



This is April 4, 2021...It is Easter Sunday

On behalf of our family of faith at Community United Church of Christ,
Medford, WI, welcome to this time of worship!

“No matter who you are or where you are on your life’s journey,
you are welcome here!”

Call to Worship:

Shouts of joy and victory abound! Roll away every stone.
Brush away every tear. Stand tall, all you who are bent low.
Let us proclaim the good news with joyous hearts.
Alleluia! He is risen indeed!

Hymn: “Christ the Lord is Risen Today” # 288 Worship and Rejoice

1. Christ the Lord is risen today, Alleluia! All creation, join to say Alleluia!
Raise your joys and triumphs high, Alleluia!
Sing, ye heavens and earth reply, Alleluia!

2. Love's redeeming work is done, Alleluia! Fought the fight,
the battle won, Alleluia!

Death in vain forbids him rise, Alleluia! Christ hath opened paradise, Alleluia!

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Pastor MJ: Now, Ben G and Mint G will read the scripture:

Mint: This is a reading from the **Gospel of Mark, 16:1-8** Common English Bible “Empty tomb”

When the Sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices so that they could go and anoint Jesus’ dead body. Very early on the first day of the week, just after sunrise, they came to the tomb. They were saying to each other, “Who’s going to roll the stone away from the entrance for us?” When they looked up, they saw that the stone had been rolled away. (And it was a very large stone!)

Ben: Going into the tomb, they saw a young man in a white robe seated on the right side; and they were startled. But he said to them, “Don’t be alarmed! You are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised. He isn’t here. Look, here’s the place where they laid him.

Go, tell his disciples, especially Peter, that he is going ahead of you into Galilee. You will see him there, just as he told you.” Overcome with terror and dread, they fled from the tomb.

They said nothing to anyone, because they were afraid.

Thank you, scripture readers! **My Message today is entitled,** “The Proof We Need”

Please pray with me: Holy One of many names, our hearts are filled with praise as this Easter day surrounds us with new hope. Let your words speak to us so that we may hear the resurrection story anew! Amen.

I invite all of you, the believers and the skeptics alike, to spend some time grounding yourself in the good news of the Gospel that was just read: Jesus Christ is risen!

We look in on the conclusion of the Gospel of Mark and see Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Salome going to the tomb to anoint Jesus’ dead body. There, they find the stone rolled away and his tomb empty. A young man in a white robe tells them, “He has been raised.” They are instructed to go tell Peter and the disciples, but, “They say nothing...because they were afraid,”

The Gospels of Matthew, Luke and John report the story a little differently: Matthew tells of an earthquake, an angel rolling away the stone, Jesus meeting the women as they run to tell the disciples. Luke describes two men in bright, gleaming clothing standing at the tomb announcing: “He isn’t here, he is risen.”

The women run to tell the disciples and Peter goes to check it out for himself. John tells us that Mary Magdalene went to the tomb, saw that the stone had been rolled away and noticed the linen cloths including a “face cloth” folded there near where angels stood. As Mary ran to tell Peter and John, Jesus appeared and she mistook him for a gardener.

No matter how the details unfold in the gospels, the story of Easter is a promise of eternal life and it proves to us that God can be trusted, even in the face of death. This miracle solidifies our belief that Jesus has gone before us in life and in death and that death itself has been defeated by God’s power.

The last week in the life of Jesus is recorded and repeated each year during Holy Week, and is always laced with the heartbreaking and breathtaking realizations of disciples who had hopes and dreams not unlike ours. I believe that, in a sense, as we really listen to the Easter story, it mirrors our own personal stories of times when a loved one has passed away. We drag *our* feet as we walk through the cemetery to the final resting place. We have done what we can to deal with the grief as time ticks by as slowly as if we, too, have been thinking of ways to roll a stone away. It is a burden that we couldn’t have known how to prepare for. The separation feels as though we are in some sort of a tomb ourselves, inching our way out.

Mary Magdalene, Mary, the mother of James, and Salome were 2 days into their grief, feeling like this, when were bringing spices to the tomb in order to anoint the dead body of Jesus, as was the custom. Who among us could even imagine doing that? Distraught as they were, perhaps it never occurred to them how they would actually *move the stone*, but it didn’t matter now. When they arrive at the tomb, thankfully, it is already open, and to their utter amazement, the tomb is empty!

Those who had witnessed the death of Jesus and who had previously thought that they would “follow” him in their ministry for many more days, now, as eye-witnesses of an empty tomb have a new work to accomplish. He is risen, as he said. There is new hope where there has been, just seconds before, despair!

Let this day lift our hopes higher than they have been just minutes ago. We need it, too, don’t we? But wait: have you ever doubted the resurrection of Jesus?

Did you know that researchers, theologians and archeologists throughout these 2000 years have made attempts to prove that the resurrection is a hoax? Do you think that the story of Easter filled with enough reason to believe it? Yes, it is! In fact, our faith is not built on ignorance...it is based on something substantial. Here’s how we know.

Young people left their homes and jobs to follow Jesus of Nazareth. Crowds gathered to hear what he was saying wherever he went. Some were healed of leprosy, deformity, blindness and insanity. Neglected people and people who were failures were given a new lease on life. His disciples reported that he calmed a storm on the Sea of Galilee and raised his friend, Lazarus, from his death bed. Without his making a point to declare it, a large crowd welcomed him into Jerusalem as Messiah and King. Truly, Jesus was unique.

The story of Easter may have been hard to believe for the disciples themselves, having been witnesses of his crucifixion and dying and his burial; but when they saw the empty tomb with their own eyes, they were convinced to believe what he had told them about his rising. They became a radically different group of people: courageous and enthusiastic beyond “normal.” Against all odds, they began to preach that Christ was crucified and had risen from the dead. They refused to be silenced and they wrote the story of Jesus in what we call the Gospels and began a new movement that we know as Christianity.

It wasn’t easy. The religious and political leaders of the time started a rumor that the disciples had robbed the grave and had taken the body of Jesus, insisting that the resurrection was a hoax. The Roman Empire was tired of the early Christians’ threat, killed some of the leaders and threatened others. Even so, Christianity continued to spread like a forest fire.

Why would they even write the New Testament if there was no substance to Easter? Something happened that was indescribable and breathtaking. We call it “Resurrection.” Today, in hundreds of thousands of churches, people are celebrating that miracle. In that miracle, our present and our future are determined!

If you ever have examined the reasons for believing the miracle of Easter and the implications it has for your life, you may still choose to be suspicious. But it is now much harder to be indifferent with the evidence being so overwhelming,

Frank Morrison, scholar and writer, set out to discredit the Easter story. He was an honest man and he made an honest inquiry. He planned to write a book discrediting the Resurrection but it refused to be written. Instead, he wrote a book entitled, "Who Moved the Stone? The Evidence for the Resurrection." In his preface, he writes: "Essentially, this is a confession, the inner story of a man who set out to write a one kind of book and found himself compelled, by sheer force of evidence, to write quite another."

*Lee Strobel, the author of "The Case for Christ," wrote the forward in Morrison's book, "I owe Morrison a great debt of gratitude," Strobel writes, "Who Moved the Stone?" was an important early link in a long chain of evidence that God used to bring me into his kingdom. Morrison's stirring intellectual exploration of the **historical record** proved to be an excellent starting point for my own spiritual investigation."*

The final step in making the miracle of Easter personal and true... is to follow Jesus Christ closely and honestly, allowing his life, love, presence and power to be a part of your life. When you sense his power and presence in your experiences, you will know that this is not a figment of your imagination.

Your trust will grow with time. Your faith will develop with greater certainty.

Ultimately, you will find yourself understanding that Easter is as important as the sun.

~borrowed & edited a bit, from an Easter sermon by Rev Dr Dale Kuck, 1986, "We Who Must Die Demand a Miracle"

Once, when John Wesley was preaching, the town bully started heckling him. "We've had Christianity for 1700 years," the heckler shouted, "and what difference has it made? What's it ever done? We're in just as big a mess now as we've ever been."

"My good man," Wesley replied, "Don't you know that we've had water for much longer than that but, you're still dirty. You've got to **use** something before it works." That has always been the key to Christianity. Those that actually commit their lives to Christ are not disappointed.

We can't segregate Easter from the rest of our faith and just celebrate it for one day. In fact, every Sunday is a reminder of the resurrection. Easter speaks to our living and to our dying. We speak of death as a "comma, not a period" and that makes all the difference in the world!

Never was there a question about the reality and the power of Christ's Resurrection in the early church. It was all they talked about. It compelled them to cross the seas and tell the world. They were prepared to die for that faith. That faith changed their lives and their view of death.

Paul, in his first letter to the Corinthians, chapter 15:3-7, 20-22 (Common English Bible) he writes this: ...Christ died for our sins in line with the scriptures, he was buried, and he rose on the third day in line with the scriptures. He appeared to Cephas, then to the Twelve, and then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers and sisters at once—most of them are still alive to this day... Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles, and last of all he appeared to me...

But in fact, Christ has been raised from the dead.... Since death came through a human being, the resurrection of the dead came through one too. In the same way that everyone dies in Adam, so also everyone will be given life in Christ.

This is what we believe, thanks to Jesus Christ and thanks to those who came to the tomb, putting aside *their* fears and proclaiming that "Christ is risen. He is risen, indeed!"

That's all the proof we need! Amen.

Take a deep breath... and let it out

Time for Prayer: (Let's spend a few moments in silent prayer.) Great God of Victory, let us now rise to the challenges of our lives with the energy of people who have been given a new lease on life. Awaken us to the delights we have overlooked in our haste and worry. Let us have the courage for change and solid ground when our world is quaking beneath us.

Gracious God, we lift before you our prayers for those we love and care for. Please say: **Hear us, O God.**
For all who suffer from oppression: **Hear us, O God.** For all who suffer in mind or body: **Hear us, O God.**
For national and local leaders, that they may ever seek justice for all: **Hear us, O God.**
For those who were born this year and for the families of those born into eternal life: **Hear us, O God.**

Hear our prayers, O God, for those you have placed upon our hearts and minds this day. (especially for Kay, Susan S, Maggie M, Tom N, Dan, Albert, Darrell P, Phil G, Christine D, Cathy S, Rick G, Teresa G, Doug, Angie, Shelly B, Mike K, Mike G-P, Matt L, Audrey, Nancy, Rob M.)

We pray in the name of Jesus and in his words: 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 sins and we forgive those who sin against us. And lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, and the power and the glory forever. Amen.

Hymn: "Thine is the Glory"

1. Thine is the glory, risen, conquering Son; endless is the victory thou o'er death hast won.
Angels in bright raiment rolled the stone away, kept the folded grave clothes where thy body lay.
Thine is the glory, risen, conquering Son; endless is the victory thou o'er death hast won.
2. Lo! Jesus meets us, risen from the tomb; lovingly he greets us, scatters fear and gloom.
Let his church with gladness hymns of triumph sing, for her Lord now liveth; death hath lost its sting.
Thine is the glory, risen, conquering Son; endless is the victory thou o'er death hast won

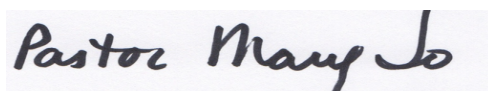
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Benediction: Go now with this good news and tell a world that needs to know that Christ is risen indeed!

Peace be with you and be safe!

You will find this *recorded service* at uccmedford.org

Click on "media." 715-351-0450

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Pastor Mary Jo". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.