**WEST CENTER CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH, UCC April 19, 2015**

101 Pondfield Road West, Bronxville, NY 10708

***You Are Witnesses***

A Sermon for the Third Sunday of Easter by The Rev. John M. Barrett

**MUSIC MEDITATION**

The Music Meditation for this morning is by the Rev. Al Carmines, a United Church of Christ minister who was also a composer with amazing gifts. Al’s song, “Ye Are Witnesses,” is based on the closing verses of today’s Gospel reading. In Al Carmine’s musical interpretation of the Gospel, being a witness to the resurrected Christ is both energizing and exciting!

**THE GOSPEL WITNESS** Luke 24:36-48

This morning’s Gospel Witness is from the Gospel of Luke. The setting and action are similar to last Sunday’s Gospel. Jesus returns on the evening of Easter to the house in Jerusalem where his followers have been staying. Jesus says hello with the same greeting that he uses in the Gospel of John: “Peace be with you.” But in the Gospel of Luke, the disciples’ response shows more terror than peace.

**SERMON**

The Gospel stories of Jesus’ resurrection on Easter morning and his post-resurrection appearances are filled with conflicting emotion. On Easter morning, according to the Gospel of Mark, after hearing from an angel that Jesus had risen, the women “went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them, and they said nothing to anyone for they were afraid.” (Mark 16:8) “Terror and amazement had seized them.”

In the Gospel of John, the Disciple Thomas first proclaims his doubt and then, if he is to believe, his need for physiological proof that Jesus, who was crucified, has risen. Thomas wants to put his finger into the holes in Jesus’ hands and his hand into the wound in Jesus’ side.

A week later, when Jesus appears and speaks to Thomas, Thomas cries out, “My Lord and my God!” (John 20:24-29), and Doubting Thomas becomes Devoted Thomas. Doubt turn to faith.

And then in today’s reading from the Gospel of Luke, (Luke 24:36-48), the disciples and other followers of Jesus are “startled and terrified” at Jesus’ sudden appearance. The disciples think they are seeing a ghost.

Jesus recognizes their fears and shows the disciples his hands and feet, saying, “Touch me and see; for a ghost does not have flesh and bones, as you see that I have.”

Even seeing that Jesus is flesh and bone does not fully convince the disciples that Jesus is alive among them, for the Gospel states, “In their joy they were disbelieving and still wondering.”

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The disciples remain in their complicated emotional state until Jesus eats a piece of fish in their presence and says to them, “‘Everything written about me in the in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled.’ Then he opened their mind to understand the scriptures. … And you are witnesses of these things.”

This morning I want to focus on two elements of the Gospel Witness for today: the complex emotional experience of Jesus’ followers upon seeing him after his resurrection and Jesus’ declaration at the end of the reading, “And you are witnesses of these things.”

The conflicted emotional experience of Jesus’ followers shows the complexity of Easter, the complexity of our Easter faith. The miracle of Easter hasn’t been easy to believe since the very first Easter.

That the miracle of Easter is so miraculous may be the reason that we see more Easter baskets, Easter bonnets, Easter bunnies and Easter eggs at Easter, than we see images of our resurrected Lord or the cross at Easter.

Most Protestant churches display an empty cross, rather than a crucifix, which is a cross with the body of Christ on it. And although painful to contemplate, a crucifix is easier to understand than an empty cross, for we all know suffering and that Jesus suffered for us. A crucifix is Jesus’ suffering made visible, made real, before our very eyes.

On the other hand, our West Center cross is empty. There are no signs of Jesus’ death at all; no blood or nails remain to tell his story. In fact, I find our cross to be quite elegant, in its mid-century modern design.

And did you ever hear the story of our cross? The children and youth of West Center Church had numerous fundraisers in the late 1950’s and early 1960's to purchase the cross for the dedication of this Sanctuary on Palm Sunday, 1962. The children and youth wanted our cross to be their gift to the Congregation, their gift to us, across the years, and now across the decades.

It is sometimes said that Protestants have an empty cross because we are an Easter people. We believe that Christ is risen, that he is risen indeed. In the cross we celebrate Christ’s presence with us, along with the love of God and the power of the Holy Spirit.

The sufferings of Jesus at his crucifixion are not the whole story. The teachings of Jesus, his parables, his miracles and his forgiveness are all part of the story, along with his suffering.

And so, it turns out that our beautiful, seemingly empty cross is not empty at all. Our cross is full, full of meaning. And at least some of the meaning of our cross is what the disciples experience when Jesus appears to them after the Resurrection: joy, disbelief and wonder.

Our cross means joy, joy that Jesus conquered death to inspire the world and build the Church with his disciple Peter and countless other men and women followers throughout the millennia.

Our cross means joy, joy that Jesus is not still there on the wall. Jesus is risen, risen to be with us as our guardian, guide and friend, through all the good times and bad times that animate our days.

Our cross means joy, joy that is not solely our own, but joy to share: “Joy to the world, all the boys and girls. Joy to the fishes in the deep blue sea. Joy to you and me.” (Credit to Leroy Anderson)

And yet, for some people, even for some us, our empty cross may mean disbelief; our cross may mean emptiness, as well as joy.

How could Jesus be raised from the dead? Did he really come back to life? The story of the Resurrection may be just that, a story, like Adam and Eve, that teaches a lesson. The Resurrection is not scientific, it’s not rational; it can’t be proven, so some say it can’t be true. Others say that faith is deeper than reason and just as real and true.

And yet in spite of disbelief, the cross remains, the empty cross, as a reminder or symbol of Jesus, a good man whose life should have been spared but wasn’t, a man whose teachings about God’s love and forgiveness changed his world and our world, a man whose teachings we would do well to emulate, a man who loves God and neighbor and wants us to go and do likewise, whether or not we believe in the Resurrection.

And finally, the cross, the empty cross, is also a sign of wonder, a sign of wondering, a sign of curiosity, a sign of wanting to know. The empty cross also represents possibility, the future, what is yet to be --- or not to be.

When we see the empty cross, if we think about the cross and really see it, we may become full of wonder --- experiencing awe, admiration and amazement that God becomes flesh, becomes one of us, to walk the earth and teach us how to live with one another in peace.

At Easter we are reminded that Jesus is not in the tomb or on the cross. Jesus has gone on ahead of us --- gone home, gone home to Galilee. And that’s where we’ll see him, at home, wherever our home happens to be, wherever we are at home.

And who are we? We are the Body of Christ, the Church, alive in the world. And as the Body of Christ, we are witnesses, witnesses of these things: repentance and forgiveness of sin should be preached and should be lived in his name. For we are witnesses, witnesses of these things.

And so may our empty cross be full, full of meaning, full of meaning as a symbol of our living Lord and as inspiration for the living of our days.

Amen.