

"Let us Celebrate Resurrection"

John 20:1-18

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Easter

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What if Mary of Magdala only talked with the gardener?

What if Mary just hallucinated what is written in the gospel of John? What if the gardener had just moved the body into a common grave and Mary happened upon him just as the work had been done? Would it make a difference to you? For several hundred years people have suggested that Mary just imagined she saw Jesus. Others have written books explaining that the early church created these stories to honor Jesus and keep his memory alive. Would it make a difference to you, if Mary just talked to the gardener? I want us to carefully think about the implications of our answer to this question.

The Greek philosophical school called Epicureans believed that life was complete in and of itself. Their focus was upon this life only. They taught live within the moment. Their goal was complete pleasure in and for themselves. No one and nothing else mattered. Does this sound a lot like television beer commercials? The Epicureans philosophy was rejected then, but it is alive and well today. If Mary just talked to the gardener, then you can join with the millions of modern American Epicureans and live for today.

The Hindu religion provides another option for us. Their understanding of life is linked to the past. Whatever you did in a past life is carried forward upon the wheel of karma into this life. You must work your way up the ladder of success into the final stage of multiple lives so that you can evaporate into nirvana. But, if you make some unfortunate choices in one life, you can drop down into an earlier stage and be reborn into the world as a bug, dog, sheep, or pig. The past constantly determines the life and the choices of each person caught upon the wheel. Hinduism, or a variety of its offshoots are options for you, if Mary just talked to the gardener.

Animism seeks to find meaning in the world surrounding us and utilizes the power of the animals to control the fearful future. Animism sees a devil or an angel under every tree and around every corner; therefore, it tries to appease each spirit so that the future can be peaceful. If you want to live your life in fear, seeking to appease the angry spirits, then you can chose this option, if you think Mary was just talking to a gardener.

I choose to believe the witness of Holy Scripture that Jesus was raised to new life after being put to death on a cross. I stand with the Apostle Paul who writes to the Christians in Corinth these words: "*Christ has been raised to life! And Christ makes us certain that others will also be raised to life.*" (**I Corinthians 15:20**)
www.biblegateway.com/bible?passage=i+corinthians+15:20

C.S. Lewis, writing from the immanently logical British point of view, reminds us that Jesus either is who he said he was, and that he did what is said that he did, or he is the world's greatest lunatic. We cannot have Jesus as a good man and fine teacher of spirituality. Jesus is either the Risen Messiah of God, or he is a madman. We either believe that Mary meet Jesus, or we are nothing but solemn followers of a lunatic.

Today we are celebrating Jesus' resurrection. Some people ask how can this happen? I am going to share with you a visual picture of resurrection that comes to us from the natural world. Then, during this service we are going to hear how resurrection brings us power to overcome anything that this world might force us to endure; hope that overcomes all fear; and an identity that will stay with us throughout eternity.

The natural picture of resurrection comes to us from the world of insects. Many people see catapillars crawling on limbs of trees. And, some people will notice what looks like seed pods on trees. And, all of us can celebrate seeing butterflies. Catapillars spin cocoons and essentially die to being catapillars. In the cocoon, they are reborn into beautiful butterflies. You see in the spring garden we see God's resurrection at work. Jesus is the first human being to be raised from the dead. But, Jesus promises us that we will all spread our wings like butterflies and be free in God's Kingdom.

Through the Risen Christ, God Gives you Resurrection Power!

There is racism, sexism, materialism, a rampant disregard for life, addictive behavior of all kinds, and much more to attract our attention and cause us to want to run away from the world. Many Christians seek to hide from the world. Many well meaning Christians seek to throw a protective shell around their children and keep them away from the world. Let me be the first to affirm the importance of teaching Christian values, morals, principles, and beliefs to our children and youth. One of, perhaps the most important, value is that we are to be salt for the world, leaven for the world, light for the world.

We are called to live a resurrection faith within the world that rejects the possibility of resurrection. Jesus Christ is alive! Christ is raised from the dead. In Christ we have the power to engage the world. In and through Christ we have the power to overcome the world. In Christ, we have the responsibility to move the world just a little closer to being the Kingdom of Heaven. Let me share with you one person of resurrection faith who still makes a difference even though she is dead to this world in and through Christ Jesus she lives in God's Kingdom.

On a grave in Ruleville, Mississippi, there grows a cactus, one that flowers every so often. It has been there since 1997, when a woman was buried there after having lost her battle with cancer. On the tombstone, under the name of Fannie Lou Hamer, are the words she lived by: "I'm sick and tired of being sick and tired."

Fannie Lou Hamer is not the kind of person - if you look at her early life - who you would think likely to have been written up anywhere, any time. She was the 20th child of a family of black sharecroppers in the poorest part of the poorest state in the nation. When she married and found she couldn't have children, she and her husband adopted two daughters. Her only talent was the ability to sing, especially the spirituals which were so much a part of her life.

In 1963, when she was 45, she heard a speech that turned her life around. In the speech, she was told that she was a citizen and could vote. So she tried to register but failed the literacy test which was then required. She vowed she'd be back the next month to try again - and again - and again - until she passed. The landlord came and told her that if she persisted, she'd lose the little bit of farming equipment she had and the land she and her husband were sharecropping. She persisted and was evicted. One of the voter registration groups heard of her courage and asked her to work for them, which she did. In her travels, she was arrested for going into the "whites only" part of a bus station, hauled off to jail and badly beaten.

After some pressure from the U.S. Justice Department, she was released. Surprisingly, the bitterness that might have been there wasn't. As she put it, "It wouldn't solve any problem for me to hate whites just because they hate me."

Here was a woman, mostly self-educated, who decided in the latter half of her life to use the God-given power that was hers for bringing justice to Ruleville and other parts of the South.

And so a cactus blooms over a grave that friends had to take up a collection to buy. And the cactus stands as a symbol of a woman who could bloom in the midst of an arid desert of injustice and hatred. (Henry Sawatzky, "On Not Being Powerless," Stanley Congregational Church, Chatham, New Jersey.)

In and through the Risen Christ, your resurrection power will enable you to embrace and engage life in the world to make it a better place than it was when you arrived in it. You have power to participate in the coming Kingdom of God.

Through the Risen Christ God Gives you a Resurrection Hope!

We do not need to fear the future. We can face whatever comes to us because Christ is risen. Christ is victorious over fear. And, the Risen Christ has defeated death! The future is not a looming chasm of darkness. The future is just another part of the journey with God. God is present. God's power will prevail. We can place our hope in the resurrection of Christ. We can live the resurrection every day of every year that we have left on this planet before we move to the heavenly dimension to be with Christ. Let me witness to you that this resurrection lifestyle is possible. Through the words of their pastor, Harold and Maggie teach us.

They had never been apart, she told me. In the 55 years they had been married, they had never spent a night apart. Through all the years on the farm, the births and raising of their children, through illnesses they had both suffered, they had never been apart.

Now he was dying. I think she knew, but the doctor wanted me to tell her that her beloved Harold could not last the night.

"Why don't you go home," I suggested. "I'll sit here for awhile."

"I can't go," she said.

The nurse told us that we could have our five minutes. "Don't forget the gowns and masks," she commanded. "We don't want the infection to spread."

Harold didn't seem to recognize the two, green-shrouded figures that came to his bed - at least not until Maggie took his hand, moved her mask and touched her lips to his cheek. I said a prayer out loud, but all the time she was whispering to him. She kept her head right alongside his on the pillow - talking to him like she belonged there.

Later, in the hallway, she was weeping. "What did you say to Harold?" I asked - more to cover the silence than to get information.

"I told him that I loved him and that I would stay with him."

"You know he's very ill. He may not be with us in the morning."

She stared at the floor for a long time. "I know," she said. "He knows he's dying too. He's afraid a little. I can tell by the way he holds my hand. But it's all right. I know he's all right now. I told him that it will be Easter in the morning.

I didn't know what to say. It was November. Had she forgotten?

"Um. It's not really Easter," I offered.

"I know, Pastor," she said patiently. "But it is for us. We've practiced celebrating Easter together for all of our years. Now, for Harold and me, tomorrow is our Easter."(The Rev. Theodore W. Schroeder, Division for Congregational Ministries, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America)

Jesus called Mary's name. Anyone of us who has lost a loved one knows the deep desire to hear that person call our name again in this life. Mary would not have missed knowing that it was her Rabbi, her friend, her Lord who spoke her name. This Easter morning, Jesus stands beside you and speaks your name. Gently, lovingly, quietly Jesus speaks your name.

- Jesus asks only for a relationship with you.
- Jesus asks only that you acknowledge that he is alive.
- Jesus asks only that you step into the circle of God's love and experience the resurrection joy, faith, and hope every day of your life.

Will you stop and listen? Will you choose life with Christ so that you can overcome the world? I pray that you will.

Through the Risen Christ God Gives you a Resurrection Identity!

Jesus' resurrection is not just about what happens to you after death. Resurrection is real right now. Jesus will raise you up to be the person God saw in God's eye when you were conceived in your mother's womb. Your identity as God's child relates to Jesus' resurrection. And, as God's child you will receive foretastes of resurrection all of your life.

"What resurrection have you experienced in your life?" Resurrection is intimately connected to your new identity with Christ. As God's child you can overcome the pain, the negativity, and the suffering of the past and the present. As God's new person, you are given new insight and new energy for life, Christ's resurrection is a gift of a personal identity based in the living and joyful Risen Christ.

I know the importance of Christ's resurrection in my own life. When the Doctor said that I had prostate cancer I responded with shock, fear, and sadness. At first I thought my life was over. The "C" word, when used in the personal tense can send you into the depths of depression. I fell into that hole. During the time of my waiting for surgery, surgery, and recovery from surgery I came to know the power of Christ's resurrection first hand. For me, Easter is not a theory. Easter is a fact. I know the power of being God's child. I know the strength of Christ's presence in the deep pain. I know the importance of a living Jesus who is my friend and advocate. Many people prayed for me. Most importantly, the living Jesus prayed for me. Early in the process someone, and I do not remember who, sent me a poem that reminded me of my identity as God's child and the power of Christ's resurrection. On this resurrection Sunday, I share with you the power of resurrection that we can experience each day, but especially on the days that we are in the depths of pain.

Cancer is so Limited....

*It cannot cripple love,
It cannot shatter hope,
It cannot corrode faith,
It cannot eat away peace,
It cannot kill friendships,
It cannot shut out memories,
It cannot silence courage,
It cannot invade the soul,
It cannot reduce eternal life,
It cannot quench the spirit,*

Cancer cannot lessen the power of the resurrection.

In the midst of this fallen, shadowed, disease ridden planet, the Risen Christ raises you up to be the powerful, hopeful, joyful, peaceful person God created you to be in the first place. In and through the Risen Christ, you have an identity as a beloved child of God that will give you the strength to carry on, no matter what may happen in your life. In and through the Risen Christ you have the gift of being raised up now and raised up for all eternity at death.

“You Raise me Up”

When I am down and, oh my soul, so weary;
When troubles come and my heart burdened be;
Then, I am still and wait here in the silence,
Until you come and sit awhile with me.

You raise me up, so I can stand on mountains;
You raise me up, to walk on stormy seas;
I am strong, when I am on your shoulders;
You raise me up...To more than I can be.

There is no life – no life without its hunger;
Each restless heart beats so imperfectly;
But when you come and I am filled with wonder,
Sometimes, I think I glimpse eternity.

You raise me up, so I can stand on mountains;
You raise me up, to walk on stormy seas;
I am strong, when I am on your shoulders;
You raise me up...To more than I can be.

Lyrics by Josh Groban at www.AZLyrics.com

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