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Easter

April 16, 2017

First Congregational Church UCC of Burlington, VT

Christ is Risen! Christ is Risen Indeed!

Let's start today's sermon with a game show question. Since all the kids are with us here today, everyone can play this game. Now if you were paying attention, you just heard ten lines of the Easter story from the gospel of Matthew. Not counting articles of speech or conjunctions or pronouns or proper nouns, what was the most common word that you heard? At least ten times!! No peeking back at the Bible – does anyone want to guess? Just guess.

(Reply accordingly) It is the word of movement: go and come. In English it might not seem to be the same word, but it's derived all from the same Greek root word. Rapid fire style, here are the ten:

Mary and Mary went
The angel came
Come see the place
Go quickly and tell
He is going ahead
They left
They came to him
They ran (went) to tell
Go and tell
Go to Galilee

Now that's an awful lot of coming and going, don't you think, especially for this Easter morning where we've just gotten all nicely settled in our pews. Jesus and his friends are mostly about movement. Last week they went on a journey to Jerusalem. Before that they were travelling around Judea, and before that, wandering around in their home district of Galilee. Jesus never was one to sit still: he was always on the go, with no place to rest his head.

Even now in the resurrection life, Jesus doesn't seem to be any different. He's up and on the way even before dawn on that first day of the week. The stone doesn't stop him,

the woman holding his feet doesn't stop him, there's nothing stopping him now. For someone who has eternity ahead of him, he seems to be in a big hurry.

Even the angel catches the mood, arriving simultaneously with a big earthquake and sonic boom: just imagine what a cinematographer could do with that awe-inspiring scene. "Come and see the empty tomb," the celestial being invites them. Then immediately says "Hurry! Go quickly to tell the others". Get moving. And what do you know? Those two Marys, they do it. They sprint back home and tell the others. Mark, Luke and John have different kinds of endings, and they go tell about other things that happened in and around Jerusalem and other resurrection appearances of Jesus. But none of that is in Matthew. Very soon we hear all of the disciples are on their way back home to Galilee "tout suite". There they will see Jesus once again.

Whew! I'm kind of worn out already, aren't you? Feels like a marathon. And we haven't even had the Easter Egg hunt yet.

So how does all the energy and the movement of this story fit with the way we usually celebrate Easter? We come to church – almost as many of us as come at Christmastime - and we sit in our fancy new clothes, we sing, we pray, but mostly we listen. Then after worship and some friendly greetings and delicious treats, we will be back to our own agendas at our own pace and we'll forget all about the urgency of this gospel text.

Jesus says: GO! Go go go. Go to Galilee. Go out into the world. Go and make disciples. One of my preaching colleagues says that Matthew's resurrection story could be summed up like this: "Going, going, gone!"

So maybe I've persuaded you. Jesus is a really active kind of guy, and he doesn't want to see us, his students, his followers, his friends, sitting around behind locked doors trying to figure out what comes next. That story comes from a different gospel, not this one. In Matthew there is no break in the action.

The Kingdom that Jesus has been preaching about for three years is very near to us, and the Kingdom happens around us when people actively love and care for one another. Jesus has not left us. Jesus is going before us, on the road to Galilee. And there we will keep on doing the work he has given us to do: the healing, the reconciliation, the forgiveness. Yes, we will keep on moving just a few steps behind our teacher. And when we get there, we will keep on doing the day to day ministry which Jesus taught us.

We will not be on our own, alone. That's the real point of Easter. Jesus promised not to leave us alone, afraid, and disempowered. And he didn't. Jesus will be going ahead of us, always. The work is now ours to do, as we are his hands and his feet.

And what work there is to do out there in the world on this Resurrection morning of hope, following as it does what seems to be a week full of Good Friday news. There are so many refugees around the world who are fleeing the violence of war. Syrian refugees are at the top of the list, in danger at home, in danger as they flee, in danger in the European camps. Yet some of us are called to go serve them, just as our member Nancy McClellan did last month as she provided medical care to refugees in Greece. In South Sudan, the refugees who get out are the lucky ones right now as they are avoiding the violence of civil war chaos. The majority who have stayed at home are now running out of food and are slowly starving to death. Who will go to serve them? Or least send their money to provide sustenance for starving children?

Easter is a joyous, wonderful day – but we must allow its power to move us keep us going in our efforts to follow Jesus into the world.

A young preacher, Nathan Mattox, says that's the whole point of Easter. He says, "When the Resurrection compels **us** to be agents of reconciliation, that's letting Easter shape "how" and not just "what" we believe. "

Easter is by no means the end of the story: it is simply one day in which we celebrate the victory of life over death and love over hate. Easter is the summary of what makes us Christian. This one day? It's just the beginning of being a courageous and committed follower of Christ.

Think about Mattox' statement for a moment: it is not just "what" we believe – the Easter creed that Christ is risen – but "how" we believe. How will this belief lead us to live, what kind of people will we be, from this moment on? What actions, what courage, what kind of life will we lead after we have seen the Risen Christ?

Rev. Mattox goes on:

"Easter means you have another chance to be the person God created you to be, and you can start doing that at any moment, even after you think it's too late. The disciples whom Jesus called "brothers" and "sisters" learned that it was never too late. This is "how" we believe. We believe in the resurrection by believing in the possibilities for redemption and reconciliation that happen every day."

The disciples are eager to get back to home to Galilee, away from the unfamiliar big city of Jerusalem. Matthew's is the only version of the Easter gospel that mentions nothing about hiding in the Upper room and puts them on the road toward home immediately. Right away they can live as if the Kingdom of God is here and now; right away they can move ahead knowing that Jesus is going before them.

The Resurrection is not over at the end of this day. The Resurrection is an ongoing action that stays alive and moving in you and in me. By the grace given to us we follow Christ in the light and movement of Easter and we do so by living Christlike lives. We serve those in need. We practice compassion for those on the margins of society. We offer radical hospitality to those in need of community. We speak truth courageously and stand up for justice. We walk humbly with our God on the everyday path.

At Easter Jesus does not stay dead and motionless in the tomb. That beautiful picture of the Risen Christ that we all have somewhere in our head and hearts is not just a relic that we drag out once a year to admire and remember. Instead of being stuck in one place, in our memories, in the past, God still goes ahead of us – into our future – as the one who feeds the hungry and forgives sins, washes our feet and raises the dead. Jesus is just waiting for us to get moving and join in.

May your Easter be blessed with belief in a God who is alive and active in the world, the Christ who goes before us and urges us to join in the important work of forgiveness and reconciliation. The best lies ahead, not behind. A blessed Easter to you all!

Benediction

Christ is with us in this place. Alleluia!

Christ goes with us into the world. Alleluia!

Go now in peace. Christ is risen! Risen indeed! Alleluia!

Today we hear the story of Jesus raising from the dead—the story where the tomb is empty! There was a phrase repeated a couple of times in that story—did anyone catch it? It was Do not be afraid—this is something that God wants us to know for sure, that we are not alone and that Jesus raising from the dead is not something that we need to fear.

Now I have with me these butterflies—does anyone know why? Yes, a butterfly is a symbol for Easter because a butterfly starts as a caterpillar and then goes into a chrysalis and then becomes a butterfly—something new but still the same. I often wonder about how that caterpillar might feel as soon as it goes into the darkness—how do you feel if you are in darkness? Yes, it can make us a little nervous or even just unsure about what will happen next. Jesus' disciples were not sure what to think.

The women at the tomb found it empty and ran to tell the others about this news and they were amazed! The butterfly helps us remember new life and the words of God to not be afraid, no matter what darkness you are facing Jesus is with you.

If you have a butterfly to hand out go ahead and to that here saying I hope that when you see a butterfly you will remember the story of Easter and of God's love for you in all times.

Let's pray together: Jesus, we celebrate with Alleluias today! We praise you for the promise that you are with us all the time. Help us to know your Holy Spirit in our world and in our hearts. Amen

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