

Resurrected, Transformed
Luke 24:1-12, Psalm 118:1-2, 14-24
Sermon by Rev. J. Michael Cobb
Easter Sunday
Woodbury UMC
April 17, 2021

Christ is risen! He is Risen Indeed! Hallelujah!

Preaching on Easter is one of the clearest examples a pastor gets of their mandate—tell people the story. Tell of how God came into the world as a baby. Tell how he grew into a man, speaking of God’s love for all people, and how he spent much of his time pushing those boundaries on what loving your neighbor really meant. How he preached repentance, and the Kingdom of God. Tell of how he taught, and inspired, and how he was eventually executed by the state, and that on the third day he was resurrected. Tell of how He lives, and reigns, and rules even right now. Tell how giving your life to Jesus will change your life.

But that is not the end of the story.

This year, what really struck me was that the resurrected Jesus was different from how he used to be. He had big scars, he could walk through a wall, and when some of his friends met up with him, they didn’t recognize him. Something had changed from before.

All of this reminds me that resurrection doesn’t just mean “not dead anymore” but instead it means that something has been **transformed**.

Jesus was in the tomb for three days and came out completely transformed.

When I started planning this, I initially thought I'd point out that after two years in seclusion, our communities and our country and our entire world are coming out of the time of pandemic transformed, too. We are different, and I pray that we don't try to pretend otherwise, like nothing has changed. Instead, I pray that we lean into the change, because what used to be wasn't working for a whole lot of people, and now our resurrected society can transform into something with a higher priority on treating one another in a more Christ-like way.

That's a good message, but I'm guessing that after two years you've probably heard that message in one way or another. It's still where I am going, but there's something else.

This weekend, today in fact, marks a rare convergence of Ramadan, Passover, and Easter—major celebrations for the three Abrahamic faiths. We are pretty different, but we all claim a common ancestor. also Vaisakhi, an important religious observance for Sikhs and some Hindus. And a full moon! Having all the Muslims and all the Jews and all the Christians putting a high priority on loving God this very day is a welcome reminder—we are all trying to follow God, and we are all trying to love others in the name of God.

If only that was always as clear as it is during this convergence!

I learned about something new this year for Passover. The World Union for Progressive Judaism is urging Jews around the globe to add a beetroot to their Seder plate this Passover. A seder is a

ritual meal, where each item on the plate helps to tell the ancient story of their liberation. Ukraine's most famous national food is borscht, for which the main ingredient is beetroot – making this a symbolic way to show solidarity with the people of Ukraine, **actually incorporating it into this ritual**. A spokesperson pointed out that “The story of Pesach is the story of freedom... Many of us feel helpless in the face of what is happening, but all of us placing a beetroot on the Seder plate is a powerful symbol of solidarity.”

I think this is beautiful and appropriate. One of the stated purposes of the seder is that it should be relevant so that **each generation understands**, honors, and appreciates the importance of liberation and the quest for freedom for ALL. This important ritual commemorating liberation long ago, is being revised **to explicitly include those who need their liberation NOW**. What a great idea. As the church recovers from the pandemic, I'd like to see the church revise our own rituals to explicitly include those working towards their own liberation as well.

Just imagine if the disciples told him they were glad to have him back, and then insisted that he speak and behave exactly as he had done before, as if the crucifixion had never happened. He might rightly have said that after everything he had gone through, that he was changed forever, that in fact EVERYTHING had been changed forever. To pretend otherwise would have been absurd.

I think that's where we are. I love the rituals of the church — one of my privileges is to lead the rituals of our church, as we will shortly — but we honor Christ when we bring the message of salvation in a way that is **relevant** to the real challenges of everyday life, so that each generation understands, honors, and appreciates the importance of

liberation from sin and death and the quest for freedom for our sisters, brothers, and siblings in Christ, and that love of neighbor is always bigger than we think.

We Methodists have adapted before. In Holy Communion, we use grape juice, because some people shouldn't drink alcohol. Today we have gluten free bread. I don't know if anyone here has a gluten sensitivity, but we are doing our best to make sure that absolutely everyone is included.

There are others that haven't been included as part of the church, and maybe at some point that will change as well. In preparing for our worship procession today, I learned that the beautiful processional cross was given by Jay and Rae Ann Hockenberry in loving memory of their friend, the Reverend Ronald R. Markle, a talented United Methodist minister and also a gay man. By honoring his life and work, maybe in some small way we help people consider that the **Holy Spirit bestows gifts on all people, not just those we think should have them.** Once again, love of neighbor includes people we might have overlooked. But God is faithful, and God never forgot God's people.

I tried to bring in beetroot today, in hopes of putting it on the communion table as a reminder that some Christians in the world are fighting for their lives against tyranny today. I'm hoping that my not being able to find any means that lots of families are including solidarity for Ukrainians in their seder.

The resurrection is real. That means that we can't insist that things stay as they were, or that they go back to how they used to be. You don't tell the butterfly to knock it off, and get back in the cocoon. The

resurrection is real, Christ came into the world that it might be saved through him. That message is as relevant today as it has ever been. As Christians, we must share that message in a way that each generation understands, proclaiming the importance of liberation from sin and death, and the quest for freedom for all, and that love of neighbor is bigger than we think. Christ is risen, and nothing can ever be as it was again. Let's not consider that reluctantly. Instead let's embrace that as an opportunity to shed the old baggage and be bold in our own new life.

One other thing. In today's gospel reading, did you notice that Jesus is not in it? We celebrate Easter, and Jesus is not there in the reading. While the disciples are hiding in fear, the newly resurrected Jesus is out in the world. I pray fervently today that we who have come together in the name of the risen Lord do not stay inside our buildings for fear of what is outside, but instead let us be like Jesus, out in the world. Jesus is risen and on the loose! As people who live in Christ, let us be known as those who engage the world's pain today, a relevant church to facing urgent challenges. Instead of ignoring them because they makes us uncomfortable — because such is the kingdom of God.

Resurrection is about love conquering death, about having faith in the face of impossible odds, and the joy that comes with realizing how deeply each and every one of us is loved by God, and that even death is powerless to stop such great love.

Christ is Risen! He is risen indeed! Hallelujah, and Amen!