**WEST CENTER CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH, UCC April 5, 2015**

***Go to Galilee***

**A Sermon for Easter by The Rev. John M. Barrett**

**GREETING**

Good morning on this joyous Easter morn. 'Tis the spring of souls today. Christ has burst his prison.”

**THE STORY OF JESUS** ICorinthians 15:1-11

Our first reading of the day is the story of Easter, according to St. Paul. St. Paul was not one of the original twelve disciples of Jesus. As a matter of fact, Paul, whose original name was Saul, persecuted the early Christians, until Christ appeared to him on the road to Damascus. Paul then became the most enthusiastic of followers of Jesus, eventually attaining sainthood as the great missionary of our faith. Listen for this verse, near the end of the reading, “But by the grace of God I am what I am, and God’s grace toward me has not been in vain.”

**THE GOSPEL WITNESS** Mark 16:1-8

Each of the four Gospels: Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, records Jesus’ Resurrection with their own unique emphasis and some differing details. One element that all four Gospels do have in common is that Mary of Magdala, commonly known as Mary Magdalene, comes to the tomb, by herself or with other women to prepare the body of Jesus for burial. Mary Magdalene is the first witness to Jesus’ resurrection.

**SERMON**

My two favorite words in Mark’s story of the resurrection are “terror and amazement.” After speaking to a young man in a white robe, who says, “Jesus has been raised; he is not here,” the women “went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them.”

“Terror and amazement had seized them.” What a powerful image.

Mary Magdalene, along with Mary the mother of the disciple James, and Salome went to the tomb early in the morning, just as the sun had risen (which is the reason some churches have an Easter sunrise service). The women went to the tomb to anoint Jesus’ body with expensive spices before burial to mask the odor of death, and to show Jesus honor and respect.

While the women were up and out early, Jesus’ male disciples were probably still sleeping or at least staying indoors, so as not to be identified with their crucified Lord and meet a similar fate.

As the women walked to the tomb, they wondered who would roll the stone away from the tomb’s entrance for them, so that they could attend to their Lord's body. But it turns out that the stone was the least of the women’s problems; for when they arrived at the tomb, the stone, which was very large, had already been rolled back.

When the women enter the tomb, they meet a young man, dressed in a white robe. The young man is most likely an angel, as white was not a practical color to wear in that time and place. White seems to have been solely reserved for the garb of angels. The Gospel of John records that “two angels in white” speak to Mary at the tomb.

The women at the tomb are alarmed at the sight of the angel and the empty tomb, but the angel says to them:

*“Do not be alarmed. … Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified, has been raised; he is not here. … But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you. So the women went out and fled from the tomb,* *for terror and amazement had seized them.*”

The women went to the tomb in their grief, as an act of devotion. And there they receive startling, unbelievable news: Their Lord is not dead but risen, and has gone ahead of them, back to their home in region of Galilee.

You might think that the news that Jesus was risen would result in the women's unbridled joy, but no, the news doesn’t bring them unbridled joy. The women’s grief is too fresh; the hour is too early; the young angel’s appearance too unworldly. Instead of joy, “Terror and amazement had seized them.”

I think the Gospel of Mark's description of both terror and amazement is marvelous because it is so layered with feeling --- and so real.

For the women to be only terrified would not be likely because they believe that Jesus is the Messiah. But the women's being only amazed wouldn’t be real either, because they had seen Jesus die on the cross, be taken down, and placed in the tomb with their own eyes. The women were terrified and amazed but not incredulous because being incredulous implies a lack of faith, and the women were not lacking in faith.

So the women display polar feelings of terror and amazement. They are paralyzed by feelings of fright on the one hand and feelings of excitement and wonder on the other. What they had heard from the angel, as well as their own complex feelings frightens them. So at first, after fleeing the tomb, the three women say nothing to anyone about what they had seen and heard there.

But then, a short while later, the women tell everything that the angel had commanded them. They tell what they had seen and heard at the tomb to those women and men who were now gathering around the disciple Peter, as their leader. Jesus had said that Peter would be the rock on which he would build the Church. And Peter’s time was now.

And just as the women experience polar feelings, conflicting feelings, on that first Easter morning, we may find ourselves coming to Easter, 2015 years later, with some conflicting feelings of our own.

We may not feel the same terror and amazement of the first Easter in the year of our Lord 2015. But we may be feeling sadness as well as joy --- joy for the end of winter and the first glimpses of spring, and yet sadness that another spring has come, and yet some of our problems and issues, and the world’s problems and issues, remain, for the most part, unresolved.

We may feel sad that in April we are still where we were in December. Another Advent has passed and Jesus was born; another Lenten season is gone, and Christ is risen! And where are we?

We may have other polar feelings as well: separation as well as love, poverty as well as riches, war as well as peace, hope as well as worry.

On this 2015th Easter, like the women at the tomb we also may feel doubt as well as faith, uneasiness as well as calm, tears as well as laughter. We may wonder if even God could bring the dead back to life? But if God creates life, couldn’t God restore life too, raising Jesus from the dead?

And looking at recent world events in the French Alps and in Kenya, we may ask ourselves, “How can people be so violent if we are the creation of a loving God?” What keeps people, what keeps us, from following the commandment of Jesus: ‘Love one another as I have loved you?’”

Part of the human condition is this polar tension that the women experience at the tomb. We may be frightened, but we also want to believe, and we do believe.

Just as the women’s terror lessens and their amazement grows, so that they eventually tell their story to the other followers of Jesus, so we seek to resolve and we often do resolve that which is conflicted in our personal and faith experience. For with God’s help we can choose our life’s path: we can choose sadness or joy, loneliness or love, poverty of spirit or spiritual riches, war or peace, doubt or belief.

We are like the women at the tomb and everyone else who had followed Jesus to Jerusalem on Palm Sunday and lived through the events of Holy Week. We too choose our life’s direction. We choose where we go.

So let us then, like Jesus’ first followers, also follow his instruction to “Go to Galilee,” where he has gone ahead of us.

And by “Going to Galilee,” we will go home to live our life anew, living faithfully, from east to west, from north to south, knowing that through us, Jesus is sending out “the sacred and imperishable proclamation of eternal salvation,” which we know to be the sacred and imperishable proclamation of eternal love, through our Lord Jesus Christ at Easter and throughout the year. Amen.

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