

Plymouth Congregational Church of Fort Wayne, UCC

April 16, 2017

Easter Sunday

**“Looking for Jesus”**

“... the angel said to the women, “Do not be afraid;  
I know that you are looking for Jesus, who was crucified.  
He is not here; for he has been raised.”

Matthew 28:5-6

**PRELUDE**

Easter.

What a grand and glorious day to celebrate  
the resurrection of Jesus Christ,  
the galvanizing event long recognized  
as the “foundation” of Christian faith.

Christian faith has germinated a variety  
of forms and expressions that defies uniformity;  
but faith’s seed has always been  
    singular and inseparable  
from the mystery of resurrection,  
a tenacious affirmation of life,  
expressly in the face of death.

Our opening hymn this morning  
put it this way: **“Death in vain forbids  
Christ rise, God has opened paradise”**  
(v. 3, “Easter Hymn”).

As stated in the Apostle’s Creed:  
**“Jesus (the) Christ suffered under Pontius Pilate,  
was crucified, died and was buried;  
he descended to the dead.  
On the third day he rose again ...”**

In the “UCC Statement of Faith,”  
the summary is offered:  
**“In Jesus Christ, the man of Nazareth,  
our crucified and risen Savior,  
God has come to us ...”**

In “A New Zealand Prayer Book,” it is  
stated: **(O God), supreme and holy ...  
You have revealed and proved your  
love for us in Jesus Christ,  
who lived and died and rose again”**  
(NCH, No. 886).

In the UC of Canada,  
it is stated: **“We are called to be the Church ...  
to proclaim Jesus, crucified and risen ...  
In life, in death, in life beyond death,  
God is with us.  
We are not alone. Thanks be to God”**  
(NCH, No. 887).

These are ecclesiastical angles that  
reference resurrection  
as the tangent and touchstone  
from which faith springs.  
In the beginning there was community,  
followers of Jesus,  
and the community proclaimed:  
Jesus died; Jesus was raised; Jesus lives.

In the beginning there were women  
and men who proclaimed: the Jesus  
who died on the cross has come calling,  
and we are his disciples.  
The Spirit in him lives in us.

In the beginning there was community,  
a God-serving people drawn together,  
clustered with resolve, bound by hope,

sustained by promise of Presence,  
and a refusal to abandon the Way  
informed by Jesus' death, life and love.

In the beginning.

This is where my mind is wrestling  
with Easter this year.

In the beginning.

The beginning is always cloaked in mystery,  
is it not? Which comes first - the chicken or the  
egg? Still working on that one!

You can't have Easter without Christmas;  
but you don't have Church without Easter;  
cradle leads to cross, but  
in the beginning,  
it was cross that was retraced to cradle.  
it was Easter resurrection that spawned  
curious followers, wanting to more,  
and evermore, to be enlisted  
by Immanuel, the One who abides.  
The task of Church is always -  
stay close to the beginning.

This is our task if Easter is to have any relevance,  
any significance beyond bunnies and bonnets  
and fanciful cultural diversions,  
to cling to the beauty and wonder that  
always mark and define our beginnings.

In The Revelation, you may recall,  
mention is made of seven churches,  
the first being the church of Ephesus.  
The First Congregational Church of  
Ephesus is credited with doing so much that  
was known to be good and faithful and true.

But the angel of the church was concerned, noting this: **“You have abandoned the love you had at first. Remember then from what you have fallen ...”** (Revelations 2:4-5).

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In the beginning. For if we fall away from Easter insight, we forfeit the jewels it provides for sparkling life. Every age is charged to remember and renew; not to reverence the past, but to reverence life even in the face of death.

Luther - 500th anniversary - quest to recapture the **primitive gospel**, to restore vibrancy of faith.

Arnold Toynbee, in his work, *An Historian's Approach to Religion*, 1956, “the annihilation of distance” that has occurred through technological advancement, which presents us with urgent task - to sort through religious essentials from nonessential accretions that have caused a corruption of faith; as a corrective, we need face-to-face encounter and recover with **“ancestral faith.”**

Yet another voice, more current, that of Brian McLaren, who draws a distinction between **“imperial and original Christianity:”**

**“The imperial gospel loves money, pleasure, and power; it lives by the sword, the gun, and the bomb of violence; the original gospel loves God, self, neighbor, and creation. The original gospel equips agents for justice, joy, and peace for all”** (B. McLaren blog, 4/9/17).

A restoration of primitive gospel,  
essential/ancestral faith,  
original Christianity, is the promise and  
power of Easter that we need seek.

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In the beginning.

Did you know that the oldest computer  
can be traced back to Adam and Eve?  
I heard of this just the other day from  
Roger Eversole. The oldest computer  
on record - traceable to Adam and Eve.

It was, surprise, surprise, an Apple.  
But it possessed extremely limited memory.  
Just 1 byte.

Then everything crashed.

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We are living, are we not, in an uncertain time,  
wondering when the next crash will occur.  
In the name of making ourselves great,  
    who will we bomb next?

When the obituary is written for our culture,  
extolling the convenience we cherish;  
the profit margins we reap;  
how great our power,  
how slick our mastery of earth and  
exploitation of its treasures,  
will mention be made of  
Strangelove and death by decadence?

We are in need of Easter to spare us  
Strangelove, and death by decadence.

Decadence: “falling away; decay;”  
a willful wasting of life.

We are physically designed to decay;  
we live within time defined by a birth and death.  
I realize this as my years mount -  
and need come to terms that I can no longer  
bound out of bed in the morning  
without being reminded of some ache or pain.

But we also suffer the consequences of  
moral decadence, unbecoming behavior  
for a people who should know better.

Decadence is always prelude to  
to cross, to crash, to the unraveling of life.

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Our gospel lesson this morning takes us to  
the beginning of Easter as recorded by Matthew.  
Matthew takes us to the first day of the week  
as the day was dawning. In the beginning.

Mary Magdalene and “the other Mary” (a veiled  
reference to Mother Mary?) went to the tomb.  
And then, fireworks. An earthquake, a shaking  
of foundations, an angel (bona fide - make  
no mistake! - superhero strength, appearance  
like lightening, clothing white as snow);  
the tomb’s seal, the stone is rolled away,  
seeming with angelic ease.

In Matthew we have guards at the tomb.  
The guards represent imperial rule, they  
are servants of Strangelove, and they  
contribute to the oppositional elements  
that want to ridicule resurrection as fake news.

The Marys encounter the angel, who speaks:  
**“Do not be afraid, I know that you are looking  
for Jesus, who was crucified. He is not here,  
for he has been raised”** (Matthew 28:6).

This is where I want us to pay attention.  
For Jesus died defending Torah –  
defending Word and Wisdom of God –  
in a decadent world enthralled with  
    its own power and might,  
    its capacity to crucify its dissidents.

And those who love him, who thought him  
dead and buried, go looking for him, but he is  
not to be found. Indeed. He has been raised.  
If raised, then where does he reside?  
Where is he to be found?

He isn't in the place as assigned by  
the decadent world. Indeed, he  
won't stay put in any place where  
his love would be restrained.

He is not in the tomb.  
He is not in the air,  
prepping for a landing.

He wasn't launched by God,  
up, up and away on a  
“mother of all missiles”  
into some otherworldly plain.

According to the Matthew,  
he is not in Jerusalem.

He really isn't in any place  
    you might expect.  
He is flying under the  
    radar, we might say.

According to the angel,  
Jesus has gone ahead - into Galilee  
(Matthew 28:7). If you are looking for  
Jesus, as per the angel instructions,  
get to Galilee - there you will see him.  
So the Marys are told.

So they take off, Mary and the Mother,  
running to tell the men who are sleeping in  
and nowhere to be found this morning.

Then they experience an "encounter."  
Jesus met them. And they grasped his feet  
(the "touch" in Matthew differs from John),  
and held on for dear life.

They worshipped.

And then instructions are delivered -  
go, tell the brothers. Go to Galilee.  
There they will see me.

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It has been said,  
**"Nothing is more responsible  
for the good old days  
than a bad memory."** Franklin Pierce Adams

Bad memory impairs Easter appreciation,  
the grand beginning, when a people looking  
for Jesus were told - he is going before you.

Seek and you will find,  
knock and it shall be opened to you" (Matthew 7:7);  
this is Matthew's teaching.  
But we need the clue - better be seeking,  
best be knocking in Galilee to understand.



So we need to understand Galilee.  
Today it is a major tourist area.  
Everybody's grand tour of the holy land  
includes the inland sea and surrounding  
environs. It's bucolic, tranquil.  
A northern "getaway," an escape  
from urban drama.

Before Jesus was lodged in scripture or  
cathedral stone and stained glass;  
before Jesus was projected into an alternative universe;  
before tying Jesus in doctrine and ritual,  
Jesus was found by way of encounter,  
within the hearts of the people he loved,  
and the people who refused to give up  
on the love he was disposed to give.  
He was found among the lost, the neglected,  
the poor and suffering - wherever God's tender  
mercies might bring healing and wholeness.

And so he is to be found even today,  
always popping up in unexpected ways  
in unexpected people.

Looking for Jesus this Easter?  
Look for him risen, alive, lodged within  
the people and places a decadent world neglects.

Look for him radiant, nail scarred,  
yet healing broken people, restoring  
hope to the forlorn and abandoned.  
Look for him yearning to impart  
the blessings of God's peace and mercy.  
Look for him at the Table that is open,  
that welcomes all.

And when you see, as see you will,  
rejoice and be glad.  
For in such love is our God magnified  
and exalted, now and forever.

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)*