

**Seeing Easter Again**  
**John 20:1-18**  
**First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)**  
**April 4, 2021 – Easter Sunday**  
**Rev. Jill Cameron Michel**

Let's play a word association game. I'm going to say a word and I want you to say the first thing that comes to your mind.

Peanut butter... I assume at least some of you said *jelly*, maybe *crackers*, perhaps someone out there responded by saying *allergy*.

Sky... Maybe you said *clouds* or *sun*, *birds* or *blue*.

Easter... So, what came to mind first? Bunny? Eggs? Maybe since today is Easter Sunday and we are in worship, perhaps your first thought was Jesus or resurrection.

Easter is many things for us. Let's be honest - even for those of us who understand it first as a Christian holiday, in fact, the high holy day of Christianity - we also associate Easter with things like Easter baskets and egg hunts, dresses and family dinners. Growing up Easter was always the time when women changed to white shoes and white purses. For many girls in my generation, it might have been the only time of year we had a hat to match our dress.

But, no matter how much we enjoy the food and festivities and shopping that we have come to associate with Easter, we also know it has great religious significance.

Easter for many of us was the day of our baptism. Easter is a day when worship songs are big and there is joy and celebration palpable in our gathering. Easter is the day when we celebrate resurrection...resurrection which begins with the story about Jesus, but which is also symbolic of so much within our faith.

After all, Christianity at its best is a religion of Easter people...people who understand that sin and death don't have the last word...people who see and create space for new life and second chances...people who extend these realities not only to ourselves, but to others.

And so, at Easter we celebrate. We bring our smiles and our confidence to worship. We proclaim, "Christ is Risen! Christ is risen, indeed!" Even with different understandings of exactly what happened and what those words mean, on Easter we proclaim them confidently. And often we proclaim them as much because of what we understand they mean for *us* as because of our understanding about what happened with Jesus.

We, as people who live hundreds and thousands of years after Jesus' presence on this earth, we have come to take for granted the joy of Easter. We, especially those of us who were raised in the church, have been so surrounded by the confident proclamation

of resurrection and forgiveness, new life and second chances that we assume that Easter was always bright and beautiful and celebratory. But what happens when we see Easter again?

What happens when we listen again to the stories?

What happens when we really pay attention?

If we do, and I will claim it is *important* we do so, then we hear some nuances we need in order to fully appreciate the Easters we know.

Because those early disciples did not wake up on that first Sunday morning after Jesus' crucifixion with joy in their hearts. They did not go to the tomb expecting Jesus to be alive. It doesn't matter how many times we read in the gospels that Jesus said or indicated or hinted at his upcoming resurrection...none of them were expecting it. And before we become critical of them, let's remember - we would not have been any different.

Rather, they woke up that Sunday morning as anyone who knows deep grief does. Perhaps as their eyes first opened, in that first moment of alertness, they were gifted with the ability to forget what they had experienced. Or maybe not, maybe it was a nightmare, a reliving of seeing Jesus arrested, watching him be beaten, listening as he cried out or took his last breath...maybe that is what woke them. Either way, in a mere split second they knew that they were waking up to a world without Jesus in it.

And I suspect that is what motivated the women - and depending on which gospel we read, the list of women differs, but in each of them there are women who wake up and go to the tomb. Mark and Luke say they went to prepare the body. The other gospels don't name that. But any of us who know grief can suspect that they woke up and just needed to be as close to Jesus as possible...so they went.

I suspect that same grief may have been what caused the other disciples not to go. Whether it was the reality that if they arrived at the tomb they would just have to admit again that Jesus was dead...whether it was their own fear that they too would be killed.

Of course in the reading from John we hear that two of them went. Mary came and got them. They went, seemingly because she needed them, because something wasn't right. And when they saw the empty tomb, did you notice? They didn't immediately celebrate. They just went home. And they went with grief, and now likely confusion, as their companions.

In Matthew, Luke and John, the stories shift pretty quickly. Jesus shows up. The women go and tell. Eventually he shows up to others. The word gets out.

But we who are so many years from this event often forget to even pause with Jesus' friends in their grief...in their confusion...in their hesitant hope. We just go straight to the joy of resurrection as if everyone should have been expecting it.

And maybe that's why we never read Mark's telling of this story in worship. Because we aren't really comfortable sitting in the pain. We don't really want to accompany Jesus' followers on that first Easter morning. We *want* to assume confidence and joy.

But I want us to hear how Mark tells this story because, if we are to really see Easter again, we sometimes have to sit with what is not satisfactory.

Here's what Mark writes:

When the sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices, so that they might go and anoint him. And very early on the first day of the week, when the sun had risen, they went to the tomb. They had been saying to one another, "Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?" When they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had already been rolled back. As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man, dressed in a white robe, sitting on the right side; and they were alarmed. But he said to them, "Do not be alarmed; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here. Look, there is the place they laid him. But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you." 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 16:1-8, NRSV).

Let's sit with that for a minute.

In John's version, which Tad read for us earlier, Peter and the other disciple simply returned home. Mary didn't recognize Jesus. And even though John tells us she went and told the others, when Jesus appears to them, they are still locked up together, hiding out.

In Luke's version when the women told what they had experienced, the other disciples didn't believe them.

Matthew tells us that the women left the tomb with fear and great joy - so even though they did share what was told to them, they were fearful.

And Mark, which we just heard, in what scholars believe to be its original form, ends saying that they were too afraid to tell. Of course, we should note, that in the form we have it, Mark has two endings - a "choose your own adventure" of sorts - both which were added later seemingly to wrap things up in a way that would make us more comfortable.

So, why not? Why not just shout “Christ is risen!”? Why not just move straight to the resurrection appearances? Why is it important to remember all this? Why should we spend time with the grief and fear and hesitation and unbelief of Mary and Peter and the other women and men who loved Jesus?

The reality is that we do know the story. We have heard it. Mark’s ending which says that they didn’t say anything to anyone...that wasn’t the final word. Someone did tell. Someone said something...someone believed...someone encountered the presence of Jesus...someone embraced resurrection...someone chose new life. And because they did, we can, too.

But, let us not lose how difficult this journey was. Just as we can’t go faithfully from the “Hosannas” of Palm Sunday to the “Christ is Risen” of Easter...neither can we assume that resurrection was easy to embrace, or that sharing the story was only joy-filled.

Rather, we are an Easter people who believe in new life because of women and men who risked their very lives...who faced their real fears...who stepped out into the world even when their grief was holding them back. It is because of these that we know the story and that today we can proclaim, “Christ is risen! Christ is risen, indeed!”

It is because of these that we carry a legacy of faith that speaks out in the face of fear and grief and disbelief...a faith that even when it doesn’t fully understand proclaims that Christ is risen. When we are willing to see Easter again, we realize this is the faith we embrace and this is the faith we are called to share. Amen.