

St. Paul's Congregational Church, April 16, 2017  
 Easter Sunday – “Live in the Joy”  
 Matthew 28:1-10, 16-20  
 Rev. Cynthia F. Reynolds

Let us pray: may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

I'll never forget when a few years ago at my church in Middlebury a young woman came up to me after worship the week before Palm Sunday and asked me, “Is it ok if we do Easter next week?” She was from a large family – not really consistent in their participation in the life of the church – certainly they were there on the great festivals of the church – Christmas and Easter – or when there was a crisis in the family – but I really didn't know what she meant and asked her to say a little more about the question. She said, “Well, the whole family will be here next week and we want to come to church together and have our Easter dinner – is that ok?” I said, “We're glad to have you all in worship any time and being together as family is always good.” She asked again, “But is it ok if we do Easter – have the Easter baskets, candy – all those things?”

I always remember those questions and that conversation at this time of year and I continue to ask myself and today ask you, “What does it mean to do Easter?”

We all have family traditions around the Easter celebration - certain foods for dinner, certain rituals for Easter morning. It's the coming of Spring – my father taught me that the day to plant green peas is Good Friday and I did just that again this year. The robins are back, the buds are on the trees, my pansies are in full bloom in my window boxes, my hibiscus plants that I sheltered inside all winter are beginning to show new life. It's a wonderful time of year! Seeing these signs of new life brings such hope and joy and that's all good.

What indeed, though, does it mean to do Easter? And the second question, what difference does this great celebration of the resurrection make to us every day?

I've shown my confirmation classes over the years the 1970's Rock opera Jesus Christ Superstar during Holy Week: you all probably know it's the story of Holy Week ending with the crucifixion, done entirely in music and dance. There's no real resurrection in the movie, though it is there if you look for it.

It's always interesting to watch the confirmands and their reactions to it and to really listen to what they have to say as it plays. I'll usually talk them through the events they're seeing – who all the characters are – encouraging them to listen to the words of the songs to get the story in a new way. It can get very quiet in the room when the scenes of the flogging of Jesus come – when Jesus is nailed onto the cross - they wince as they watch – some of them look away. And in that silence one year, one of them sat up straight and looked at me – she asked – why do we make such a big deal out of Christmas when this is what our faith is all about? Our faith is about Jesus suffering and dying but then being resurrected!

What a great question, a great observation – and we talked about it. I said there's no Easter without Christmas – there's no Easter without Holy Week ending with the tragedy of Good Friday. Our faith journey includes all of these stops, doesn't it. But many of us have trouble with the painful parts of the journey.

A friend of mine shed some light on this too – she said, we know how to celebrate birthdays – presents, parties, the joy that surrounds the birth of a child. Christmas is about a birthday and maybe that’s partly why it’s such a bigger deal. But we don’t know how to deal so well with the sorrow of Holy Week that precedes the festival of the resurrection. It’s all part of our faith journey, isn’t it – we believe that these extraordinary events happened. And we have to make a choice to let them change our lives.

How indeed do we do Easter.

Let’s try this: today we celebrate the resurrection of our Lord, Jesus Christ.

But every day we do Easter.

We remember that Jesus died for us and we are so very grateful that this isn’t the end of our story. We celebrate that Jesus rose from the dead and is going ahead of us. The celebration of Easter doesn’t make sense without Good Friday and Good Friday doesn’t make sense without Easter morning. That Jesus is with us always to the end of the age.

And if we believe that, live that, our lives will change. The choice is ours.

Remember that woman in Middlebury who wanted to know if it was ok to “do Easter” on Palm Sunday? There’s more to her story – her 4 year old daughter had been born with a heart defect and it was during Holy Week that year when she was to have life saving surgery. Her family was gathering from all over the country to support each other during this frightening time – a wonderful thing. But their Easter celebration, the doing of Easter, didn’t happen when they opened their Easter baskets, had dinner together, came to church together. It happened as the surgery was successful, when the little girl fully recovered and is now an active, energetic young woman. Living in the attitude of gratitude for her recovery, for her new life, is doing Easter, isn’t it.

Maybe the celebration of Easter doesn’t end with the empty tomb – it begins there. The promise of new life. The promise of mercy, of forgiveness. The promise of Jesus’ eternal presence, walking with us and before us in every moment of our lives. And doing Easter means paying attention to and acting on the great commission: Jesus tells his followers then and now: go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you.

What happens after the great celebration of this day is over? Tomorrow we go back to work, to school, facing the same issues we always face – the uncertainty of the world situation – Syria, Afghanistan, Korea are on our minds and hearts for sure, long and difficult commutes, dealing with sickness or loss in our families, doing homework, studying for exams, the simple – yet not so simple – acts of getting along with each other.

With tomorrow comes “doing Easter” for me and for you. Tomorrow and every day we’re called to remember the great commission; to live out the teachings of Jesus that have profound implications in our most everyday activities. Tomorrow and every day we’re called to explore how this incredible, unexpected, mysterious event of the resurrection impacts us day after day. And it’s our choice to make – we can put the celebration away for another year or we can continue our faith journey, together, restored and refreshed and even challenged by the observance yet again of that amazing good news: Christ has risen.

How do we live out this good news? What difference does it make in the routine of our daily living? How does it affect our on-going faith journey?

It seems that every year during Holy Week something happens that deeply challenges me on my own journey of faith. One year it was the aftermath of a youth retreat at my home church – during the evening some of the kids went outside and brought in their hidden stash of beer. The other advisor and I realized something wasn't right and we found the empties outside the door to the parish house. It was a long night indeed as we talked with the high schoolers about what had happened and how that breach of trust had such an impact on our life together. I shall never forget that Holy Week when I placed a beer can on my desk and struggled to deal with what had gone on that night. As I struggled to let go and let God. And that's an ongoing battle for me as I suspect it is for most of us.

This year again it's also about breach of trust as we listen to the stories of too many politicians. It's also about the reality of the possibility of war in Korea, the continuing fighting in the Middle East – the use of the biggest non-nuclear bomb ever this week.

It's about those in our midst who struggle with the loss of someone dear – the empty chair at the table at Easter dinner today brings deep pain. Next weekend I will be in my childhood home with my family, cleaning, remembering, sorting, throwing out so much stuff that accumulates after 65 years there, bringing some of those treasures back here to New Jersey - as we prepare to put that home on the market.

We all have our own challenges in our lives that don't go away with the festival of Easter, don't we. And it's much too easy to be dragged down by them. But doing Easter also reminds us that God is in charge – God is in control – and if God can do something as outrageous and mysterious as raising Jesus from the dead, God can help us deal with every challenge we have. All we have to do is ask for the help and we'll get it. What a relief that is for me. That's what gives me great hope for today and tomorrow. Doing Easter is about hope, isn't it. It's about treating each other well, as we would like to be treated. It's about walking with each other in all the joys and sorrows and challenges of life. It's about letting go and letting God. It's about expecting the outrageous, the impossible – in the very ordinariness of our daily lives.

On Friday I had a call from a good friend – Iryna's on the Glen Ridge Ambulance Squad and last week she had a call to a home in town. The patient is on hospice care and he'd fallen. His wife and daughter couldn't get him back into his chair alone and called for help from the Squad. The crew went to the house – these folks know how to help lift people and as Iryna lifted the patient back into bed, he made a comment about appreciating his dance partner. They both laughed about that – and the call was completed.

On Friday while Iryna was in a Petco store in the checkout line, at the next register a woman discovered she hadn't brought her wallet with her and wanted to pay by check. The store wouldn't accept a check – no exceptions.

Now what. Well, Iryna told the woman, you can write me a check and I'll pay for your stuff. Really? You'd do that? Sure, she said – no problem. As they looked at each other Iryna said, "You look familiar – I know we've met but it's not coming to me where." After a few minutes of talking, it turns out, the woman was the daughter of that man who'd needed help back to bed. She'd been at the house when the Ambulance

Squad came - and they had a great conversation, ending with the man's daughter saying, "So good to see my Dad's dance partner again! Thank you so much."

When Iryna got into her car, she immediately called me – overflowing with excitement and gratitude and joy. She named the gift of grace she'd just been given and received, the joy of encountering the Holy Spirit in Petco, of all places. We agreed that those moments happen often – but we have to pay attention. That's doing Easter isn't it – those moments when our faith collides into a so very ordinary moment of our lives, changing us – opening us to the new life God has given and continues to give to all of us.

Doing Easter is about letting God lead us to new life: into new life sure of Jesus' promise that he is with us always. And it's about being surprised by a joy that passes all human understanding – just like on Friday in Petco!

Today, right now, let us hear Jesus' voice speak through the words of scripture, of prayer. Let it sing through the notes of the music. Let us hear it in the voices of family and friends – and then let us, like Mary there at the tomb, and my friend in Petco, share with others the Good news of God in the Risen Jesus Christ. Go in peace and tell the world that you have seen the Lord!

Today we celebrate the resurrection. What a free and awesome gift that is! The challenge and joy is this: tomorrow and all the days to come let us continue doing Easter. And may we continue to be surprised by God's overflowing and awesome grace. Alleluia! Happy Easter!

Christ has risen!

He has risen indeed! Amen.