

Mystic Congregational Church, UCC

Mystic, Connecticut

Sermon from April 8, 2007

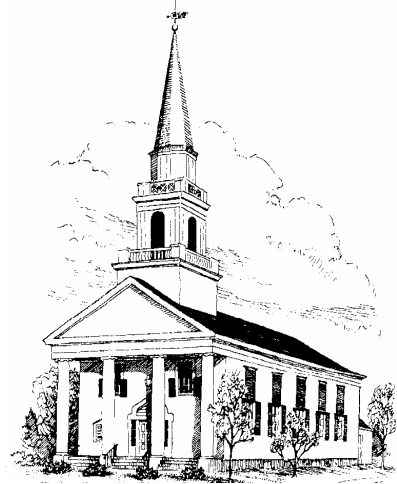
Rev. Barbara J. Libby

“He Is Risen!”

Scriptures:

Acts 10:34-43

John 20:1-18



As I have moved through these past six weeks of Lent and the most recent events of Holy Week in this past week, and as I have journeyed on the road into Jerusalem again, I have been touched in many ways with this most amazing story of our faith. As I imagine the events of that first Easter morning, I have been struck with what an amazing and shocking story it really is!

There is nothing natural about resurrection. It is both a shocking and an amazing thing to proclaim on Easter morning the good news that Jesus Christ is risen from the dead! It is a shocking thing to declare that we are a people of the resurrection! In a world of so much bad news, it is both amazing and shocking to call ourselves people of the good news!

If we sacrifice or normalize this shocking quality, we do so at the risk of missing something. There is, without a doubt, a shocking and amazing reality to this Easter story we tell here today—a shocking reality that, even nearly 2000 years later, simply cannot be normalized or naturalized.

Something enormous took place on that first Easter morning that even the most faithful as well as the most skeptical among us struggles with on Easter Sunday. Easter morning is the remarkable and mysterious story of the resurrection from the dead of the man Jesus, the one we call the Christ.

Easter morning was and is the beginning of our faith. Christianity does not begin at Christmas, even if we love the story of a baby born in Bethlehem. The real story of our faith begins at the empty tomb, where the risen Christ flies in the face of everything we think we know. Today is the most important day of the entire Christian year. Today we celebrate Jesus' resurrection—the great event that lies at the very heart of the Christian gospel. Easter is the starting place for our faith.

Today's gospel story tells us about a remarkably unusual and unique event—Mary Magdalene meets the risen Christ in the garden! Let's walk around in the story of Mary at the tomb. Let's see what happened as she met the risen Christ in a personal encounter—something that each of us may both yearn for and also fear at the same time.

Although details of the tradition vary from gospel to gospel account about who came to the tomb on that first Easter morning, what is clear across all the various stories is that women were the first at the tomb in the early dawn of Easter morning. Tradition tells us that women came first to anoint the body and to complete the process of spreading spices that was a part of the traditional burial process—something that they had been unable to complete because of the arrival of the Sabbath on Friday evening.

All four gospel accounts also agree that Mary Magdalene was present at the first Easter morning. By John's account, Mary of Magdala went to the tomb alone, while it was still dark. This Mary was not the woman identified as the sinful woman by Luke. This Mary had been healed of a demonic possession by Jesus. This Mary is named by John's Gospel as one of the women who had stood with Jesus' mother at the foot of the cross when Jesus was crucified. This Mary had been close to Jesus and to all the events of what we now call Holy Week.

We might say that John's account is a story of Mary's turning—a story of Mary's slow dance at the tomb, a dance from bewilderment to belief. And what a strange and wonderful story it is—not neat and tidy, perhaps a little scattered and confused, and certainly filled with the natural quirkiness of human beings in the face of something inexplicable, mysterious, and miraculous.

Mary came to the tomb that Sunday morning in the gloom of early dawn. She saw that the large stone that should have covered the entrance to the tomb was instead rolled away leaving the tomb wide open. Probably both frightened and upset, she immediately ran to tell the disciples, saying “They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him.” Some of the disciples then ran back to the tomb with her to see for themselves. One of the disciples bent down and went into the tomb to verify that the body was missing and to see that the burial cloths had been left in two separate piles.

John's account tells us that one of the disciples then “saw and believed”. Yet all that was possible at that moment in time was that they saw an empty tomb and believed that Mary had been right in her fears—Jesus' body was indeed missing and gone from the tomb. Then we are told that the two disciples returned home, perhaps not knowing what else to do.

Someone has said that we have to step over Jesus' body to get to Easter. While that may be true at some levels, we can also say that it was the absence of Jesus' body that first alerted Mary and the disciples that something extraordinary might have taken place. After the disciples depart, Mary stays on at the tomb, perhaps to mourn and weep over the unfinished task she had come to do and certainly to wonder at the absence of the body which had been placed there on Friday evening.

Then Mary turns and looks into the tomb. It is only then that she observes two angels inside the tomb. These angels speak to Mary and ask her why she is weeping. She is understandably flustered. She tries to explain, “They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him.” Mary then turns and looks around her, further bewildered by all that she has experienced already, so early on that first Easter morning.

In the gloom of early dawn, she sees a person she presumes to be the gardener who addresses her as “woman” at first and asks her why she weeps and who it is she is looking for. Still intent on the missing body of Jesus, Mary does not recognize that here in front of her stands the risen Christ.

It is not until Christ calls her by name that Mary’s vision clears and in an instant she turns again in her progression from bewilderment to belief. She finally focuses and really sees that it is her teacher & friend, Jesus, who stands before her. She cries out “Rabbouni” in recognition.

This is the critical moment of clarity in this Easter story. It is here that Mary breaks through from bewilderment to belief. In an instant, in one of those blink moments, Mary knows without any doubt that a risen Jesus stands in front of her. In that instant, she becomes certain that Jesus has somehow broken the boundaries of death.

Jesus then instructs her to return to the disciples and tell them that he is ascending to God. Mary goes out to share the amazing news, the shocking news, the good news with the disciples saying, “I have seen the Lord!”

And good news is hard to contain! Mary’s good news report did indeed begin the sharing of the good news that Jesus Christ is here, among us still! From her testimony and the testimony of others who subsequently saw and experienced the presence of the risen Christ, word spread through Jerusalem, across Israel, and throughout the nations and in time, around the entire globe. And the Good News of Easter continues to spread down through the ages to this year and to this very Easter morning!

Mary encountered the risen Christ. She recognized him when he called her by name. John’s report of this story gives us a sense of a genuine piece of history—some ambiguity, some mystery, some fear, some confusion, some bewildered running around, and then, a moment when everything comes into focus. And isn’t that the way our faith dawns on us?

I can imagine that there are some of us who get to Easter morning and realize that we’re not really sure where we stand on this amazing and shocking story of the resurrection. It may feel quite familiar to experience, along with Mary and the first disciples, a strange mixture of confusion, disbelief, unclarity, and apprehension as we approach the empty tomb.

Our faith isn’t always neat and tidy. Our faith may be a precarious balance between hope and promise, between doubt and belief, between fear and astonishment. Fundamentally, our faith rests on the premise that Jesus Christ was resurrected from the dead on an Easter morning long ago and, in the end, each of us must come to know the living Christ in our own hearts for us to truly believe.

Today’s Easter story is not just a story of long ago and far away! The Easter story continues as we encounter the living Christ in our lives and as we listen for God’s call to each of us in this world. God invited Mary and the first disciples to move into the light of that first Easter morning and God invites us to new awareness and to a renewed faith as we move into the light of this Easter morning.

My hope for each of us here today is:
that you might feel Christ's presence,
that you might hear Christ call your name,
that you might see the living Christ move in your life.

Let us celebrate this day the Good News that Christ is risen! Alleulia! Amen!