

Sermon – “Alive Again”
Scripture Reading – John 20:1-18
Easter Sunday, April 4, 2021
Westminster Presbyterian Church
Springfield, Illinois

Let us open the scriptures to the reading of the events that took place on that first Easter morning as they are recorded by “the other disciple” in the Gospel of John, chapter 20. Hear now God’s Holy Word.

1 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. 2 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." 3 Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went toward the tomb. 4 The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. 5 He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in. 6 Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there, 7 and the cloth that had been on Jesus' head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself. 8 Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; 9 for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that Christ must rise from the dead. 10 Then the disciples returned to their homes. Amen.

At the heart of the Gospel reading for Easter is Mary Magdalene’s discovery that Jesus is Alive Again. We continue our reading in John. Hear now God’s Holy Word.

11 But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb; 12 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. 13 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." 14 When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. 15 Jesus said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping? For whom are you looking?" 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." 16 Jesus said to her, "Mary!" She turned and said to him in Hebrew, "Rabbouni!" Rob boony (which means Teacher). 17 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.'" 18 Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, "I have seen the Lord;" and she told them that the Risen Christ had said these things to her. Amen.

The title of the sermon: “Alive Again”

The text: *When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there... John 20:14b*

Let us pray. Holy and Loving God, as we gather together with gratitude, joy, and hope for the meaning of this day at the heart of our faith, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of each of our hearts be acceptable to you, our Strength and Redeemer. Amen.

In many ways, it feels like the Season of Lent, the time of self-denial, simple living, repentance, and preparation has been longer than 40 days. Last year’s Easter Service was prerecorded one month into the pandemic. We were at the beginning of a societal shut-down we never envisioned would last this long. Neither could we comprehend, at that time, how much death we would encounter along the way.

The Easter Sermon “Relentless Resurrection” was preached to an empty church with words of encouragement to those gathered behind closed doors in their homes to “not be afraid” because of the hope in our resurrection faith and in the vaccination research which had already begun.

I referenced the Johns Hopkins Medical School researchers and the role of HeLa cells in their effort to create a vaccine. HeLa cells are named for Henrietta Lacks, a young African American woman who died from cancer in 1951. Henrietta received treatment from Johns Hopkins, the only nearby hospital which would treat blacks and she was buried in an unmarked grave at a family cemetery near Lackstown, named after her family’s former slaveholders.

In the last 70 years of research, HELA cells have made possible the discovery of lifesaving drugs and vaccines, including the Polio vaccination. These resurrected HELA cells were instrumental this past year on the relentless journey of discovering the COVID-19 vaccines.

This Easter morning, as we anticipate the rebirth of life as we knew it before the pandemic and celebrate the resurrection at the heart of our faith, “*Alive Again*” captures today’s message of gratitude, joy, and hope.

With Mary Magdalene, Peter, and John on that first Easter morning, we marvel at the revelation that Christ is *alive again*. This good news does not deny the suffering, sacrifice, and death that were a part of Christ’s life and are a part of each of our lives. No, this good news affirms the God who has the power to bring life out of death, salvation out of sacrifice, and redemption out of suffering.

As we gather on this Easter morning following a year of pandemic, *alive again* is a renewed sense of our shared vulnerability as human beings, our dependence on and connection with one another, and our mutual need for a Savior.

Alive again is a deep and abiding appreciation for the gift of community and fellowship, the importance of touch, and the necessity for kindness.

Alive again is our mindfulness of the inequity within our world and a renewed commitment to treat all people with dignity and respect. As Peter and I read the Passion narrative from Mark’s gospel this week interspersed with the news coverage of those who witnessed the death of George Floyd, we could not help but see the tragic similarities: the grief, the fear, and the

helplessness of the bystanders; the indifference, the contempt, and the cruelty of the authorities; and the pain, the anguish, and the suffering of the one who breathed his last breath.

Alive again is the recognition of the ways we each participate in the injustices of this broken world, our need for forgiveness, and Christ's call to forgive one another, to reach beyond ourselves, and to return no one evil for evil.

Alive again is our determination, in spite of all the foibles of the Church over the years, to proclaim and to unravel the mystery of resurrection in our own lives and in the world today. How it is that the Creator God who is beyond our understanding would reveal what it means to be fully human by becoming one of us and who would then conquer death by dying on a cross.

Today we celebrate the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ, and we proclaim with Christians around the world that death is not the last word, that the love of God could not be contained in the tomb.

And so my friends, we proclaim this paradox, this unbelievable reality and we do so by faith, "recognizing that realities about which we hold no doubt are not large enough to reveal God to us. No, without apology or hesitation, what we proclaim at Easter is too mighty to be encompassed by certainty and too wonderful to be found only within the borders of our imagination."

Christ lived, Christ died, and Christ is alive again. Hallelujah! Amen.