

First Presbyterian Church  
Bozeman, Montana  
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April 1, 2018  
*Easter Sunday*  
John 20:1-18

### Called to New Life

Christ is risen! (He is risen indeed!) If the only message you take away from this morning's service is this one, proclaimed in churches across the world today, then that would be enough. Christ is risen! (He is risen indeed!) is the word which sparked a revolution, gave birth to a worldwide movement, motivated missionary zeal, and brought us here to this moment, this place and time. The resurrection of Jesus Christ is the turning point in human history, the pivot point of our salvation, the moment when God began a new creation. Christ is risen! (He is risen indeed!)

The four gospel writers give us differing accounts of what happened that morning, who was there, what they saw, and what they said. But they agree on these essentials: the stone which closed the tomb was rolled away, the tomb was empty, and a resurrected Jesus appeared to his disciples. The apostle Paul provides his testimony in his first letter to the Corinthians, a second-hand report, yet written before the gospels were written:

For I handed on to you as of **first importance** what I in turn had received:  
that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures,  
and that he was buried,  
and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures,  
and that he appeared to Peter, then to the twelve,  
then to more than 500 brothers and sisters at one time,  
most of whom are still alive, though some have died. (1 Corinthians 15:3-6)

If the only message you take away from this morning's celebration is this, then that will be enough. For, as Paul says, this is the message of "first importance." This is the nugget of truth on which everything—EVERYTHING—else in the Christian faith is built. Christ is risen! (He is risen indeed!)

But on the off-chance you'd like to hear a bit more, we've just read from the gospel of John this detailed, dramatic, sometimes comical story of Mary, Peter, and an unnamed disciple on the day of resurrection. Three disciples who see the empty tomb, one of whom is the first to encounter the living, resurrected Christ. Three disciples who have previously been called to life by Jesus and experienced his healing, his teaching, his understanding, his sacrifice and suffering and death. Three disciples who, on that Easter morning, find themselves called to **new** life by their risen Lord. It may be that in their stories we can hear our stories, and find ourselves also called to **new** life. For the Christian life is not "one and done," not a "been there, done that" experience, but an ongoing adventure, ever **new**.

So let's consider the three. Maybe your life holds parallels to the unnamed disciple. Six times in the gospel of John there are references to "the one Jesus loved," but he never is named. Tradition points to John, the son of Zebedee, but this beloved disciple's identity remains a point of scholarly debate. What we do know is that this man's primary motivation was to be close to Jesus, to feel the love. He was a person of devotion, dominated by his heart more than his head, one with unquestioning loyalty. I can think of a few people in this mold in this congregation—maybe you can, too. The beloved disciple stayed by the cross while Jesus was dying, and there, Jesus entrusted him with the care of his mother, Mary. Of course he leapt into action at the news that the stone had been rolled away. He outran Peter, arriving at the tomb first, peered inside, then deferred to Peter to try to solve the mystery. The beloved disciple only wanted to be close to Jesus, and Jesus wasn't in an empty tomb.

Yet the spark of belief ignited in this disciple at that moment, belief which called him to new life. If you are like this unnamed disciple, proof matters far less than presence. Faith easily outweighs doubt, and new life comes with the dawn of faith. The “disciple Jesus loved” loved Jesus, and that changes everything. If Jesus has been transformed, then so has his beloved disciple. New life in Christ is ruled by love, and this disciple may have been the first to comprehend that loving Christ comes with a gift: the power to become children of God. That’s new life!

On the other hand, you might identify more with Peter. Peter is a leader among the disciples, a leader with evident flaws. He is visionary and bold, brash and impetuous. He speaks before he thinks, and acts before he considers the consequences. He is curious, and always wants to know more. He wants to be loyal, but under threat, he acts like a coward. Three times he denies knowing Jesus when doing so might cost him his life. Maybe it is shame and regret which motivate him as he runs to the tomb. Maybe he is hoping for forgiveness, a new beginning, a fresh start.

Peter doesn’t know it yet, but he soon will hear a call to new life which will be harder than anything he’s ever done before, but will make him 10 times the person he was before. He’s going to get that forgiveness he seeks, but with it will come a commissioning to represent Christ to a wide audience, giving up safety and security--no more middle class life for this disciple--to proclaim the good news that Christ is risen. The new life is a risky life. But it is also a true life, a meaningful life, a life with challenges and rewards, a life with no regrets at its end. Is this a compelling call for you? Does this describe the new life you seek?

Or is your story more like Mary Magdalene’s? Forget what you may have heard about her having a scandalous past—all that scripture tells us is that Jesus healed her of seven demons. Forget the speculations that she and Jesus had a sexual relationship—there is nothing in scripture to suggest that. Instead, notice how prominent a role she plays as a disciple of Jesus, despite her gender. She’s the only one that all four gospels agree was present both at the foot of the cross and on Sunday morning to discover the empty tomb. That’s a true disciple. She is the first to see and talk with the risen Christ. And in that conversation, her deep grief is transformed. Her weeping ceases. And she receives, then and there, her calling and commission—to tell the good news to the others: “I have seen the Lord,” she testifies.

Mary’s new life is marked by hope and joy, a calling to preach good news, a breakout role in history. There they are in a garden, and her new life is part of the new creation inaugurated by Christ’s resurrection. Instead of holding onto Christ, she is sent out by him. “Go and tell my brothers,” he says. And thus she becomes “the apostle to the apostles.” (Paul Simpson Duke, in *Feasting on the Gospels: John*, vol 2, Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, p. 319) Like the beloved disciple, she believes. Like Peter, she embarks on a new vocation. But in her own way, Mary receives new life as she sees the living Christ through her tears, and her grief gives way to faith. Maybe you can identify with Mary’s new life, in which fear and death are exposed as pretenders while faith and life are shown to have true and lasting power.

Mary, Peter, and the beloved disciple embody what 20<sup>th</sup> century Reformed theologian Karl Barth says about the Easter message:

The Easter message tells us that our enemies, sin, the curse, and death, are beaten. Ultimately they can no longer start mischief. They still behave as though the game were not decided, the battle not fought; we must reckon with them, but fundamentally we must cease to fear them any more.

(*Dogmatics in Outline*, in *The Living Pulpit*, Jan-Mar 1998, p. 30)

For Mary, Peter, and all the other disciples the good news of Jesus' resurrection transformed their earthly life. It changed who they were and how they lived the rest of their days. In the midst of grief, Mary was called to new life by Jesus himself—enough weeping, there's work to be done! In the depths of shame, Peter was called by new life by Christ's forgiveness—enough hanging your head, there are sheep to be fed! In the throes of despair, the beloved disciple was called to new life simply by believing, his faith preceded his understanding. Enough moping around, there are people dying to hear the good news that Christ is risen and though it may still look like Good Friday, it may look like death is the last word, it may look as if evil is the master of this world, it may appear as if sin is running ragged over goodness, but this is an Easter world we live in now!

"Christ is risen!" means that Jesus is not a memory for us, but a presence with us. One writer says, "Jesus died for our sins, and we may praise God for the comfort that brings. But Jesus rose for our ministry, and he calls us to serve his Kingdom in the power of the resurrection." (William Sappenfield, *The Living Pulpit* Apr-May 2005, p. 9) The power of the resurrection is the power of life over death, goodness over evil, and love over hate. With this power, we too can become 10 times the persons we once were. We can become fully human, fully the people God created us to be. And as we do, the world becomes more fully the beautiful, blessed world God intended. The renewal of creation began on the first Easter, and we are called to be ministers of that new creation. When we say "Christ is risen!" we are proclaiming that nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus, and we are servants of that truth.

So, my friends, I challenge you to leave this place, this morning of praise and proclamation, leave as a changed person. Leave this place as those who have seen the empty tomb, have met the risen Lord, have heard your name spoken with love and promise, and have been given a commission.

And that commission is this:

To tell Christ's brothers and sisters,  
to speak with our lives to the world  
that life and goodness have already written the end of the story,  
and we the people of Christ are ready to reckon with  
all forms of death and all manner of evil,  
because in the end, love wins.

We have seen it. Go and share it!

Christ is risen! (He is risen indeed!)