

Plymouth Congregational Church of Fort Wayne, UCC  
April 1, 2018

**“April Fools/Easter Fear”**

“So they went out and fled from the tomb,  
for terror and amazement had seized them;  
and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.”

Mark 16:8

Prelude:

Through Lent we worked with the theme:  
following where compassion wanders.

Through Holy Week, we wandered  
through Maundy Thursday and Good Friday,  
recalling so much that is pivotal in our  
Christian faith, so much vital detail and  
defining content for our Christian witness.  
Holy Week paved way to the cross,  
full of sorrow and suffering,  
leading to Jesus’ death and burial.

This morning we have opportunity to consider  
the great theme of resurrection that serves to  
anchor our Christian faith. Though Jesus  
suffered, and died, and was buried,  
there came upon those who lived and loved him  
the experience of resurrection.

Resurrection - a profound mystery and conviction;  
Jesus lived, suffered unto death and was buried,  
and he rose. In the words of the Apostle’s Creed,  
**“On the third day he rose again;  
He ascended into heaven,  
He is seated at the right hand of (God) ...”**

The “right hand of God” - is everywhere.

Resurrection is what enables  
 Christians to profess - Jesus didn't simply live,  
 once upon a time, past tense.  
 By way of his rising, he lives. He is loose. And free.  
 And current. And we are connected with his Presence.

When I was serving in Michigan, every Easter included  
 a sunrise service hosted by the Second Baptist Church  
 of Ann Arbor, where the Rev. Emmett Green - a man of  
 blessed memory in life - served. And often that service  
 would close with the singing of the hymn some of you  
 may recall:

*I serve a risen Savior  
 He's in the world today.  
 I know that He is living,  
 Whatever (folks) may say.  
 I see His hand of mercy;  
 I hear His voice of cheer;  
 And just the time I need Him  
 He's always near.  
 He lives, He lives, Christ Jesus lives today!  
 He walks with me and talks with me along life's narrow way.  
 He lives, He lives, salvation to impart!  
 You ask me how I know He lives?  
 He lives within my heart.*

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This morning our theme is resurrection,  
 and I want to impress upon us that  
 resurrection changes everything about how  
 we understand life and death.

Resurrection changes everything  
 with regard to how we measure and  
 assess our existence.

Three points to make:

- (1) Resurrection enables and empowers us to live as children of God - in accord with Jesus and his love.
- (2) Resurrection keeps us humble and hopeful; just a little bit on edge, a little nervous, which I think is a good thing. Our God is full of surprises. God is working where we least expect.
- (3) Easter asks a lot of us. Are we fools to follow where our crucified and risen Savior has need?

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Permit a word about Easter and its intersection with April 1, April Fool's Day. I was thinking such a convergence of holy day and humor had to have happened before, and of course, it has. I didn't realize, though, that the last time such a junction occurred was in 1956, way before I had any interest. The overlap won't be repeated again until 2029 - and then only one other time this century. So this is not a common thing.

In spirit with the day, I need to ask,  
 Have you heard about the new version of the Lord's Prayer that is gaining traction? A significant change has been made and is being recommended for all churches to use.

"forgive us our tweets, as we forgive those who tweet against us."

In writing to the Corinthians, Paul once made reference to fools, saying "**We are fools for the sake of Christ.**" (I Corinthians 4:10). In his estimate, Christians were contrarians when measured against whatever was culturally dominant.

We've failed to fully embrace this radical dimension in the thought of Paul and his understanding of what it meant to follow Jesus, our crucified and risen Savior who lives in our present. Paul wasn't the first, but he far exceeded many in understanding - resurrection changes everything. Nothing remains the same in how we relate to God, the world, to each other. If we follow where the Risen One wanders, we will be perceived as rather odd, peculiar.

As fools.

Dare we entertain being fools  
for the sake of Christ?

Take note: Paul didn't say,  
I'm a fool for the sake of Christ,  
but we are fools.

Paul meant by this that we bless  
when others curse,  
we endure, we persist,  
when subject to the ill-mannered  
and threatening behavior of others;  
we are kindly, when others  
besmirch or slander, when insults  
are hurled without second thought.

We are fools, Paul asserts,  
for daring to live and love in the world  
as Jesus lived and loved in the world.

It is not easy for the church to get  
this story straight, or to keep from  
corrupting it. This reminds me of an  
old story. Three fools died and landed  
themselves at the gates of heaven, where  
they encountered St. Peter,  
serving as a gatekeeper.

**“You can enter if you answer correctly one simple question,” Peter said. “What is Easter?”**

The first of the fools was quick to raise his hand and responds - **“That’s easy enough - Easter is in the month of November, it’s a great family day, celebrated with Turkey and dressing and football games.”** “Wrong!” said Peter.

The second fool was asked, **“How about you, what is Easter?”** **“It is in December, I think, a celebration of Jesus and his birth, with trees being decorated and presents gift-wrapped and exchanged.”** **“Good gracious! Wrong!”** said St. Peter.

Peter then turned his eyes upon the third fool. **“What is Easter?”** The third answered: **Easter is a big Christian holiday, coincides closely with the Jewish Passover, with Christians remembering in a holy week, the death of Jesus by Romans, who hung Jesus on a cross, and when he died, they buried him in a cave that was sealed with a large boulder.**

St. Peter was impressed. So far, so good. The third fool continued on. **“Every year the Christians celebrate as the boulder is moved aside - Jesus comes out ... and, if he sees his shadow, there will be six more weeks of winter.”**

Knowing Easter, keeping Easter, without mixing up the message - this is not always easy for Christians.

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### **No Joke: Easter Changes Everything**

It was a decade ago Brian McLaren wrote a book

with a simple message: **Everything Must Change.**  
In this work, and elsewhere (*A New Kind of Christianity*), McLaren speaks of four global emergencies that we face today.

- (1) Crisis of the planet - we are consuming earth and its resources in way that is suicidal;
- (2) Crisis of poverty - the great gap between those who have, and those who have not.
- (3) Crisis of peace - violence, war, threats of war; a security of crisis.

The fourth crisis is, for me, most interesting.

- (4) The Crisis of Religion - what McLaren's calls a "**spirituality crisis.**" This crisis is precipitated by the fact that our world's religions (note the plural - religions) are failing to recognize and provide creative response to crises 1-3, the threats to the planet that come by way of rapacious greed, poverty, and war.

I mention this - for this being Easter, we should have enough sense to proclaim - with God, who has done great things in and through Jesus Christ, all things are possible!

If Easter changes everything - it changes us, and our capacity to work for good, to be good, and to be creatively engaged in the world compliant with God's love of the world.

No joke.

When our lives intersect with the God, who works through discarded bodies that have been sealed in stone,  
everything can change.

We live in league with the God who conveys power and promise to live as

children of God, without fear  
of fault or failure.

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**No Joke:  
Easter Changes Everything,  
Even our Understanding of Where  
And How God is at Work for Good**

Curious the resurrection of Jesus –  
it happened at night. According to our  
scriptures, the empty tomb was discovered  
early in the morning, Jesus already having been  
raised. At night. In the dark. Undercover.  
God operates, we need say, incognito.

Not just undercover of darkness,  
as in the shadows.  
Nothing, in a far more extreme state.  
Resurrection happened in total darkness.

Recall the way our story is narrated.  
The great mystery of our faith transpired,  
predawn,  
when Jesus was wrapped in a shroud,  
sealed in stone.  
No shadows there.  
It was dark beyond all dark,  
a deep darkness admitting no light.

Yet then and there, in ways  
imperceptible to the human eye,  
exceeding our imagination,  
life came out of death.

Walter Brueggemann: **“The God of the Bible  
is an inscrutable power for life in the world.”**

This inscrutable side of the Divine,  
a power at work for life in the world,  
makes Easter a little unnerving,  
indeed, a little frightening.  
The God we address can't be domesticated.  
God is on the move, working in ways,  
with people and in places that defy the mind.

As with others, God is working with us, through us,  
in ways we may not even be aware.

Few portions of scripture capture this sense of  
uneasiness – this inscrutability, this defiance  
even of death, at times, in places, we can't  
conceive, as does the author of Mark's gospel.

The women are up early,  
Problem solving, worried about the  
stone seal; Mark gives us an editorial  
comment on the stone, it was “in fact,  
a very large stone.” In coming upon  
the gravesite, they see it has been  
disturbed, indeed, emptied;  
they have an angel encounter – who issues  
instructions – do not fear (which is never  
really consoling in scripture) - you seek  
Jesus – he is not here – but up and ahead  
of you. Tell Peter and boys, get to Galilee,  
for there you will find the one you seek.

The women, we read, fled the scene.  
They were seized with terror and amazement.  
And they said nothing, for the fear  
that possessed them. One scholar has  
translated the Greek saying “**they didn't  
breathe a word of it to anyone, talk about  
terrified**” (see “The Gospel of Mark,”  
Daryl D. Schmidt, p. 151, *The Scholars Bible*).

Such an ending (at Mark 16:8) has proven less than satisfying to any number of people. Pay attention to the footnotes that appear in Bibles and you find all sorts of scribbling, trying to calm the nerves of the concerned. But the author, I sense, knew something about Easter and its resurrection proclamation -

The author knew Easter changes everything.

In an Easter understanding of life,  
there is a God whom we cannot escape.  
This God threatens not with death,  
    but threatens with life,  
    with goodness and mercy,  
        with love that will suffer  
            to save and redeem  
                and deliver the Beloved.

You - are the Beloved.

We - are the Beloved.

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**Easter asks a lot of us.  
Are we fools to follow where our  
crucified and risen Savior has need?**

A third thought. Authentic Easters are intensely personal. I suppose we either high five each other,  
    or shrug the shoulders. But to each of us comes a question really, are we fools to follow where our crucified and risen Savior has need? Can we, will we, follow where the compassion of Christ wanders today?

I'm not suggesting that we act foolishly to feed our own passions. There is a proverb in our scriptures we need to reference, that defines the fool as one "**always right in their own eyes,**"

while the wise are willing to listen to others (Proverbs 12:15). I am asking that we give fresh consideration to the depth of our convictions.

The choir sang “When I Survey the Wondrous Cross,” the Isaac Watts hymn, on Good Friday with great passion – and I found myself wrestling with the line from the hymn:

**“Love so amazing, so divine,  
Demands my soul, my life, my all.”**

My soul, my life, my all? This gave me pause. Can I – or we – ever be all in on Easter? Permit a quote from William Stringfellow, one that helps me resolve the question.

**“Thus the vocation of the baptized person is a simple thing: it is to live from day to day, whatever the day brings, in this extraordinary unity, in this reconciliation with all people and all things, in this knowledge that death has no more power, in this truth of the resurrection. It does not really matter exactly what a Christian does from day to day. What matters is that whatever one does is done in honor of one’s own life, given to one by God and restored to one in Christ, and in honor of the life into which all humans and all things are called. The only thing that really matters to live in Christ instead of death”** (Wm. Stringfellow, *Instead of Death: New and Expanded Ed.*, first published in ’63, revised in 2004).

Easter invites life in the love of Christ,  
instead of death.

Easter invites hope, and prayer, and service,  
in the love of Christ,  
instead of death.

Easter invites that we be filled with courage,  
to live gospel life, with peace, even joy,  
instead of fear of death.

May we be so wise, so foolish, so free,  
And may God be glorified.

Amen.

*(Sermons are typically composed in haste,  
for the demands of the day are many;  
so be charitable as you read; and remember:  
the contents of this sermon have not been edited  
and may or may not have been a part of its public presentation)*