

# PILGRIM

CHURCH

An open and affirming congregation of the United Church of Christ

## EASTER – A NEW BEGINNING

John 20: 1 - 18 April 12, 2009

Pilgrim Bud Precise

The preacher was working on his sermon on his flight from Chicago to New York. He was mulling over the meeting between Mary Magdalene and the risen Lord outside the empty tomb. It was a clear, brilliant evening. Even at 33,000 feet the lights below seemed so close you could almost sense the people lining in and around them. There would be people watching TV, people preparing the evening meal, children doing homework, people visiting friends. And there were cars darting all around. The preacher thought how utterly absurd of him to imagine that any one of them could care one bit about the scene outside an empty tomb, or about what Mary said to Jesus, and what Jesus said in reply as compared with their interest in a favorite TV program, the town gossip, the rising cost of food in the supermarket or the fortunes of the local high school basketball team.

Yet, he thought, virtually all of them would be concerned about the tension between the new and the old, the good old days and the perplexing present, the tension between old life-styles and new ones, between old moral standards and new ones, between a fairly stable and simple past and an almost terrifying present with its rapid changing customs, morals and standards.

And he thought, most of them would want to cling to the old and resist the everchanging new. Radical change comes along and hits us almost every day. It is understandable that we seek reassurance and stability by clinging to the past. And that brings us directly to the story of Mary Magdalene and Jesus outside a tomb on Easter morning. (THE WITNESS OF PREACHING by Thomas G. Long page 182)

Mary has gone to the tomb, early on the first day of the week, on Sunday. It is still dark. She sees that the stone is removed from the tomb. She runs and tells the disciples, "They have taken the lord out of the tomb and we do not know where they have laid him." The disciples come, and sure enough, the tomb is empty. They return home. But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. She sees Jesus and supposing him to be the gardener says to him, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away." Jesus calls her name, "Mary." It is in the calling of her name that she recognizes Jesus. "Rabbouni! Teacher." Jesus says these words to her – "Do not hold on to me."

# PILGRIM C H U R C H

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We live in this tension of the Easter story – between the old and the new. Mary wanted the future to be like the past. She wanted Jesus back with her and the disciples like it used to be. We know that feeling. A part of us wants to hear only comfort, only good news. But there is that part of us that always wants to hear the truth, even when it is painful. The amazing good news of Easter is that God calls us to new life. The gospel is given to us not to destroy us, but to bring life.

I tend to like books that bring the story to a conclusion. A book that has an ending that is open is, well, I want to know the end. Same thing with a movie. I like for things to be in order and to be able to see problems resolved. I guess I like that “And they lived happily ever after ending.”

But that is not the ending of the Easter Story. The Gospel of Mark does not even have the resurrection story at the end. There is one that has been added, but to end the story of Jesus dying at the cross is open ended. I think of some of the parables that Jesus told. The story of the Prodigal Son. I want that story to end with celebrating the return of the lost son and everyone happy, but that is not the ending. The story of the Good Samaritan. I don't know what happened to the man after the Good Samaritan reached out and helped him.

When tragedy comes – an unexpected death, the discovery of an uncureable illness, a divorce – the advice from well meaning friends and family is often that you should, “Get busy. Go back to work.” Get back to that familiar and routine that you know. It is like when we are assaulted by some great tragedy or trauma that we can just get ourselves up, brush ourselves off, and go right on living the life that we lived before.

That is not the message of the Easter Story. “Mary, do not hold on to me!” There is a new you that God calls into the future. “Mary, do not hold on to me.” In the days to come after the resurrection, Mary and the disciples learned that the Easter Story calls to new life. A new way of doing. A new kind of understanding. A new way of being.

Today we baptized Memphis. He is not going to be another Aaron. He is not going to be another Kista. He is a new person – new ways, new thoughts, new life. He is not going to be like one of our other children here – like Jack or Grissom or Annie or Rayshawn or Chris. He is new life. He will be Memphis.

The Easter Story calls us to a new life. The Easter story calls us to an uncertain future. The promise of the Easter Story is that God is always present w