

Jesus is Alive! Are You?

Easter Sunday—April 4, 2021—10:30 a.m. service
St. Luke's United Church of Christ, Lititz, Pennsylvania
Pastor James Haun

John 20:1-18

Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb. So she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him." Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went toward the tomb. The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in. Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there, and the cloth that had been on Jesus' head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself. Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead. Then the disciples returned to their homes.

But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb; and she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet. They said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping?" She said to them, "They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him." When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?" Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away." Jesus said to her, "Mary!" She turned and said to him in Hebrew, "Rabbouni!" (which means Teacher). Jesus said to her, "Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'" Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, "I have seen the Lord"; and she told them that he had said these things to her.

This year's sunrise service was held here at St. Luke's and not at the Old Zion Cemetery as has been done for decades, (Old Zion has been closed due to the

pandemic, so for this year we changed location.) and moving out of a cemetery does change the focus of the message. In a graveyard setting one's spirit focuses upon the future promise of Resurrection and the day when we shall be raised and united in Christ. Moving to another setting can lead one to think more of the present-day meanings of Resurrection and how believers in Christ have already been raised. Paul tells us that we were all dead in sin, but through Christ's rising we have been raised and restored to life. It is this present-day aspect of Resurrection which moves me each year to post my favorite Easter remark on our signboard: *Jesus is Alive! Are You?* More than just post this statement on the sign, we should all spend a few moments pondering question. Am I alive? My heart is beating and I am breathing, but am I raised with Christ and connected to God, the only source of real and eternal life? If one wants to know what it means to be raised and alive with Christ, one needs only to look at Mary Magdalene who lived out Resurrection life on that first Easter morning. Let us take a closer look at this wonderful lady, and by her example examine our own lives.

The first sign of a Resurrected life is a **seeking heart**, and Mary had this one nailed! Her searching was relentless. As far as she knew that Easter morning, her dear Lord was dead, but she was still going to do all she could to honor him, so she went to the tomb. She discovered that the tomb had been opened and ran to tell the others. Peter and John would run back to the tomb to examine the situation and discover that the grave was empty. Not knowing what else to do, Peter and John returned to their lodgings, but not Mary! Mary stayed. Why? What did she expect to find? It was a passionate determination which made her want to stay, for hers was a seeking spirit. Jesus exhorted us all to be seekers. In the Sermon on the Mount (7:7) we are told to ask, to seek and to knock on heaven's door with great persistence, and Mary was giving a demonstration on how this was done. Mary's persistence was not in vain, and soon she was being addressed by others around the grave. First came the voice of the angels from within the tomb, and then a voice of one she thought to be the gardener. In all her confusion and emotion, she was unable to conduct a fuller conversation and inquiry, but her seeking spirit kept up the search.

Are you longing and searching for the Risen Christ? Or did you give up the search some time ago? Many can tell of younger years when their spirits sought God with energy and sincerity. Some will report crises and difficult times in the past when they became focused on the big questions of life and were seeking after God. Many have never given the matter much thought at all. Over time we learn to make peace with the world and give up on such "idealistic" searches. Are you seeking and longing after Christ? This is one of the vital signs which shows that we have been raised with Christ, and the lack of such desire is a warning of serious trouble. Mary was alive and those who seek to be raised with Christ do well to follow in her footsteps.

The second sign of being alive in Christ is **having discovered Him**. Those who seek as Mary did, will find, and that moment of discovery was a precious one. John writes,

Jesus said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?" Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away." Jesus said to her, "Mary!" She turned and said to him in Hebrew, "Rabbouni!" (which means Teacher). What a wonderful reunion that was! There was joy beyond measure, and with her happiness was an expression of dedication and obedience. She called him Teacher and was going to continue to look to Jesus for truth and guidance. In that moment her hope was restored and she felt more alive than she had ever been.

What Easter story do you have to tell? Few, if any of us, can match the drama and excitement of Mary's encounter in the Garden, but those who are alive with Christ have wonderful stories to tell. Jesus gladly draws near to those who will genuinely seek, and He often appears to those who did not even come looking! When do you remember the Living Christ drawing you near in love? Some can tell of a felt board story during Vacation Bible School when they realized that this Jesus was just wonderful. It may have been during an *Alpha* session when the message pierced your heart and you sensed the Spirit's power. For some it was a time at a youth camp or an adult retreat when Jesus seemed so near and the Good News made so much sense. Perhaps it was in a time of crisis when prayer was answered mightily, or even in a time of tragedy when Christ's comforting presence was sustaining you. Jesus often meets us in worship, in prayer, in song, in Bible reading and in message. These encounters with the risen Christ are not as rare as we think them to be. Remember your encounters. Hang on to those memories and keep that joy alive.

We remember and cherish these experiences, not like ancient relics which belong only to the past, but as signs that Jesus is alive today and with us, and this promise of His presence can be renewed and celebrated each day. We meet the Risen Jesus in worship and at the table, in service and in devotion. We meet the Risen Jesus in the blessed moments of life, and we also find Him with us in the most painful times. Mary discovered and embraced Jesus. Have you? Seek the Risen Christ and you will find Him, and that shall be a joyous encounter.

The third sign of being raised and alive with Christ is also the most difficult, and that is a **walk of faith**. Again, we find Mary showing how it is done. Barely had Mary found Jesus than she received a difficult command. *Jesus said to her, "Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'" Why must such joyous moments be so brief? The day of Easter is quickly gone and we are soon back among the troubles and toils of life. Mary had found her Lord alive and this was a cause of infinite delight, but their relationship had now entered a new phase. She would see Jesus a few more times over the following forty days, but then Jesus would return to His heavenly home. Mary would continue to walk with Jesus, but it would be a walk of faith. Jesus could no longer be seen, but His Spirit would be present, and the guidance of the Bible and the Church would keep her walking in a sweet harmony*

with Him. Faith is a walk of obedience, and Mary showed no hesitancy in that obedience for she ran to tell the others just as she had been commanded.

This would be a similar, yet very different walk for Mary than were the previous years of Jesus' earthly ministry. One can only wonder and suspect that she often longed for the "good old days" when Jesus could be seen, heard and engaged in dialogue. She may have looked back with longing to that Easter moment, but she was too wise to become stuck on such a memory. As a risen and enlivened believer, she knew that the best was yet to come and that a walk of faith was a blessing not to be missed. Her faith would be tested, just as every walk of faith is challenged, and though the path of faith would lead through difficult valleys, it would lead to only greater life and to the Father's House.

Are you walking that walk of faith with the Risen Christ as Mary did? It is not as complicated or lofty as it may sound. Are you seeking, asking and searching for life with God, or are you simply making peace with this world? Are you in love with Jesus as Mary was? Is Christ your deepest desire, or are your days of energetic faith only fading memories and sentimental thoughts? Revisit and renew that love! And how zealous is your walk of faith? Yes, it requires work and discipline, but it is a path of life like no other.

The Resurrection is a past event and a promise for our future, but it is also a present reality of sin sick people, separated from their source of true life, being raised and reconciled to God through the Risen Christ. Jesus is alive. Are you? Many are in the habit of an annual physical examination, and there is much to be said for this practice. Better yet is a regular spiritual examination to see just how alive we are. And if on this Easter morning you feel that you are far away from Christ and a life of faith, seek and cry out like Mary for the Savior. He will gladly meet you, raise you to life, and lead you on the path of faith and life.