

St. Paul's Congregational Church
April 21, 2019, Easter Sunday
John 20:1-18
The Rev. Cynthia F. Reynolds

Let us pray: may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

We began our 40 day journey through Lent with Ash Wednesday – with images of darkness, of destruction, of the colorless gray of ash – we confessed that we have not loved God with all our heart and soul and strength; we have not loved our neighbors as ourselves; we have been deaf to God's call to serve as Christ has served us. We are called to turn away from all that separates us from God and each other and believe the good news!

Last week we celebrated Palm Sunday – Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem – through the joy of our palm processions, we knew what was ahead for him during this Holy Week, and we so looked forward to this great celebration of Easter – the hope, the reminder that death does not have the last word.

And on Maundy Thursday we gathered to share communion and hear the Story again – reminders that we have fallen away from the commandment to love and serve God, to walk in the Light – not in the shadows.

This year it felt to me that Holy Week compressed all the elements of our Lenten observance in just 7 days! On Monday afternoon I was channel surfing and came upon the news of fire breaking out at Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris. So terribly quickly the fire grew – it was stunning to watch – and I found myself in tears – feeling and seeing the pain of so many, including many millions who don't identify as Christians.

Jim Wallis of Sojourners writes, "I was particularly moved by the images and videos of crowds of people of all faiths, perhaps even no current faith, gathered in the streets outside the cathedral singing hymns together, especially as the outcome was still uncertain – would the whole cathedral be destroyed. It was a remarkable outpouring of collective pain and collective hope, and in many ways felt fitting for the outset of Holy Week."

He continues, "Holy week for Christians represents a dramatic movement from pain to hope. We deeply feel and lament the pain Jesus Christ endured for us, but we also feel our personal pain and the world's pain. Then we rejoice as that pain gives way to the eternal hope that is

always available to us through the resurrection – a hope that is not just for ourselves but for the world. We say, “Christ is Risen! Christ is risen indeed!” with a joy that surpasses understanding.”

The next day we saw a haunting photograph of the inside of the cathedral – brightly lit with no roof remaining, ash and debris from the collapse of the spire, water pooling on the floor – looking toward the chancel and seeing the empty cross, back-lit, rising above all the destruction – a profound, quiet, statement of hope rising through the ashes. It was stunning in its simple beauty, amid the pain of the tragic events of the prior day.

This picture reminded me of something I’ve always believed: Good Friday doesn’t make sense without Easter and Easter doesn’t make sense without Good Friday. That photograph of Notre Dame sums up the whole of Lent, of this Holy Week observance, right up to today to our Easter celebration

Cameron Trimble, of the Center for Progressive Renewal, wrote, “Resurrection is meaningful if we feel the pain of the crucifixion. We can’t rush it. We must let it burn us, tear us down, open us up. Then from those sacred ashes, we rise again to rebuild. Life, death, life again. Paris will rebuild Notre Dame – but I pray we remember this day...the pain, the tears, the disbelief. Our heartbreak and subsequent hope are the cornerstones of all that will come next.”

But there was more this week:

At the same time as Notre Dame was burning, a 2,000 year old section of a mosque in Jerusalem was threatened by a fire – accidentally started too – but here, firefighters were able to successfully contain the blaze before it could spread. This event barely made the local news.

At the same time, a continent away in Louisiana, three century old historically black churches in St. Landry Parish had burned to the ground – deliberately set by an arsonist. This was in the news for sure – but the reaction from people was very different, very quiet.

However, following the Notre Dame fire and the reports of so much money given to rebuild this magnificent building, donations to rebuild these churches surged to 1.8 million dollars: the pastor of one of the churches, Mount Pleasant Baptist Church, said, “It gives you new hope in society. It gives you new hope in people because it shows a lot of people have a good heart.”

Easter is a desperately needed reminder every year that pain, loss, and death don’t get the final word. The resurrection of Jesus Christ teaches us that there always is and always will be hope – we do not carry that hope in vain.

The good news of Easter is not only that Jesus Christ has been raised from the dead and lives, but also that the power of the resurrection can transform our lives as well. The power of the resurrection calls us back to the basic message: love God, love neighbor. The power of the resurrection gives us great and lasting hope, and calls us to respond, gives us the strength and courage to respond. New life is possible, right here, right now, today!

John's gospel tells us it was on the first day of the week that Mary Magdalene came to the tomb alone early, while it was still dark - she hasn't come to tend the body but to grieve her loss, perhaps to feel closer to Jesus by keeping vigil at his tomb. She finds the stone has been moved – Jesus is not there.

Since "it was still dark," maybe she had spent the night tossing and turning, sleepless from sorrow and grief. We wonder what she's thinking, and what she expects to find. It's sure that she does not expect, of all things, an empty tomb.

She runs back and meets Simon Peter and the other disciple whom Jesus loved and they went back to the tomb. They look in and find the tomb empty and the two men went back home. This is a very different response from that of Mary, who felt compelled to share the news, and then to return to the tomb, and remain there.

At this point, the text tells us, Peter and John didn't make the connection between what their eyes were seeing and what their ears had heard from Jesus on more than one occasion, about his suffering, dying, and rising again.

Mary stands weeping outside of the tomb – she stoops to look inside and sees two angels sitting where the body of Jesus had been. They ask her, “Woman, why are you weeping?”

“They have taken my Lord and I do not know where he is.”

She turns around and sees Jesus standing but she doesn't recognize him – he asks her for a second time, “Woman, why are you weeping?” And then she hears Jesus call her name - she turns back again, and she recognizes him – he tells her to go back to the disciples and tell them – she went immediately and said to the disciples, “I have seen the Lord.”

There's something here to really pay attention to: in all 4 gospels, Jesus entrusts such wonderful news and responsibility to a woman, of all people; remarkable and ironic, given the status of women in communities of faith – and it's in John's gospel at a crucial moment in the story, a woman – Mary Magdalene, represents that thread of hope that runs through the scriptures: God's trust of the little ones, the ones on the margins, the ones without voice. These are the ones who God trusts and lifts up to shine like

the sun! Mary Magdalene – the first apostle who went forth and proclaimed Jesus raised from the dead! We wouldn't know this story today, without her would we.

Imagine hearing Jesus call your name as he did to Mary. Imagine your response. Imagine how this will change your life! Because it will. And then, imagine who you would tell.

The good news of Easter is that the power of the resurrection can transform our lives as well. The power of the resurrection gives us such hope, and calls us to respond, gives us the strength and courage to respond. New life is possible, right here, right now, today! The power of the resurrection calls us back to the basic message: love God, love neighbor.

As the world became one, united in grief over the flames at Notre Dame, so too are we are called into this oneness every day someone is suffering, every day there is violence, every day there is oppression, every day people are cold, hungry, enslaved. The events of this week prove that we have the capacity to become one!

Out of the ashes comes Easter!

How are we living into this Easter story? What brought you here this morning? Do we hear Jesus calling our name? Or does it get drowned out by the noise of our ordinary, busy days. What difference does this extraordinary story make in our lives?

We are in the midst of celebrating the 125th anniversary of our ministry at St. Paul's Congregational Church – here in Nutley and indeed around the world. Our ministry has flourished for 125 years, through wartime, through tough economic times, through the good and the hard times. And we look forward to continuing our ministry for years to come – our ministry of teaching and learning the story, listening for Jesus calling our names, and responding. We are indeed bound together to go forth and live as Christians.

Isn't that the very message of Easter? To go forth to live and love and serve? To take in the story and go live the story? To allow this awesome story to define who we are, to change who we are – to hear Jesus calling our name, both as individuals and as church? God has called us together by name at this time and place – how shall we respond?

Our lives today are so complicated, so compartmentalized, aren't they. But the Easter story in all its elegant simplicity can and will change our lives if we let it. We come together this morning expectant, hopeful, joyful: how do we keep that going? By not just going home as those disciples did.

We take the time to hear Jesus calling us by name, hearing the message, responding to the message and boldly proclaiming that God's life

is stronger than any death, that God's love is stronger than any hate, that God's peace is more powerful than human violence. The truth is: love and life and forgiveness are the final realities of the world.

Today we celebrate with all the wonder, awe, and thanksgiving for what God has done for us. Today we all experience the resurrection joy – now let's go tell somebody. Share that joy! The story continues: Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! Alleluia!

Amen.

CALL TO WORSHIP:

Christ has risen! Christ has risen indeed! Surprising us when our eyes are downcast, and lifting our heads gently so that we see love waiting before us: the risen Christ comes to us. In our midst in the days of doubt, inviting faith, bringing peace, and sending us out renewed: the risen Christ comes to us. Staying with kindly understanding when we struggle to believe and moving closer so that we are reassured: the risen Christ comes to us in love. Let us bring our thanks and praise: