomb was? This is one of those little details in this story that we never stop to think about but it's crucial. How did the women know where Joseph of Arimathea's tomb was? How did they even know he had made the effort to take the body for burial? Simple. They never left Jesus' side. They stayed with Jesus through the entire day, as much as they could. They followed the procession of prisoners and Roman guards through the city to Golgotha. They watched horrified as the guards cast lots – threw dice – for Jesus' beautiful cloak. They heard the hammers pounding in the nails through his wrists and feet. They saw the agony in Jesus' face and they heard his moans. Because they never left his side. They stayed as close as the guards and the crowds would let them, and they never left. The disciples could not say the same. As soon as Jesus was arrested in the garden they left. They ran actually. We're not sure to where but by Sunday morning they were together again, huddled in the upper room where they were terrified of being arrested if people figured out that they were Jesus' disciples. They were paralyzed with fear.

We should note there was one more person who did stay with the women and with Jesus. Curiously, we do not know this person's name since he is referred to only as "the disciple whom Jesus loved." He too stayed with Jesus for at least part of his time on the cross, and it was this disciple whom Jesus asked to care for his mother after he was gone. But, at some point even he leaves, and the women stay. So they are there when Jesus dies. They are there when the guards come to take his body down from the cross in response to Joseph of Arimathea's request to bury Jesus. They were there when Jesus body came off the cross and perhaps there really was that moment depicted

in *The Pieta*. I surely hope you are familiar with this magnificent sculpture by Michelangelo of Mary holding the brutalized and dead body of her son just after he was taken down from the cross. Such a powerful moment captured in marble that we hope it was so.

Regardless, he soon would have been placed on some sort of cart for the journey to Joseph's tomb. Mary his mother, Mary Magdalene and some other women followed along behind watching his dead arms and legs flail as the cart bumped along the bumpy roads. So, this is how they knew where to find his body on Sunday morning. They knew because they stayed with him to the very end, following him to the tomb where he was laid. The sun was setting and the Sabbath was beginning, meaning there was no time to wash and prepare the body as they so desperately wanted to. Perhaps they would have anyway but Joseph, a faithful Jew, said no. Or perhaps the guards just rolled the stone in front of the tomb before they had time to even try. We just don't know. But we can imagine they stood there and wept silently, holding on to each other as the tears flowed. They would have wanted to wail, to keen, for this loved one dead, but they couldn't even do that for fear of angering the Roman guards and getting arrested themselves. And then who would return on Sunday to finish the burial rituals? So as the sky darkened, they made their way back to wherever they were staying. We don't know where that was because they were just the women. Who cared?

The next morning, while it was still dark John's Gospel tells us, Mary Magdalene makes her way back to the tomb. In John's Gospel telling of this story she is alone. In the other Gospel accounts, others are with her, different women in different Gospels. But in John, only she creeps along the pitch black streets toward the tomb. She can't bare to wait another minute to care for her beloved Jesus. Still traumatized – who wouldn't be – by the events she witnessed on Friday, she just cannot stand by any longer to wash the blood and sweat and grime from Jesus' body, preparing him for burial as he deserved. Finally, she reaches the tomb and realizes in horror that the stone has been rolled away so the tomb is open! She ran back to the disciples to tell them, convinced that someone had stolen Jesus' body for some awful reason. Peter and once again, the unnamed disciple whom Jesus loved, take off running back to the tomb. They reached it, after a foot race, and peered inside verifying it was empty. Then they went inside and saw the discarded grave clothes. Confused, they left and went home.

But again, Mary Magdalene stayed. She stayed and wept at what she thought was yet another indignity Jesus had to suffer – his body being stolen. She found the courage to go inside and there she saw two angels – remember that the other two disciples saw nothing inside the tomb. The angels, who appeared only to her, asked her, "woman, why are you weeping?" She answers, "They have taken away my Lord and I don't know

were they have lain him.” Before they could answer her, she turns around and Jesus is right there but she doesn’t recognize him until he speaks. He tells her not to “hold on to him” but instead to go and tell the disciples that he would be ascending to God. She leaves and does as he says. John doesn’t tell us how the disciples receive her news but in the other Gospels they don’t take it well, believing her to be hysterical or worse.

While it was still dark, Mary Magdalene faced her fears because her love for Jesus and for God was too strong for her to be cautious any longer. She knew what she needed to do and she was going to do it, no matter what. And do it she did, not as she had expected, though. There was no body to wash and anoint because Jesus was alive again. She had seen him – and two angels – with her own eyes. Peter and the other disciple did not see either Jesus or the two angels. Why not? I’ve always wondered that. If they were so close to Jesus, if they were the ones who had been with him nonstop through these last few years, how is it he did not appear to them? Was it because Peter had denied knowing him just two days before? Was it because he knew them well enough to know they were not up to what needed to happen next – spreading the Easter greeting to everyone they encountered, without hesitation. With only joy and hope. And love overflowing. Jesus knew Mary Magdalene would do this, without a doubt. So, he chose to appear to her. It was not an accident. It was always part of the plan.

How can I be so sure of this? Well, for one thing, Mary Magdalene is the one constant in every single telling of the story of the Resurrection in all four Gospels. She is always there. The named women are different in the other stories, but Mary Magdalene is always there. In Luke’s version even Jesus isn’t there. He’s already been raised and is out on the road when Mary Magdalene and the other women arrive. He doesn’t appear in Mark’s version either, but again Mary Magdalene is there. In Matthew Jesus wasn’t at the tomb either but Mary Magdalene and the other women literally ran into him as they hurried back to the disciples to share the news.

Dear ones, Mary Magdalene is the one constant in the Easter morning message. She is the one God chose to proclaim the Easter greeting for the very first time. She was entrusted with this, the most precious of all the miracles associated with Jesus. She was given this task because Jesus knew, God knew, she was more than up to the task. She would not fail. She had proven that over and over again. Make no mistake, this is a powerful, powerful position for someone – anyone – to be placed in. And God chose a woman to proclaim, for the very first time, the Good News of Easter. And what is that Good News? The same that it’s always been since Mary Magdalene stood shivering outside that tomb while it was still dark. With God all things are possible. There is no darkness that cannot be overcome with the light of God. There is no evil more powerful

than God's will. There is always hope that a new day is always beginning, a new life is always possible and what we thought we had lost will be found once more.

Dear ones, I know that if Mary Magdalene were here among us, she would be the first one to hug us, pushing back our worries and fears that have taken root these last few weeks as so much we had taken for granted is being threatened in ways we can scarcely comprehend. She would also be the first to tell us to share those worries and fears with Jesus because he understands more about tyranny than we ever could since tyranny took his life. And she would encourage us to stay by Jesus' side always, taking care of the least of these as he would expect us to. She would remind us that that Jesus *lives*, not as an icon of some ancient religious past but as a living embodiment of justice and compassion, love in action for everyone.

While it was still dark. That feels too true these days when we are too often anxious and fearful of what lies ahead in so many ways. Dear ones, Easter is God assuring us that the darkness never stays dark forever. The dawn breaks, Jesus lives again and life in all its wonder continues. May we, like Mary Magdalene, be ready to greet the dawn and move forward praising the Risen Christ, confident of our place in God's future. Amen.