

**St Paul United Church of Christ**

**Easter Sunday Worship**

**April 4, 2021**

Welcome and Announcements

Prayer Requests

Prelude (Recording begins)

**Call to Worship**

**\*Hymn**

**"Christ the Lord Is Risen Today"**

**#288 blue hymnal**

*Christ the Lord is risen today, Alleluia! All creation, join to say Alleluia!  
Raise your joys and triumphs high, Alleluia! Sing, ye heavens and earth reply, Alleluia!*

*Love's redeeming work is done, Alleluia! Fought the fight, the battle won, Alleluia!  
Death in vain forbids him rise, Alleluia! Christ has opened paradise. Alleluia!*

*Lives again our glorious King, Alleluia! Where, O death, is now thy sting? Alleluia!  
Once he died our souls to save, Alleluia! Where thy victory, O grave? Alleluia!*

*Soar we now where Christ has led, Alleluia! Following our exalted head, Alleluia!  
Made like him, like him we rise, Alleluia! Ours the cross, the grave, the skies. Alleluia!*

**Opening Prayer**

Spirit of Life, whose truth is always amazing and whose peace is beyond all understanding, may the Spirit of the Risen Christ live within our hearts. As we gather for worship today, may we experience your fellowship in the company of all who are faithful to the vision of your heavenly Realm, and may we trust that faithfulness to your Way will bring to us and to our neighbors the joyful experience of your good news for the world.

**Epistle Lesson:** Colossians 3:1-11

*So if you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth, for you have died and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is your life is revealed, then you also will be revealed with him in glory.*

*Put to death, therefore, whatever in you is earthly: fornication, impurity, passion, evil desire, and greed (which is idolatry). On account of these the wrath of God is coming on those who are disobedient. These are the ways you also once followed, when you were living that life.*

*But now you must get rid of all such things – anger, wrath, malice, slander, and abusive language from your mouth. Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have stripped off the old*

*self with its practices and have clothed yourselves with the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge according to the image of its creator. In that renewal there is no longer Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and free; but Christ is all and in all.*

Before we read our Gospel lesson for today, let's join in singing an old, familiar song that was composed to describe the experience of Mary Magdalene in the garden by the open tomb of Jesus on the Day of Resurrection.

**Hymn  
hymnal**

**"In the Garden"**

**#300 blue**

***I come to the garden alone, when the dew is still on the roses;  
and the voice I hear, falling on my ear, the Son of God discloses.***

***Refrain: And he walks with me and he talks with me and he tells me I am his own,  
And the joy we share as we tarry there, none other has ever known.***

***He speaks and the sound of his voice is so sweet the birds hush their singing,  
and the melody that he gave to me within my heart is ringing. R***

***I'd stay in the garden with him, though the night around me be falling,  
but he bids me go; through the voice of woe his voice to me is calling. R***

**Gospel Lesson:** 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.*

## **Sermon**

When we read the stories in the Gospels about the empty tomb of Jesus we can see right away that they differ in their details, right down to who was there and what they actually saw. This should not surprise us when we realize that the Gospels were all written some thirty years or more after the events they describe. Testimony to the truth of Christ's Resurrection can be found in some very early writings that are quoted in the letters and Gospels of the New Testament. But the finished stories in the Gospels came later. So, knowing that, we shouldn't get too caught up in the details. It's helpful to remember that these stories were not written to pin down the historical facts surrounding the Resurrection. What they are instead, are testimonies about what the original witnesses were seeing and feeling that day, and how their experiences following Jesus' death were molded into spiritual truths and realities that would forever after be embedded in their hearts, beginning on that day.

The lectionary of the Christian year gives us a choice this Easter about which Gospel story to read – the story from Mark or the story from John. Mark's story is the simplest one, and the earliest of the Gospel accounts. But today, I've chosen to read the story from John; and, frankly, it's because I like it the most. The reason many people say John is their favorite Gospel is because he gives us such vivid pictures of how the people in his stories were feeling. I like that about the way John tells us the stories.

The person we learn about mostly in this Gospel story is a woman named Mary Magdalene (or Mary from Magdala), the only close follower of Jesus that the Bible describes in any detail who is a woman. In John's Gospel, she is described as the first Apostle of the Risen Christ – that is, the first who is sent to spread the good news. "I have seen the Lord!", she says. And this is her personal testimony to a theological truth: He is risen! Death has not destroyed the truth and hopefulness of who he is.

Apart from this story, we don't know much about Mary of Magdala, and much that we think we know about her is not so. The medieval Christian Church was inclined to treat her as a prostitute, and associated her with the woman of the streets who is remembered for bathing Jesus' feet with costly oil. But, on the evidence of Scripture, that was not Mary. Clearly, she was a devoted follower of Jesus, and seems to have been so since a time when he is said to have healed her of some kind of demonic possession. It seems clear that she loved him and that he loved her, and that their relationship was deep enough that parting from one another would have been hard to do. She was with him to the end, and beyond the end, having remained by the cross when many others went into hiding. She returned to claim his body for burial, and then to treat it with spices in its resting place in the tomb.

On the Day of Resurrection, Mary was preparing to carry out her last faithful duty of caring for Jesus' body when she found the tomb empty. She was distraught. She seems to have felt she needed to see him this one last time and care for him in order to move on through the process of grief. In the shock of not finding him where she expected, she sought help from the other disciples, and two of them came, in response to her cry of distress: "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and I don't know where they have laid him."

The others looked into the tomb and left perplexed and saddened, but Mary remained, clinging to the place where she last saw Jesus. Now she looks again into the tomb, and, through her tears, she sees a vision of angels, but the vision does not bring her joy. They ask her, "Why are you weeping, and they tell her that Jesus is no longer there. Then just behind her, she hears another voice. "Woman, why are you weeping?" She turns, and sees someone she thinks might be the gardener. She thinks he might have taken the body away, and she pleads for it to be returned to her. It is only when he speaks her name, "Mary," that she knows it is Jesus.

His message to her is not what we might have expected or what she at first must have wanted to hear: he said, "Don't hold on to me." And I'm not sure whether or not she would have understood the reason he said it, or if I do either. He said, "because I have not yet ascended to the Father." And I think what he may have meant is, don't hold on to the part of me that now is truly dead. But go and tell the others, he continued, that I am ascending to be with God.

I count among my friends over the years several people who have shared with me that they believe in ghosts. They usually have had a story about seeing the image of someone they loved in a familiar place, and sometimes heard their voice, sometime after they had died. I do not doubt their experiences. They were telling me the truth. I do, though, have to confess that I do not personally believe that ghosts exist in the world outside the mind. The story of Mary Magdalene could easily turn into a ghost story if we let it, but I don't think it is one. What I do believe is that, when someone we love has passed from earthly life, they continue to possess us, and that it is in the framework of our minds to feel them there and even to continue to talk with them and seek their wisdom and feel the comfort of their love. When we reach a certain age, there may be as many people we keep company with who are gone from their earthly presence but alive in our consciousness as we have in our current earthly relationships.

So I don't think Mary was talking with a ghost, but I do think she was genuinely talking with Jesus there in the garden. And more importantly, it was not only Mary but many others who had heard his words and experienced his healing spirit who were able to say he was alive again for them, and that his wisdom and his compassion and his hopefulness about the human community would not die – no matter what the Romans did, no matter how severely his body was damaged or how much his message was mocked. But, as he said to Mary, we can't just hold on to him as he was, or continue to mourn his death, or conceive of some notion that his body became supernaturally alive on Easter morning. Christ is risen, because we continue to talk with him, and, in our best moments, we do our best to walk the pathway of justice and compassion that he walked and continue to wage the peaceful battle he gave us to continue - to bring the heavenly kingdom to the earth. Because love is not conquered by death; and truth is not

thwarted by violence and oppression. We have seen the Lord. We have felt his presence.  
Christ is risen, and we will follow him.

**Anthem**

Diana Ridener, Tina Tuck, Paula Weil

**Sacrament of Holy Communion**

The Table is set and the Body of the Risen Christ is gathered. Come to the eternal feast of the fellowship of God. Whoever you are and wherever you are on life's journey, you are welcome here.

On the same night on which he was betrayed, our Lord took bread, and when he had given thanks he broke it, saying, Take and eat. This is my body, given for you. Do this in remembrance of me. In the same way after supper, he took the cup, saying, Take and drink. This cup is the new covenant in my blood that is poured out for you and for many for the remission of sin.

Holy One, may these elements of food and drink be to us the body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ, that we, as we partake of them, may know that we share Christ with one another, and that the risen Christ is fully and truly present in this meal. We thank you for these elements symbolic of your grace, and we rejoice in the fellowship through which Christ's body is revealed.

May the truth of Christ be shared among us. May the love of Christ bring joy to our hearts. May the peace of Christ be ours forever.

Let us pray in the words that Jesus taught us:

**Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.  
Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.  
Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors,  
And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.  
For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory forever. Amen.**

**\*Closing Hymn**

**"The Day of Resurrection"**

**#298 blue hymnal**

***The day of resurrection! Earth, tell it out abroad;  
the Passover of gladness, the Passover of God.  
From death to life eternal, from sin's dominion free,  
our Christ has brought us over with hymns of victory.***

***Our hearts be pure from evil, that we may see aright  
the Lord in rays eternal of resurrection light;  
and, listening to his accents, may hear, so calm and plain,  
his own "all hail" and, hearing, may raise the victor strain.***

***Now let the heavens be joyful! Let earth its song begin!  
The world resound in triumph, and all that is therein.  
Let all things seen and unseen their notes of gladness blend;  
for Christ the Lord has risen, our Joy that has no end.***

**Benediction**

Now may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us all. Amen.

**Postlude**

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**Pastor Allen will be out of town from April 6 – 21**

**You will continue to receive his daily morning messages, they will be sent from church office.**

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