

# THE RHYTHM OF LIFE

## **Recalled to Life**

A prompting offered by the Rev. Dr. Michael D. Castle  
April 11-12, 2009 • EASTER SUNDAY  
Cross Creek Community Church, United Church of Christ  
Dayton, Ohio

### **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 out ran 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.*

### **Mark 16:1-8**

*When the Sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices, so that they might go and anoint him. And very early on the first day of the week, when the sun had risen, they went to the tomb. They had been saying to one another, "Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?" When they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had already been rolled back. As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man, dressed in a white robe, sitting on the right side; and they were alarmed. But he said to them, "Do not be alarmed; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here. Look, there is the place they laid him. But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you." So they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.*

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**The Lord is risen! The Lord is risen indeed! Alleluia!  
I thank you God for this most amazing Day  
For the leaping greenly spirits of trees  
For a blue true dream of sky  
For everything which infinite, which is natural, which is Yes.**

-- e e cummings

The big word for Easter is "Alleluia" – which is a code word meaning yes: yes, hooray and wow! A whole heap of wonder, delight and awe!

Someone has said that there are three important words in the English language: Yes, No, and Wow! Easter is a dramatic YES to new life! YES to love! YES to hope! YES to what is possible. But Easter is also NO; NO to the power of death...NO to despair...NO to disappointment...NO to evil. And to all of that, Easter is definitely a WOW! WOW to the whole process of life from death, hope from fear, joy from loss.

Alleluia! Christ is risen! Christ is risen indeed. Alleluia! Wow!

If Christ is risen, then we are surrounded by Easter. Properly understood, every day of life is a celebration of Easter. But Easter is more than a new day. Easter describes who we are as a Christian people. Resurrection faith is part of our DNA – even on our worst days.

Stan Hastey, my dear friend, who is retiring this year as a twenty-year leader of the Alliance of Baptists, tells of one of his most memorable moments in seminary. The venerable black Baptist preacher and educator, Dr. Benjamin Mays, preached in chapel. It was the spring of 1968, only a few weeks following the assassination of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. in Memphis. Easter that year had come and gone. As he moved ever so slowly from his chair to the pulpit, as though bearing on his broad shoulders the weight of the world, Dr. Mays began with the words that Hastey never forgot: ‘For black Christians and Americans,’ he said, ‘Easter this year came just in the nick of time.’

Some years are like that. Perhaps this is such a year for you. Today, Easter 2009, the Day of days for the Christian Church, has come just in nick of time.

But maybe it hasn't. Perhaps some of you don't feel the joy and hope of resurrection. It can happen you know. I am sure that some of you cannot genuinely shout, even whisper, alleluia. For some, you struggle to celebrate and praise on this day when you are supposed to...but cannot. Perhaps some of you have tasted life in all its richness but you have lost the taste for it – for whatever reasons.

In Charles Dickens', *A Tale of Two Cities*, Dr. Manette, a French physician, had been falsely accused, imprisoned and forgotten for 18 agonizing years in an unspeakably horrible cell. He was finally rescued and taken to a safe place. But he was a creature barely alive and withdrawn, with vacant, dull eyes and slow, mechanical movements. At one point, Dr. Manette was being questioned by an old friend, Mr. Lorry, whom he did not recognize.

Mr. Lorry: "You had abandoned all hope of being dug out?"  
Dr. Manette: "Long ago."

Mr. Lorry: "You know that you are recalled to life?"  
Dr. Manette: "They tell me so."

Mr. Lorry: "I hope you care to live?"  
Dr. Manette: "I can't say."

As we come to Easter this day, it is those two questions that will not let me go. "You know that you are recalled to life?" And, "I hope you care to live?"

I am convinced that something or someone is trying to re-call me...to recall us...to life. That just seems to be the rhythm and cycle of things. And that's probably why I'm a minister still. This call...this impulse to life is becoming more, not less, insistent the older I get and with each passing day. But do I care to live? Do we? Well, the honest truth is sometimes we can't say. But more and more I find myself leaving the "I can't say" behind and striking out on a journey toward, "Yes!" And that's my hope for myself, for my family, for this church on this Easter Sunday. Saying "Yes!" to life in all of its fullness is the Easter WOW!. Saying "Yes!" to life is at the heart of what it means to be Christian.

But Pastor Mike, isn't Easter about the resurrection of Jesus from the dead? Yes...the Church through the years has proclaimed that Jesus was raised on the third day. But do we expect Easter to be like something we might hear on the evening news? Can you imagine Brian Williams or Katie Couric reporting: "Early this morning, Jesus of Nazareth was raised from the dead. Word came from some women, friends of his, who had approached his tomb to complete the burial preparations. His disciples could not be found for comment. Now for other items in the news..."

No, the resurrection is not a news event that can be described in a few sound bites. Neither is the empty tomb just a fact about Jesus. No one saw the resurrection of Jesus. The Easter message is not just about a change in Jesus, but it is also about a change in us. To live as an Easter people is to live with Mystery and to allow the Mystery to transform us. While I believe in the resurrection of Jesus with all my heart, I cannot prove it. And in the end it isn't about "belief" anyway. In the end, I don't need to prove it, I just need to experience it again and again. And that is enough proof for me. Those who encountered the risen Christ were a few followers, not the crowds, not the soldiers, not the dispassionate reporters. And even their personal accounts did not fit neatly together as one coherent whole. Although the story begins with Mary offering a plausible explanation for what happened, it ends in mystery. The witnesses cannot explain the

empty tomb or the folded burial cloth; they only experience it and give themselves over to its power.

What *is* clear is the impact of this mysterious event upon the lives of those early disciples. Something explosive occurred...something revolutionary – a reordering, a restoration happened. The detached language of an evening news report could never do it justice. To convey what happened – poetry was pressed into service...colorful, engaging metaphors were brought in...imaginative symbols were required to capture the wonder of it all.

Listen to the language. John says that at the crucifixion, “There was *darkness* over the whole land.” And then, at the resurrection: “Early on the first day of the week, *while it was still dark...*” John loves to play with the light and darkness in telling his gospel and Jesus is the Light that shines. Mark also says that at the crucifixion “darkness came over the whole land.” But Mark says at the resurrection, “Early on the first day of the week, when the sun had risen...” Mark, in his own way, seems to be giving us a clue that a new day has risen. Then in both gospels comes the rolled away stone...the empty tomb. It’s all poetry, imagination, symbols. All of it pointing to a deeper meaning...and a deeper reality at work in the world!

With that in mind, let’s approach the Easter message through the episode from Charles Dickens story. For whatever else the resurrection is, it is a re-call to life. Death was in the air. It was for all the key players: for Mary and Peter and John and Thomas and the grief stricken disciples returning to Emmaus. Jesus was dead. It was over. The movement began by Jesus was defeated. Mary came to the tomb to grieve. The disciples huddled in a room in fear. They had tasted of Life in all its richness, but now that life was over.

But then came Sunday morning. On Friday, darkness covered the earth. Death was in the air. Despair reigned. But that was Friday. On Sunday morning, the disciples were recalled to life. That is a way of understanding what happened. These followers of Jesus experienced the resurrection as a re-calling to life...specifically a re-calling to life in Kingdom of God, which Jesus had taught and embodied. You see, Jesus had introduced them to another way of living. He opened to them a way of living that they had never dreamed possible.

There was such a freedom in Jesus – freedom from jealousy and status. He was free *to* wash the feet of his students and free *for* interruptions by children and the poor and the desperately ill. He was free to speak words of forgiveness and assurance. He was free to welcome and invite difference to the table of fellowship. What freedom! He brought to life God...he brought to life love...he brought to life inclusive hospitality...he brought to life equality and justice and care...he brought to life joy and courage and grace...he brought to life peace and healing and wholeness. And Easter for those first disciples was a re-calling to that Jesus kind of life. The very life spirit of Jesus they experienced as being breathed *into* them. They became body to his spirit. They became hands and feet to his spirit. With his passion they became passionate. The life of Jesus was alive in them. Immersed they were...baptized into this life of Jesus, rising in them as newness of life.

But let’s not leap over the second question. Once we are re-called to life, there is a second question. Do you care to live? Do you want to live this life? Charles Dickens had Dr. Manette to answer: “I can’t say.” Maybe you are there. Or, maybe you are somewhere between “I can’t say” and “Yes.” Even the disciples... even after being re-called to life, were not quick to say “yes.” We see their struggle and ambivalence and fear. We note the realism of their “I can’t say” and their reluctance to pledge a quick “yes.” Have you noticed in the resurrection narratives, almost in every case, only gradually did they come to see; only slowly were their eyes opened to understanding and to commitment.

So let’s be honest about the terror of the Resurrection! That’s how Mark describes the disciple’s response to the resurrection. He ends his gospel with these words: “*So they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.*” Can you believe it? Mark ends his gospel with that word: “*They were afraid.*” Now if you read your Bible you will find that there are some additional verses printed there. However, these verses were added two to three hundred years later. I guess some later church officials were bothered by Mark’s ending so they felt a need to end it on a more hopeful and upbeat note. But I like Mark’s ending just fine! Mark leaves us stammering at the surprise of the empty tomb. Mark leaves it up to us to decide what our response will be. And Mark doesn’t gloss over the struggle to respond: there is scare in this recall to life. The truth is we fear Life, not just death.

Granted, this is a day of rejoicing. We pull out all the “stops” – the lilies, the majestic hymn “Christ the Lord is Risen Today,” new cloths (Doesn’t Gideon and Aydan look strikingly handsome in their new Easter outfits!?). We can make it seem so attractive, as if you can grasp the message on one big Sunday in the spring. But we know better. There’s also a terror in Easter. We have good reason to fear the risen Christ. Do we really want Christ breathing down our necks, breathing his spirit into us? Do we really want to be re-called to his

life and his concerns and his kind of company? Do we really want to be immersed into this grand love story knowing that lovers of God get clobbered...even killed...and that the cross always stands before us reminding us of this risk? Do we want to know his kind of passion and pain and promise? Do we really want to set aside our priorities and try our best to follow in his way? For good reason, we best pause with hesitation. We know on some level that such living means more trust, less control; more risking, less protection. We know it means more mystery; less certainty; more openness, less pride and self-centeredness.

Easter means allowing ourselves and our Cross Creek community to be a place where God is brought to life...where hospitality and justice is brought to life...where joy and courage and forgiveness are brought to life...where peace and reconciliation and freedom and truth telling are brought to life. Do we want to live like that? And a part of us has to admit: "We can't say for sure." I can hear us saying, "We want more assurance than that. We want a security greater than love can offer. We want a security greater than this invisible spirit can offer. We want a security greater than this life can offer." But that's the offer friends—security in a Love from which not even death can separate us; security in a Life that cannot be contained or squashed. That's the deal – security in a spirit, a Living, Pulsating Presence that promises to be with us. That's the invitation – security in a persistent, rhythmic recall to Life from the someone or something we name as God.

And I hope that for you this call to Life is becoming more insistent with each passing day and that more and more you, and I, will find ourselves leaving the "I can't say" behind and striking out on a journey toward "Yes!"

Well, our own Barbara Battin has done it again this year. She has penned an incredible poem for Easter...a prayer:

Great mystery:  
    earth wakens  
    green poking, pushing  
    through crusted winter soil  
great mystery:  
    spirit wakens  
    hope rising, renewing  
    deep down weary soul  
Great mystery;  
    from fallow, fruit may grow;  
    from despair, delight may erupt,  
    startle, and surprise us with joy  
great mystery:  
life-seed hidden in grave moments  
    waiting for light to waken us  
        to liberate our lives  
        from seasons of war  
    waiting for love to waken us  
        to transform our lives  
        from cycles of hatred and violence  
    waiting  
        for us to rise  
        from deadness  
        to breathe life into our relationships  
        and loving-kindness into our politics  
    waiting  
        for us to rise  
        from our daily practices of death  
        to plant a glorious garden  
        of justice and peace.  
O, Great Mystery, grant us resurrection blessings!

And all I can say to that is "Yes. Yes! Alleluia! Wow!"