

UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST CONGREGATIONAL
Wallace, Idaho

Alice M.C. Ling, Pastor

April 17, 2022

Easter

PRELUDE “*Christ the Lord is Risen Today*”

WELCOME AND ANNOUNCEMENTS

CALL TO WORSHIP

This morning we celebrate that hope lives, that new life pushes up through the soil, green and strong, that warmth and light return with the sun as a new day dawns.

This morning we celebrate that there is no darkness that love cannot reach, no tomb that love cannot break open, no depths from which love cannot raise us up.

This is no superficial joy; it is hard won. The past is not erased, it is written on the body in scars.

This miraculous morning affirms that all that is broken can be made beautiful, integrated into new wholeness.

And so, like the daffodils, we will lift our tear-streaked faces.

Like the blackbird, we will greet the day with song.

Like Mary, we will feel our hearts swell with delight that spills over into Good, Good News:

Christ is risen! (Cara Heafey, worshipwords.co.uk)

HYMN No. 217 “*Christ the Lord Is Risen Today*”

Christ the Lord is risen today, Alleluia! Mortal tongues and angels say Alleluia!

Raise your joys and triumphs high, Alleluia! Sing, ye heavens and earth reply: Alleluia!

Love's redeeming work is done, Alleluia! Fought the fight, the battle won, Alleluia!

Death in vain forbids Him rise, Alleluia! Christ has opened Paradise, Alleluia!

Soar we now where Christ has led, Alleluia! Following our exalted Head, Alleluia!

Made like Him, like Him we rise, Alleluia! Ours the cross, the grave, the skies, Alleluia!

CALL TO RECONCILIATION

We don't have to tell God, but we need to remind ourselves, the ways our actions, words, inattention cause harm to others. Despite that, this is the day, as on every day, that God calls us by name, filling us with grace, and making us whole. Let us bring all we have done to God, for mercy and hope. Let us pray together, saying,

PRAYER FOR FORGIVENESS (in unison)

In our foolishness, we think this old story has nothing to do with us, God of Imagination, and so we miss the incredible news that love has triumphed over hate, goodness has defeated evil, that life has broken the power of death and the grave. Yet, this is a day of joy, of wonder, of grace which never ends, God of every life, God of our lives. So, may we push aside the stone of indifference we have rolled across our hearts, so we may be reminded that this old story is new every moment, that those ancient promises still hold true, that we are the ones called by the Gardener of grace, Jesus our Brother, who calls us by name and anoints us with resurrection love. Amen. *Silence is kept*

ASSURANCE OF PARDON

On that first day, and the next, and every day until now and beyond, God turns, calls us by name, planting mercy and life into our hearts.

Alleluia! This is the good news! Christ is our peace, the peace we need, the peace which will heal the world. Alleluia! Christ is Risen. Amen. (Thom M. Shuman, Lectionary Liturgies)

SCRIPTURE READING John 20:1-18

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 toward 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 around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?" 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.

SERMON

It was dark when Mary got to the tomb. No early colors of morning or suggestions of a sunrise. Probably not even any small wedge of a moon or display of constellations to help light her way. She had no companions or collection of spices and oils. Not really anything to do either; Joseph and Nicodemus had cared for his body on Friday, when what was left of him was taken off the cross. No, in the wee hours of a new week, she just knew she couldn't stay in that house a moment longer. She'd given up on sleep days ago, and the walls had closed in on her enough that she didn't even have any room to pace, so here she was, stumbling her way in the dark, moving toward the only place she could think of to go. Truth be told, the darkness of Mary's morning had little to do with the time of day or the presence or absence of the sun, and everything to do with her world of emptiness and absence, loss and despair. Moving toward his body made more sense than anything else. What else did she have? Where else was she supposed to go?

Even in the dark, she could tell that the stone had been removed and the tomb sat open, so she turned and ran to find two of the disciples. As soon as they were within earshot, she began talking: They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we don't know where they've laid him. At which point, the boys got into a friendly little race to see who could reach the tomb first. The winner was the unidentified follower referred to as the disciple whom Jesus loved. Once there, they took turns looking into the tomb, finally going in, confirming that there was no body, just a pile of the cloths they'd used to wrap Jesus' body. We're told that the Beloved Disciple believed, but not what he believed, and then both he and Peter returned to their homes.

Leaving Mary alone again, in the torment of her grief and the agony of her aloneness. Alone and weeping. When she did finally bend over and actually look into the tomb, she saw two angels sitting where Jesus' body had been lying. When they asked her why she was weeping, and again, a few minutes later when a man she assumed to be the gardener asked her the same question, she told them that they'd taken away her Lord and she didn't know where they had put him. I find it interesting that she doesn't tell any of them about his death, but has now shifted her focus to the disappearance of his corpse. Having barely managed to survive his death, it seems to be the loss of his body that has finally unhinged her.

Wrapped in turmoil and overcome with grief, her eyes clouded with tears, her ears stopped by the roar of injustice, it amazes us that she fails to recognize the very person she's searching for – until she hears him speak her name. In a moment of profound tenderness and intimacy, she suddenly understands, calls him "Teacher" and reaches for him and something notably more than a hand shake. Certainly nothing as sterile as a pandemic elbow bump. With tears still in her eyes and running down her cheeks, Mary moves in for an embrace – which Jesus prevents, saying don't try to hold on to me. I'm not staying, but I'm on my way on to ascend to God. Mary wants to cling to the Jesus she's walked beside and learned from, who's changed her life and her world, to which he says, Mary, we're not going back to that world or the way things used to be, because everything has changed. As Barbara Brown Taylor put it, "He was not on his way back to her and the others. He was on his way to God, and he was taking the whole world with him." (*Home By Another Way*, page 111)

For Mary, and for the Gospel of John, the resurrection is declared in that moment when Jesus speaks her name. Until that happens, there has been no announcement that he is risen. First the angels and then the gardener ask her why she is weeping, but when she hears her name spoken by his voice, she turns and recognizes the risen Christ standing before her. Her despair and anguish are transformed, and she's sent out to share the news of a brand new world taking shape in their very midst this very day.

It's going to take a little longer for Peter and the other disciple to make their way to the resurrection. They came, they saw, and at least the Beloved Disciple believed; but I have trouble accepting that he believed in the resurrection. I think he believed what Mary was saying about the missing body. After that, they went back to tending their own wounds from the previous days. Peter was traumatized by his denial, all of them were horrified by the cruelty they'd seen and the ways they'd failed; now they were keeping their heads down and their doors locked in the desperate hope that the taste for blood had been satisfied. That's not resurrection living. To believe in – to experience the resurrection is to be changed by it. It's not the kind of thing that calls for a 30 minute visit to an empty tomb before you go back and get on with your day; it calls for a new way of living and being in the world.

I'll admit to wondering how all of this sounds to you, and what if any difference the celebration of Easter might make in your life, our lives and in our world. I know that Easter has often been talked about as a gift we can cash in on when we come to the end of our lives here on earth, that because of Jesus' death and resurrection, we're offered the possibility of eternal life in heaven. I affirm that and I celebrate that, but as I listen to the story, I hear a lot more than that. I see a profound gift being given, and I hear a call and a commissioning, like Mary's, to go and tell, to share the great good news of Christ's resurrection, and to spread that news in the world. David Davis puts it this way, "Easter ... is the call to the resurrection people of God to stop clinging to that world that seems to never change and start pointing to that which God knows is yet to come. It is a liberating word challenging (us) to stop clinging to the world as (we) want it to be and start working for the world God promised it would be. (Worship) on Easter morning offers the chance for the congregation to rise together, put a finger in the world's chest, and shout, 'No, No, No! There is a more excellent way!'" (*Journal for Preachers*, Easter, 2022, page 5)

Doug Paget and Tony Jones tell the story of one group of people, in Atlanta, GA who did just that. “There is a group of people... who intended to create a new church, but who discovered that their hard-knocks neighborhood did not want another church because the residents saw churches as clubs that put on programs for themselves. So they knew they had to be church in a new way to show, as they tell it, “that plenty of God’s story could be practiced in ‘neighborhood work’.” Their Easter celebration is a case in point: Instead of dressing up and singing hymns, they decided to “worship” in a local park, and that was no small thing: the park was notorious for illegal activity. They began with a public demonstration of confession, admitting that the park had been left for dead and so, like the women who went on that first Easter morning to visit the grave site and anoint the dead body of their Lord, they kept an Easter vigil over the dead creation in their backyard. They met to hold a memorial service by picking up liquor bottles, paper trash, drug paraphernalia. Then in the hope of the resurrection they planted azaleas and watered oaks and filled a sandbox with four tons of sand. At the end of the day, their Easter Sunday clothes covered with dirt, they gathered in a huge circle, held hands and said to each other what the church has been saying for centuries: “He is risen. He is risen indeed!” For that brief moment, they say, “we believed in the resurrection like never before because it was happening around us, blossoming before our very eyes.” (*An Emergent Manifesto*, Doug Paget and Tony Jones, pp. 70-71.)

If we keep our eyes open and our minds on the lookout, we will already find an abundance of signs of beauty and promise, new life and possibility taking shape and coming to life all around us. It’s more than a little easy to be overwhelmed by the despair and turmoil, hostility and death that surround us, but it is also true that God is already at work redeeming and restoring the world. When we wipe the tears from our eyes and quiet the roaring in our ears, we just might see the risen Christ and hear him speaking our names, giving us a role, inviting us into the work of healing and encouragement, justice and kindness. As we come together and work together, as Christ’s resurrection people, there’s no telling the change and transformation that God can do with us, among us and through us. Amen.

HYMN No. 425 *“In the Garden”*

I come to the garden alone, While the dew is still on the roses;
And the voice I hear, falling on my ear, The Son of God discloses.
And He walks with me, and He talks with me, And He tells me I am His own;
And the joy we share as we tarry there None other has ever known.

He speaks, and the sound of His voice Is so sweet the birds hush their singing;
And the melody that He gave to me Within my heart is ringing.
And He walks with me, and He talks with me, And He tells me I am His own;
And the joy we share as we tarry there None other has ever known.

I’d stay in the garden with Him Though the night around me be falling;
But He bids me go – through the voice of woe, His voice to me is calling.
And He walks with me, and He talks with me, And He tells me I am His own;
And the joy we share as we tarry there None other has ever known.

PRAYER REQUESTS

PASTORAL PRAYER

We thank you, Redeeming God, for the glorious message that you bring new hope out of despair, resurrection out of defeat, and new life out of death. You call dry bones to dance. You give living water so that new life blossoms. You urge flowers to push their way through winter-hardened soil.

We bring before you the dead and dried-out places in our lives, that through your touch we may discover newness of life. Forgotten dreams, lapsed intentions, hardened resentments, griefs to which

we cling like children who cling to a worn but cherished toy or blanket: these we hand over to you, knowing that you will return them, mended, washed, renewed, transformed.

We bring before you the places in our lives and in our world where despair reigns unchallenged. With grief we bring our concerns for Ukraine and Jerusalem and other parts of the world where the cycle of violence goes on and on. Point us toward actions, however small, which lead to a more hopeful future for ourselves and for our world.

Gracious God, we thank you that you walk beside us as we journey through life. Because you are with us, we accept each new day, with its joys and sorrows, as a gift. Because you are with us, we gain courage to meet the challenge of the day, choosing life and not death as we move through time. As you raised Jesus from the dead, raise us to new life day by day. For we pray in Jesus' name, and with the words he taught his friends: Our Father...
(Ruth C. Duck, *Touch Holiness*)

PRAYER OF OUR SAVIOR (debts)

OFFERING

God has shown us the meaning of generosity in the beautiful diversity of creation, in the overflowing love of Jesus Christ, and in the never ending gift of the Holy Spirit! God has abundantly blessed us and called us to be a community that blesses others through the sharing of our love, our talents, and our material possessions. Let us rejoice in what we have been given and in what is ours to give. Gifts can be mailed to the church or dropped in to the mail slot beside the front door. Thank you for all that you do to support our life together, and to extend God's love throughout our community.

PRAYER OF DEDICATION (in unison)

Wonderful, amazing God, we thank you that you have raised Jesus Christ from the dead, bringing us the promise of new life. With the dawning of this new day, may we awake to new opportunities to love and serve you and witness to Christ whom you have raised. Use us, and our gifts, to your glory. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.
(Chalice Worship)

HYMN No. 226 "The Day of Resurrection"

The day of resurrection! Earth tell it out abroad;
The Passover of gladness, The Passover of God.
From death to life eternal, From earth unto the sky,
Our Christ hath brought us over With hymns of victory.

Now let the heavens be joyful! Let earth its song begin!
The world resound in triumph, And all that is therein;
Let all things seen and unseen Their notes of gladness blend;
For Christ the Lord hath risen, Our Joy that hath no end.

BENEDICTION

May the God who shakes heaven and earth
whom death could not contain,
who lives to disturb and heal us,
bless you with power to go forth
and proclaim the gospel. Amen.

(New Century Hymnal)