

PILGRIM C H U R C H

An open and affirming congregation of the United Church of Christ

WITNESS TO THE RESURRECTION

John 20: 1 – 18 April 4, 2010

Pilgrim Bud Precise

Early in the morning on the first day of the week, on Monday, Mary Magdalene made her way to the tomb. The text says it was still dark. It must have been difficult for her. Just the grief over the death of Jesus – this one who had brought so much promise and hope. Now she is comes to the tomb while it is still dark. O, there is threat from the authorities, but here is Mary, out at the tomb. Maybe she had in mind to finish the preparation of the body of Jesus for burial. Whatever her reason, she is there. The stone has been removed from the opening to the tomb. She is fearful, thinking someone has taken the body of Jesus. She runs to find Peter and John, the disciple whom Jesus loved, and tells them of her discovery. There is this silly contest of which can run faster and be first to check it out. John wins the race, but he waits outside for Peter to go into the tomb first. They do not know what to make of the scene – linen wrappings, no body. But they seem to believe on the basis of just seeing the empty tomb. They go home.

Mary stays. Yes, she is fearful. Yes, she is confused. Mary does not understand. Still, Mary stays. And because she stays, she is met by the risen Christ. What would you call it? Courage. Determination. Hopeful. Maybe we should call it Faith.

Many times, the greatest virtue in life is simply to keep on keeping on. When people go through a great trauma, like a great grief, we don't expect them to triumph so much as we want them to survive. Sometimes, well meaning friends encourage, "Get up and get going! Get involved!" Well, Mary did that on this first Easter. But she became a witness to the resurrected Christ because she stayed. Peter and John came, saw the empty tomb and raced back to tell the disciple, "He is risen."

Mary stayed. She stood there, outside the tomb weeping. The two angels tried to console her. "Woman, why are you weeping?" She replies, "They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him." She sees someone she supposes to be the gardener who asks her the same question. "Why are you weeping?" She answers, "Sir, if you have taken him away, tell me where you have laid him and I will take him away. Jesus calls her by name, "Mary." She recognizes Jesus in the speaking of her name. Remember the story of the good shepherd – "He knows his sheep and calls them by name." Mary responds to this recognition of Jesus by calling him, "Rabbouni!" The text adds, "Which means teacher." Mary is instructed to go and tell the others what she has witnessed on this first Easter Morning.

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Scholars often remind us that the resurrection narratives are really commission stories - sending people out into the world to tell everyone that death is not the last word. It is important for us to remember on this Easter Sunday that Mary Magdalene was the first one commissioned. An expected ending is now a beginning – the telling of truth about life, offering living water and the bread of life. Mary speaks, and in her speaking, we are asked to find our voice as witness to this new life in Christ.

Witness can be a tricky proposition. I am not talking about handing out religious tracts at the mall and condemning people to hell if they don't get right with God. I believe they are sincere, good people, but that is not the sort of witness I speak of.

Witness.. The word can be a noun. A witness is a person who gives evidence, testimony.. A witness is a person who saw or can give a first hand account of something, maybe in court. The deputy of the sheriff of Madison County came into my office and handed me a piece of paper. It was a summons to court. I was to be a witness of an accident I had observed, first hand. Summons meant I would appear in court.

We think of Mary Magdalene, Peter and John as witnesses to the resurrection. They were there that first Easter Morning. Though the resurrection had already happened, Peter and John were witnesses to the empty tomb. And Mary was a witness who saw the resurrected Christ.

Witness is also a verb. A verb expresses action – give, build, work, talk – in this case the disciples and Mary ran to tell the others of the good news of Easter Sunday.

Is the resurrection a summons to us as disciples? Can God actually summons us to be witness to the resurrection? We know that we can be commanded. “I give you a new commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy. Do not murder, steal or bear false witness.” We do know about commandments. How do we bear witness to the resurrection? How do we bear witness to new life in Christ? I know those people, and I believe you know them to – and I hope we are all one of them. Bearing witness to new life can be seen in people who have no evidence that the boy who messes up the sound equipment in the sanctuary will be anything but trouble, yet they insist he is headed toward a brilliant career in sound engineering. Witnesses to new life are those people who see service possibilities in broken down playgrounds and faded fellowship halls. I believe we witness to the resurrection – this new life, when we invest our time in tutoring at school. I believe we witness to the resurrection when we stretch forth our hands with food and our word of welcome to those who enter the homeless shelter. I believe

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we witness to the resurrection when we say words of welcome to those on the journey of life who need to know that this place of worship will not turn them away. We have people in our congregation who have heard words of condemnation from society, even family. At Pilgrim we extend this new life, this witness of the resurrection to all who enter.

We witness to this resurrection, this new life in Christ as we live out our lives. In her book *THE WHISPER TEST*, Mary Ann Bird tells of the power of acceptance that brought a resurrection in her life. She was born with multiple birth defects: deaf in one ear, a cleft palate, a crooked nose, lopsided feet. As a child, Mary Ann suffered not only the physical impairments, but the emotional damage when children would say, "Oh Mary Ann, what happened to your lip?" "I cut it on a piece of glass," she would lie.

One of the worst experiences at school was the day of the annual whisper test. The teacher would call each child to her desk, and the child would cover first one ear, then the other. The teacher would whisper something to the child like "the sky is blue" or "you have new shoes." This was the whisper test. If the child could repeat the phrase of the teacher, the child passes the test. To avoid the humiliation of failure, Mary Ann would always cheat on the test, secretly cupping her hand over her one good ear so that she could still hear what the teacher said.

Mary Ann was in the class of Miss Leonard, one of the most beloved teachers in the school. Every student, including Mary Ann wanted to be her pet. Then came the day of the dreaded hearing test. When her turn came, Mary Ann was called to the teacher's desk. As she cupped her hand over her good ear, Miss Leonard leaned forward to whisper. "I waited for those words," Mary Ann wrote, "which God must have put into her mouth, those seven words which changed my life." Miss Leonard did not say, "The Sky is blue" or "You have new shoes." What she whispered was, "I wish you were my little girl." Mary Ann went on to become a teacher herself, a person of inner beauty and great kindness.

So today on Easter Sunday, God summons us to be witnesses to this resurrection of new life in Christ. God does not whisper to us, "I wish you were my child." What God says to us at Easter is, "You are my child." God draws us into new life. Alleluia.