

"Fools for Christ"

Psalm 118:14-24; I Corinthians 4:8-13; John 20:1-18

The Resurrection of the Lord, Easter Day, March 31, 2024

Woodbury United Methodist Church, Woodbury, Connecticut

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The Lord is Risen! He is Risen, indeed! This ancient antiphon sounds as normal to us "How y'all doin'?" (You know I'm from Maryland, right?) "Fine, thank you, and you?" It's Easter, and we expect Christ to be raised from the dead and all be right with the world.

But what are we saying? The problem is that Jesus was dead. People don't come back from the dead. What the culture will tell us is that people – Easter people - who think otherwise are fools. A 2020 Gallup poll reveals that less than 50% of Americans belong to a church, synagogue or mosque, less than 50% for the first time since polling began in the mid-1930's.

Yet what does one say, without the support of a faith community, when death knocks at the door? How does one stare into the abyss of death without the promise of life beyond life? I don't know. I **do** know what my friend Karen said, without missing a beat, when her sister Ruth died: "*Ruth is now with the Lord.*" This is what we declare on Easter!

Yet to some people this all sounds like foolishness. And it is! The life-changing power of the Resurrection of Jesus Christ is **a** foolishness, as Paul tells the Corinthians, in which the principal actor is **God**, not us; and the power is not rationalization but **transformation and reconciliation**.

So on my first Easter with you I want to say everything and inspire everyone. Which, if Easter is about God and not us, misses the entire point. What makes it about God on Easter Day is to again celebrate the Easter promise, which is that God overcomes the worst that humans can do; that life does not end at the grave; and that life **before** the grave can be full, abundant, transforming life.

Speaking of the grave, a clergy colleague once sent me a note during Holy Week that declared: "*Have a grave-filled Easter!*" He meant, "*Have a grace-filled Easter.*" Blame it on auto-correct. But I thought it insightful. Easter takes in all the graves of our lives – our mortality and the living death in which we sometimes walk – and restores us to life.

Believing this is easier said than done, right? We sometimes get impatient with God as we look at the circumstances of our world and country; as we struggle in the broken places of our lives; as our hearts heal all-too-slowly from hurt. We get impatient. My bonus son, Ryan Rattley, loves this joke that I borrowed from him:

“Knock-knock”

“Who’s there?”

“Impatient cow.”

“Impatien-MOO!”

Still, our impatience does not deter God, who is in the life-transformation business. In that business, God has done whatever it takes to bring us back to ourselves, to give us a spiritual home, to give us life. God has even given us God’s Son, Jesus Christ, God-in-the-flesh, to show us how God looks and sounds and acts in ways we mortals can understand.

While trying to comprehend with finite minds an infinite God, we sometimes “dumb down” Christianity and miss the power of Easter. Easter shatters the notion that Jesus was only a great moral teacher. C.S. Lewis – contemporary of Lord of the Rings author J.R.R. Tolkien – gives some of us a spiritual cold shower in Mere Christianity, writing:

“I am trying here to prevent anyone saying the really foolish thing that people often say about him [Jesus]: I’m ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher but I don’t accept his claim to be God. That is the one thing we must not say. A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic—on the level of the man who says he is a poached egg—or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, or is, the Son of God, or else a madman or something worse. You can shut him up for a fool, you can spit at him and kill him as a demon or you can fall at his feet and call him Lord and God, but let us not come with any patronizing nonsense about his being a great moral teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to.”

Now this greatness of God, expressed in Christ Jesus, is a faith to live by. But it’s harder to remember when life grinds us down. Here’s a quick quiz. Before you take it, know that 80% of kindergartners answered correctly compared to only 17% of a class at Stanford University.

*“What is greater than God, more evil than the Devil;
The poor have it, the rich need it and you die if you eat it?”*

The answer is “Nothing!” Nothing is greater than God, nothing is more evil than the Devil; the poor have nothing, the rich need nothing (we could argue that, of course) and eating nothing will eventually kill you.

This is why, in the letter to the Corinthians, Paul describes himself and the other apostles as “fools for Christ.” He realizes that there is nothing that is greater than God even though the world says otherwise. The life lived in God, in the presence of God, in awe of God is indeed blessed. God is faithful when we are not; God is solid when we crumble; God builds up when we disdain; God loves when we hate. The world sees this as foolishness but living by God’s Easter promise is the key to life.

God doesn’t give up on us. I wish I had a nickel for every story I’ve had the privilege to hear in which God breaks in on our living death to bring us to life. So often that story involves the church: returning to the community of faith, seeking the power of God in people whose lives have been transformed by this amazing God, understanding that despite the flaws of the church – and there are many, because it is made up of people – it is the community of Jesus’ followers. And when we are at our best – and there are times when we are – people find the power and love of the Risen Christ because they see and feel it in us.

I also want to speak to those here today grieving the loss of loved ones and who struggle with the promise of eternal life. It is an inarguable fact that the longer we live on this earth, the more grief we experience. For us, the resurrection promise is even more urgent. And God does not disappoint us!

That brings us to Mary in today’s Gospel. The first 18 verses of chapter 20 of John’s Gospel is a whole other sermon. Because God is merciful, I’m not going to preach it today! But look at just one piece of it with me: Jesus was alive and Mary did not recognize him until he spoke. Grief can do that. It can blind your eyes and heart to goodness and hope that is right in front of you. Mary’s experience is a reminder that we all grieve differently. In other accounts of Jesus’ resurrection, those grieving do see Jesus and believe. Yet Mary’s grief was shattered when she **heard**

Jesus call her by name. Jesus will call us by name, both to claim us for holy purpose and to remind us that whatever loss we are grieving is not the final word. He is the final **W**ord.

Putting it in the succinct words of Tony Campolo: *"If you have trouble with the promise of Resurrection, stick around: we can help you with that!"*

In a few minutes, when we recite the Apostles' Creed and say we believe in *"the communion of saints,"* I am confident that those saints are smiling on us; as it says in scripture, surrounding us as a great cloud of witnesses. (Hebrews 12:1). I believe this and open my heart and my calendar to those who want to hear more of this amazing promise.

Here's an appetizer for that chat. Early this month I had a dream. Scientists who study dreams tell us we dream often even if we don't remember them. I usually don't. This one I did. Unusual. It's even more unusual to talk about one's dreams. Especially in New England, in front of a bunch of people who barely know you. They might wonder about your mental health. Think you're a kook. Make them feel uncomfortable.

So I had a dream this month. My Mom, gone from earth nearly 12 years, came to me wearing the blue coat she used to wear when working outside in the spring. She loved flowers. She loved to plant and garden. She loved it when the crocuses bloomed and when the forsythia bloomed and when the daffodils bloomed. For decades she was the Altar Flower Coordinator at my home United Methodist Church in Maryland.

In the dream I said, *"Mom, how wonderful to see you here."* She said, *"I just wanted to see how you are doing."* Mom was standing in front of me. She wanted to see me. Then she reached out her arms, hugging me.

When I told Carol about the dream she asked me how it felt and I said, *"Ohhh, it felt good, like when I was a child."* That was my dream the night of March 2, 2024, my eldest son's 39th birthday.

Now this might not have been so extraordinary. Except that when Mom died in 2012 she had been wheelchair bound for over three years due to a once-in-a-million malady called a "spinal stroke." So in this life she couldn't stand. And she had long ago lost all but faint peripheral sight due to macular degeneration. So in this life she could barely see.

Do you understand? My mom can stand now. My mom can see now. Some may have another explanation and some may scoff, but for me that dream confirmed the Resurrection promise I've long believed. Mom is stronger and safer now than ever. And I will see her again, Lord willing.

About that blue coat: as I said, it was her gardening coat. Don't get me wrong: my mom dressed up and never more so than in "Sunday best" for church. But she wasn't afraid of getting in the dirt, rolling up her sleeves, literally and metaphorically: digging in her garden to plant in the spring, and digging in to the "stuff" of life as a Veterans Administration hospital nurse treating mental health and alcohol recovery patients.

Her capacity to dig into the "dirt" with the hope of resurrection reminds me of E.B. White, the author of Charlotte's Web. In his introduction to his late wife's book Onward and Upward in the Garden he describes his wife Katherine's courage. Though dying of cancer, she planned the planting of hundreds of bulbs while she lived out her last fall. E.B. White wrote:

As the years went by and age overtook her, there was something comical yet touching in her bedraggled appearance on this awesome occasion --- the small, hunched-over figure, her studied absorption in the implausible notion that there would be yet another spring, oblivious to the ending of her own days, which she knew perfectly well was near at hand, sitting there with her detailed chart under those dark skies in the dying October, calmly plotting the resurrection.

Calmly plotting the Resurrection. The Resurrection: that promises that the worst word is not the last word; that death is NOT the end; that if you don't like the life you have, you can have another; that love is still God's yearning for us; and that Christ's resurrection promises not only life beyond death but that, while living, we can be fully alive.

So be a fool for Christ. It's the greatest foolishness going!

The Lord is Risen! He is Risen, indeed! Amen.

*Katherine White: Onward and Upward in the Garden