

The St. John's Pulpit

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ENDURING INFLUENCE

Gospel of John 1:5; 14:1; 20:1-18

Easter Sunday, April 16, 2017

The Rev. Dennis W. Foust, PhD, Senior Minister

She is mentioned fourteen times in the gospels; eight include her among a list of women. Usually she is listed first, meaning she was the most respected among the group. Despite how she has been portrayed in film and literature, she was never a prostitute. Jesus healed her from 'seven demons,' signifying severe emotional or psychological challenges. She was exceedingly grateful and became one of the women who financed Jesus' ministry. Her name was Mary from the thriving Galilean seaside village of Magdala; Mary Magdalene. She was one of Jesus' most devoted and persevering followers. In many ways, she is a patron saint for all exemplary women of commitment and vision.

Her spiritual burden had never been so heavy.

Mary Magdalene walked through the garden early that Sunday morning while it was still dark.

She finally arrived at Jesus' tomb and asked the guards to roll away the stone.

They argued at first until she gave to them a note from Joseph of Arimathea, owner of the tomb.

Once the Roman guards realized she had permission to enter the grave, they rolled the stone.

As dawn pierced the sky, some other women joined Mary at the tomb with spices.

According to their cultural custom, they had gathered to anoint Jesus' body.

Once finished, they realized their visions and dreams had died with Jesus; all was now gone.

He had been a wonderful Rabbi and had changed their lives; but that short chapter was over.

With heavy hearts, they stepped outside the tomb and asked the guards to replace the stone.

If you go to Jerusalem today, ask a tour guide to show you the tomb of that old rabbi Jesus.

Were you anticipating a different ending to the Jesus story?

Did you expect something along the line, "*He arose; and they all lived happily ever after?*"

Does this telling of the story make you feel helpless, hopeless, angry or empty?

That is how life is experienced by millions of people who live without Jesus' resurrection.

Without hope, life is aimless, helpless and empty every day.

This partially explains why there is so much hate, violence, selfishness, fear and greed in the world.

Of course, some people smile at the story of Jesus' resurrection; more a cynical grin – a smirk.

They ask, "*How dumb do these people have to be to believe this resurrection ruse?*"

And, some people wonder if your religious life is culture or commitment.

Beloved, please allow me to be pastorally real and lovingly truthful this morning.

Unless you are careful, Easter will become just another holiday on the clothesline of your calendar.

God needs you to understand the true message of Easter at the core of your being.

There is a message in the world that was prevalent before and during the days of Jesus' teaching.

The message is that God wants people to be ashamed, guilty, afraid, judgmental, biased and legalistic.

God and the world need you to be awake to the implications of this day for all people every day.

As Christ's Church, you must be fully awake to the enduring influence of Jesus' resurrection!

Beloved, Jesus' resurrection tells you why you are Christ's Church in the world!

***Christ is risen! Christ is risen indeed!**

Easter is NOT a holiday; Easter is a Holy Day showing you how to live every day.

The Gospel of John proclaims, “*The light shines in the darkness, and darkness – did not – has not – will not – cannot – overcome it.*”

If Jesus had not been raised from the dead, you would not exist.

All of history would be different; many relationships and nations would never have developed.

You cannot imagine a world without the enduring influence of Jesus’ resurrection.

Few would even know about Jesus’ teachings if God had not raised Jesus from the dead.

The enduring influence of Jesus’ resurrection begins with a small group of Jews.

They left those post-resurrection appearances of Jesus with boldness and tenacity.

Invested in following Jesus, they created communities of faith to transform the world.

They have enduring influence 20-centuries later because they were awake to the Way of Jesus.

Simon Peter guided the early Church and was eventually crucified upside down in Rome. **James** was beheaded.

John died an old man around the year 100 after influencing Christ’s Church for decades.

Andrew was tied to a cross and took two days to die; he preached to passersby.

Philip took Jesus’ message to Asia and was eventually crucified there.

Bartholomew influenced several nations and was eventually martyred in India.

Matthew took Jesus’ message to African nations and was martyred in Ethiopia.

Thomas ministered in several nations and was martyred in India.

James the Less guided the Church in Jerusalem and was martyred at age 94.

Simon the Zealot served in western Africa and was eventually crucified in England.

Jude taught in nations along the Mediterranean Sea and was martyred in Turkey.

We must confess that many atrocities have happened using the name of Christ, but not his spirit.

This is true of nations around the world – including our own.

The crusades, inquisitions, wars, the holocaust, slavery, fundamentalism, violence, etc.

Frederick Douglas wrote in his autobiography, “*Between the Christianity of this land and the Christianity of Christ, I recognize the widest possible difference – so wide, that to receive the one as good, pure and holy is of necessity to reject the other as bad, corrupt and wicked. I love the pure, peaceable, and impartial Christianity of Christ; I therefore hate the corrupt, slaveholding, women-whipping, cradle-plundering, partial and hypocritical Christianity of this land. Indeed, I can see no reason, but the most deceitful one, for calling the religion of this land Christianity.*”

However, the Way of Jesus was instrumental in ending slavery in America.

Two-thirds of the members of the Abolition Society in 1835 were Christian ministers.

Christian individuals and churches were very active in the Underground Railroad.

We echo the words of Paul to the Corinthians: “*We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed;*

Perplexed but not driven to despair; Persecuted, but not forsaken; Struck down, but not destroyed.”

“*The light shines in the darkness,*

and darkness – did not – has not – will not – cannot – overcome it.”

Yes, we still have many places where darkness is evident. We still have much to do.

Yet, because of the resurrection, the Way of Jesus has enduring influence:

1. The rights, freedoms and health of women and children are vastly improved;
2. Compassion flows to those who live with hunger and thirst and without shelter;
3. Humanitarianism emerged through the Way of Jesus;

4. Mission efforts and charity work around the world was begun and continues to thrive;
5. Infanticide and cannibalism were largely stopped by loving Christian missionaries;
6. Orphanages, worker's rights, fair pay, prison reform, food programs, compassionate care for the elderly and disabled, autonomous economic development among impoverished people groups, care for those living with incurable disease, braille languages for the blind
7. Building on the Jewish vision, educational systems of the world are still improving;
8. Writing and reading have expanded into all cultures;
9. Isaac Newton and almost all early scientists followed the Way of Jesus;
10. Robert Oppenheimer and Alfred North Whitehead agreed that science would never have emerged in the same way or had its positive impact without the Way of Jesus;
11. Churches teaching the Way of Jesus has changed the world;
12. Music, literature and the arts have transformed visions and lifestyles;
13. Ideas about government, freedom and the rights of citizens have been introduced;
14. Healthcare, infrastructures and social programs have improved around the world; and
15. Laws morals and ethics have been introduced that improve the human quality of living.

HOW ARE YOU INVESTING IN THE ENDURING INFLUENCE OF JESUS?

Is your Christian discipleship ONE of your commitments?

Or, is the Way of Jesus your core commitment on which you hang all your other commitments?

Allow me to repeat myself: **God needs you to understand that Easter is not a holiday.**

Easter is a Holy Day teaching you how to live every day!

The world needs you to internalize the true message of this day at the core of your being.

As Christ's Church, you must be fully awake to the enduring influence of Jesus' resurrection, for the Way of Jesus is not hatred, legalism, fear, prejudice or stepping on the poor.

In John 13 and 14, we find a humorous story of Jesus trying to explain to his apostles that he would be going away. Like children being left with a babysitter by a parent, they begin to mumble and fuss. Simon Peter asks, *'Lord, where are you going? I wanna go.'* Thomas chimes in, *'Lord, we don't know where you are going.'*

It is here that Jesus offers one of his most important teachings of all: (John 14:1)

"Do not let your hearts be troubled. You believe in God, believe also in me."

A few months ago, a fellow approached me during the reception after a memorial service.

He thanked me for my words about resurrection hope and then said, *"I wish I could believe in Jesus' resurrection. I believe in God. I just cannot get my head around the resurrection."*

After a brief conversation, I replied, *"Well, if you can accept the idea of The Living God using evolution to create planets, stars, solar systems, cells, elephants, humans, mountains, flowers and oceans, accepting the idea of the same Living God raising a fellow from death should be easy."*

Beloved, beyond these doors, there is a helpless, hopeless, angry, empty and hurting world. However,

"The light shines in the darkness,

and darkness – did not – has not – will not – cannot – overcome it."

Let us be fully awake to the Way of Jesus and take the light of Christ to the world!

Christ is risen! Christ is risen indeed! Alleluia! Alleluia! Amen!