

Hallelujah He is Risen



Rollstone Congregational Church

United Church of Christ

199 Main Street, Fitchburg, MA

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Moderator: Paul Stansel 978-337-1608

Church Organist and Musician: Gavin Klein

Easter Sunday

April 4, 2021

Prelude: **My Shepard will Supply my Need** **Issac Watts**

Introit: **“Christ the Lord Is Risen Today”**

Gathering for Worship:

Reader 1: Give thanks to our risen Lord this holy day.

Reader 2: May we continue to celebrate the good news of Easter day.

Reader 1: Today we celebrate anew the wondrous hope and joyous promise of new life lived in the presence of our risen Lord.

Reader 2: Now in our worship we celebrate with great thanksgiving and join together in songs and hymns of praise and adoration.

Gathering Hymn: “Because You Live, O Christ”

Because you live, O Christ,
the garden of the world has come to flower,
the darkness of the tomb
is flooded with your resurrection power.

Refrain:

The stone has rolled away and death cannot imprison!
O sing this Easter Day, for Jesus Christ has risen,
has risen, has risen, has risen!

Because you live, O Christ,
the spirit bird of hope is freed for flying,
our cages of despair
no longer keep us closed and life-denying.

Refrain

Because you live, O Christ,
the rainbow of your peace will span creation,
the colors of your love
will draw all humankind to adoration.

Refrain

A Time of Prayer:

Gracious God, we are here today to celebrate. You have defeated sin and conquered death through the resurrection of your Son, Jesus Christ. We recognize that without the cross, we would have no reason to live; we would have no hope. Thank you, Father, for giving us hope! We do not know what it was like to watch your Son die, but we know you endured it because of your great love for us. We are full of gratitude and worship. He is risen! Amen.

Choral Interlude: “Christ Is Alive”

A Reading from the Scriptures: Matthew 28:1-10 (NIV)

28After the sabbath, as the first day of the week was dawning, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb. 2And suddenly there was a great earthquake; for an angel of the Lord, descending from heaven, came and rolled back the stone and sat on it. 3His appearance was like lightning, and his clothing white as snow. 4For fear of him the guards shook and became like dead men. 5But the angel said to the women, ‘Do not be afraid; I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. 6He is not here; for he has been raised, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay. 7Then go quickly and tell his disciples, “He has been raised from the dead, and indeed he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him.” This is my message for you.’ 8So they left the tomb quickly with fear and great joy, and ran to tell his disciples. 9Suddenly Jesus met them and said, ‘Greetings!’ And they came to him, took hold of his feet, and worshiped him. 10Then Jesus said to them, ‘Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me.’

Musical Interlude:

Morning Has Broken

Flor Peeters

A Time of Prayer – *let us remember all of our brothers and sisters on the prayer list, especially those who are having a difficult time during this period of social distancing. Please share your prayer concerns so that they may be added to the prayer list by emailing your concern to Pastor Dave at dbhanks92@comcast.net or by calling him direct at 978-821-9571. He is available every evening and on weekends. During this time we suggest that you create a prayer partner with whom you can pair up until we are able to worship together at the church.*

We thank you, O God of great love, for the gift of life on this joyous Easter morning. When we face tombs of darkness and despair, may we stop, listen and hear the voice of Jesus say, “Do not be afraid; fear not, for I am with you always, even to the end of time.” Let the resurrection resound throughout our community that because Christ lives, we live in the fullness of life also. Let us bring the gift of new life in the form of hope to those who live in despair. Let the resurrection resound that we might bring friendship to the lonely, forgiveness to the penitent, kindness to the mean-spirited, calm to the angry, hospitality to those who feel unworthy of such a gift, fortitude to those whose strength is waning, peace to

the hostile, a helping hand to those who feel overwhelmed, acceptance to the disenfranchised, a welcoming smile to those who are strangers in our midst and always, the gift of grace to a world unused to a love which never lets us go. Our joy overflows on this day of new life; may our hallelujahs echo in our hearts as we go forth from this place in the assurance of the presence of a loving God who gave his Son that we might know what a life of love looks like. With unbridled gratitude, let us pray together in the name of Jesus, the Promised One, the Christ, our risen Lord who is with us now and forever, and who taught us to say when we pray “Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name; thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory, forever. Amen.

Musical Interlude: Prelude on “Alleluia No.1” Craig McIssac

The Message: “The Cross, the Tomb, and the Stone”

Neil MacGregor had been director of the British Museum from 2002 until 2015.

One day, he got to looking around the museum. Of course, he did this all the time, but on this particular day, his brain started to create an unusual framework for everything he saw. In the British Museum, there are tens of thousands of objects, perhaps hundreds of thousands, and thousands more that are not on display but in vaults and in the basement, in nooks and crannies.

MacGregor and his pals thought that perhaps the history of the world could be told through the artifacts in their museum. And so this is what he attempts to do in his book, *A History of the World in 100 Objects*.

The first object is the “mummy of Hornedjitef,” followed by the “Olduvai stone chopping tool.” The chopping tool is thought to be between 1.8 million and 2 million years old, and is the oldest object that “humans ever consciously made.” It comes from Africa.

In the period during which much of Old Testament history takes place, MacGregor mentions the “gold coin of Croesus,” minted in Turkey about 550 B.C. Yes, this is the same Croesus as King Croesus of Lydia, who was so fabulously rich. MacGregor discusses coinage and the Lydian contribution to commerce and trade.

Divisional headings in the book move the reader from 2,000,000–9,000 B.C., 9,000–3,500 B.C., and so on, into A.D., up to “The World of Our Making, A.D. 1914–2010.” This is the type of book that you can pick up and put down. There’s no plot, really. And the chapters are quite short.

Here's the thing: This is a good book, but it omits mention of three items that arguably influenced history in ways that almost defy description.

What are those items, you ask?

The objects are the cross, the tomb and the stone, that is, the stone that was rolled away to reveal an empty tomb.

Without the cross, there is no tomb; without the tomb, there is no stone; and without the stone, there is no empty tomb; without the empty tomb, there is no resurrection; and without the resurrection, "we are of all people most to be pitied" (1 Corinthians 15:19).

In terms of MacGregor's project, clearly — and there can be no argument about this — one cannot tell a history of the world without mentioning these objects. You really can't do it. Moreover, the three of them are a set. Remove one, and the value and significance of all three disappears like smoke in the wind.

MacGregor's problem, of course, is that he doesn't have any pieces of the True Cross, the tomb or the stone in his museum. His book tells the history of the world with only the materials he has on hand. So, he cannot be faulted for the omissions. And as we said, it is a fascinating book as written.

Still ...He doesn't have a cross, a tomb or a stone or pieces thereof.

But we do.

No, not actual pieces, but the cross, the tomb and the stone are integral aspects of our faith story.

(The Cross)

Perhaps a measure of the significance of the cross for Christians is its long history of awe and reverence. Tradition has it that the True Cross was discovered by Saint Helena a few years following her son's remarkable victory over Maxentius at the Battle of the Milvian Bridge in A.D. 312. Since then, pieces of the True Cross have multiplied like Jesus' five loaves and two fishes, and fragments of the True Cross now reside in containers around the world, including a church in Dickinson, Texas.

Another superficial proof of the impact of the cross is its omnipresent manifestations in jewelry. The cross appears in earrings, cufflinks and on necklaces. It is inked onto the bodies of men and women in some stunning displays of tat work.

The cross is a symbol of a religious impulse so powerful that unbelievers often sue to have it removed — even from private property — deeming it to be offensive.

Prior to Jesus' death, the cross was just a means of executing felons or political dissidents.

Nothing more.

Had Jesus not died on a cross, Pauley Perrette, Zoe Kravitz, Ashlee Simpson, Avril Lavigne, Maxwell, et al., would not be bearing a cross tattoo. And it's not likely that Colin Kaepernick's body would bear tattoos of several Bible verses, the word FAITH and a cross.

But this is all cultural stuff.

The meaning of the cross runs deeper. The cross of Christ was a stunning declaration of unconditional love, ultimate sacrifice, and victory over sin, death and the devil.

The cross just changed everything. It stands as the hinge-point of history and cannot be ignored, unless you're writing a book about objects in the British Museum.

In his apostolic exhortation, *Pastores Gregis*, Pope John Paul II described the cross as a tree of life because the cross is the story of the seed that falls to the ground and dies, later to come to life. The Bible explains that the cross offers to the world forgiveness, reconciliation and hope. So transformed and enthralled are we by the cross that we've created icons and oil paintings that laud and honor the love and sacrifice represented by the cross. And poets and hymn writers have put pen to paper to immortalize the meaning of the cross, as in the hymn "In the Cross":

Jesus, keep me near the cross,
There a precious fountain —
Free to all, a healing stream —
Flows from Calv'ry's mountain.

(Refrain:)

In the cross, in the cross,
Be my glory ever;
Till my raptured soul shall find
Rest beyond the river.

Or, we might sing a worship song like Chris Tomlin's "At the Cross (Love Ran Red)":

There's a place where mercy
Reigns and never dies
There's a place where streams
Of grace flow deep and wide
Where all the love I've ever found
Comes like a flood comes flowing down

(Refrain:)

At the cross at the cross, I surrender my life
I'm in awe of You, I'm in awe of You
Where Your love ran red and
My sin washed white
I owe all to You, I owe all to You, Jesus.

The importance or centrality of the cross for our faith cannot be overstated.

(The Tomb)

But without the tomb, the cross fades to nothing more than a heroic story in which the prophet or the hero is killed and evil wins.

Like the cross, the tomb is also important to our faith. But why?

Because a tomb is where you put dead people. And Jesus was dead.

Do we really get that? Jesus was dead.

He didn't faint. He didn't have a near-death experience.

He didn't die on the cross, have an out-of-body experience and come back to write a book about heaven being real that stayed on the Jerusalem Times Bestseller List for 113 consecutive weeks, the profits of which guaranteed a sunny financial future for him and his mom and extended family for generations to come.

The tomb is important because Jesus died. He was dead. And dead people in Jesus' times were put in tombs.

If Jesus wasn't dead, then the cross is a sham, and the resurrection is gone, too.

For no more than three days, the tomb is where the dead, lifeless body of Jesus lay in repose, like a corpse in the Boston City Morgue.

It is also the place where the dead Jesus underwent a transformation, for when we encounter the resurrected Jesus, we discover a Jesus not just alive, not just with a body, but with a glorified, otherworldly body. Barbara Lundblad, Joe R. Engle Professor of Preaching at Union Theological Seminary in New York City, puts it this way: "Jesus is not resuscitated from clinical death. In John's gospel, Jesus raised his friend Lazarus from death. Lazarus did come walking out of the tomb, and Jesus asked his friends to unbind him. Lazarus was resuscitated; he came back to life as he had known it before. He wasn't more alive than he had been before, and he would someday die. But the earliest witnesses bear testimony to Jesus who was transformed — who was alive in a new way beyond the limits of time and space."

The tomb is the site where something amazing happened that prefigures our own future transformation at the great day of resurrection at the end of time. "What is sown is perishable, what is raised is imperishable. It is sown in dishonor, it is

raised in glory. It is sown in weakness, it is raised in power. It is sown a physical body, it is raised a spiritual body. ... the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. For this perishable body must put on imperishability, and this mortal body must put on immortality” (1 Corinthians 15:42-44, 52, 53).

(The Stone)

The stone that sealed the tomb is not in the British Museum. It is not mentioned in MacGregor’s book outlining a history of the world in 100 objects.

But this stone, this enormous chunk of limestone hewn and shaped to fit snug against the opening of the tomb, is of huge importance to Christians.

It is the stone which could not contain the Son of God or resist the unfathomable power of God.

The stone was rolled away.

The guards that were posted at the tomb had one job to do. No one, but no one, touches the stone. The tomb is sealed. Keep it that way, or heads will roll.

If the stone rolls, your head rolls.

Here is the biblical record of the conversation: “The next day, that is, after the day of Preparation, the chief priests and the Pharisees gathered before Pilate and said, ‘Sir, we remember what that impostor said while he was still alive, “After three days I will rise again.” Therefore command that the tomb be made secure until the third day; otherwise his disciples may go and steal him away, and tell the people, “He has been raised from the dead”, and the last deception would be worse than the first.’ Pilate said to them, ‘You have a guard of soldiers; go, make it as secure as you can.’ So they went with the guard and made the tomb secure by sealing the stone” (27:61-66).

And yet, come Easter morning, the stone is rolled away, and the tomb is empty.

The tombstone becomes the touchstone.

What is a touchstone? A touchstone is a small, dark-colored tablet of stone with a finely grained surface. From ancient times, assayers — those who tested the value of precious metals like silver or gold — would use touchstones to determine the purity and value of the nuggets miners brought to them for inspection.

Precious metals are comparatively soft. When a piece of silver or gold is scraped across a much harder touchstone, it leaves a mark behind. Expert assayers could tell from that mark the nature of the nugget, but also make an informed guess as to what degree of purity it was.

The stone rolled away from the entrance of Jesus’ tomb functions for us as a

sort of touchstone. In and of itself, it is unremarkable. But because of who came in contact with it and how, it reveals the greatest of all treasures.

That stone signifies the power of God, reveals Easter in all its glory and helps us understand the cross with all of its degradation.

The cross, the tomb and the stone tell a history of the world not found in most history books. These objects describe a pivotal moment in history, which changed its course.

All of this is really interesting. It has the potential to increase our faith and expand our sense of awe and wonder. It reminds us to praise God and thank God for this amazing rescue operation that all, including the disciples, said had zero chance of succeeding.

The larger question for us on Easter Sunday is to what extent the cross, the tomb and the stone have changed our own personal histories.

What difference does it make to us that Jesus died on the cross? Does it matter that he suffered?

What difference does it make that Jesus lay dead in a tomb for three days?

What difference does it make that on Easter morning the stone was not snug and sealed against the opening on the tomb?

I cannot provide the answers to those questions for only your faith and belief will give you the answers. As you go forth may those questions open your hearts to experience the power of the one true living and loving God.

Closing Hymn:

“Because He Lives”

Resurrection

God sent His son, they called Him Jesus;
He came to love, heal and forgive;
He lived and died to buy my pardon,
An empty grave is there to prove my Savior lives!

Because He lives, I can face tomorrow,
Because He lives, all fear is gone;
Because I know He holds the future,
And life is worth the living,
Just because He lives!

How sweet to hold a newborn baby,
And feel the pride and joy he gives;
But greater still the calm assurance:
This child can face uncertain days because He Lives!

Because He lives, I can face tomorrow,
Because He lives, all fear is gone;
Because I know He holds the future,
And life is worth the living,
Just because He lives!

And then one day, I'll cross the river,
I'll fight life's final war with pain;
And then, as death gives way to vict'ry,
I'll see the lights of glory and I'll know He lives!

Because He lives, I can face tomorrow,
Because He lives, all fear is gone;
Because I know He holds the future,
And life is worth the living,
Just because He lives!

Benediction:

Hear the Good News!

Christ has been raised from the dead!

Christ is the first fruits of those who have died!

Christ has died for us.

Christ has been raised again from the dead, for us.

Live now as people of Christ. Spread this good news of Christ's resurrection to all. Live each day knowing that you are saved.

Through the love of God our Creator, the mercy of Christ our Redeemer, and the great joy of the Holy Spirit, our Sustainer. Amen.

Choral Benediction: **“Crown Him with Many Crowns”**

Postlude: **No.10 Sortie from Dix Pieces pour Orgue** **Theodore Dubois**

PRAYER LIST

Amy Belli
Carolyn Barney
Jack Brigham
Becky Colwell
Maureen Daoust
David Dufour
Diana Escarbie
Robert Fitton
Cathy Fontaine
Chuck Funk
Bob and Pat Goguen
Linda Haas
Douglas Hanks
John Hanks, Jr.
Timothy Hoffman
Linda Hurd
Tom Kazanjian
Sarah Kee
Colin Lajoie
Bob and Doris Lane
Diane Lane Cormier
Linda Long
Lorraine Michaud
Audrey Painchaud
Maria Piazza
Emma Pollice
Melanie Pouliot
Jackie Reiss
Del Sampson
Elwin Shepard
Ron Smith
The Staples Family
Diane Staples
Carole Ann Sumner and Henry
Donna Thorne
Daniel Tousignant
Marilyn Wales
Mary Wayman

All who are experiencing difficult times and situations

All who are lonely or depressed

All who are personally dealing with the affects of the COVID-19 Virus

Our Governmental Leaders