

Then He Appeared
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First Presbyterian Church of Waukesha
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1 Corinthians 15:1-11

¹Now I would remind you, brothers and sisters, of the good news that I proclaimed to you, which you in turn received, in which also you stand, ²through which also you are being saved, if you hold firmly to the message that I proclaimed to you—unless you have come to believe in vain.

³For I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, ⁴and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures, ⁵and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. ⁶Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers and sisters at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have died. ⁷Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. ⁸Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me. ⁹For I am the least of the apostles, unfit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. ¹⁰But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me has not been in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them—though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me. ¹¹Whether then it was I or they, so we proclaim and so you have come to believe.

John 20:1-18

¹Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb. ²So she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, “They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him.” ³Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went toward the tomb. ⁴The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. ⁵He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in. ⁶Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there, ⁷and the cloth that had been on Jesus’ head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself. ⁸Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; ⁹for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead. ¹⁰Then the disciples returned to their homes.

¹¹But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb; ¹²and she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet. ¹³They said to her, “Woman, why are you weeping?” She said to them, “They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him.” ¹⁴When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. ¹⁵Jesus said to her, “Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?” Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, “Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away.” ¹⁶Jesus said to her, “Mary!” She turned and said to him in Hebrew, “Rabbouni!” (which means Teacher). ¹⁷Jesus said to her, “Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, ‘I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.’” ¹⁸Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, “I have seen the Lord”; and she told them that he had said these things to her.

Christ is risen! The phrase, which mainly gets use just this one day a year, is familiar. The story of Jesus’ crucifixion, death, and resurrection is one we know well. Living in a country founded by Christians who were seeking freedom to worship the way they desired, the story of God coming to live

among us as a man named Jesus, who taught and healed and accepted death at the hands of other men so that God might fulfill a new promise to us, a promise of eternal life and victory over death and forgiveness of sins, has become a story which can be recounted by believers and non-believers alike. We may not be able to wrap our minds around it, Jesus being one hundred percent man AND one hundred percent God, Jesus giving up his life for humanity, Jesus being raised from the dead, but, in the name of faith, we believe it and so the extraordinariness and the excitement of it get lost in its familiarity and in our acceptance.

When malls and pharmacies and grocery stores and fast-food restaurants and supper clubs cater to those of us who believe, offering Easter outfits and new DVDs just in time for filling Easter baskets and aisles of candy and Easter hams and fish sandwiches and Friday fish fries for those who choose not to eat meat on Fridays during Lent, we begin our gradual roll into Easter as soon as Valentine's Day is over. A routine highlight in our calendars before Memorial Day. Easter gets folded into our everyday lives as a happy day with spring flowers and candy and family traditions.

But Easter, this day we celebrate, is truly far from ordinary. While Christmas is, by far, a bigger day outside the church than Easter, Easter Sunday is the more important day in the church calendar. Jesus coming to us is pivotal in the story of our redemption as people who have strayed from God. But the redemption itself isn't a done deal, as they say, without Christ's death on the cross and his rising to new life. It is the ending of Jesus' mortal life that marks the beginning of our new lives. Only through Easter Sunday does Christmas find its fullest meaning.

Those earliest followers of Christ, who understood, if even in the smallest way, that this man was of God, found hope in Jesus' message of God's love, in Jesus' righting of wrongs, and their hope was for themselves, the people of Israel. They took comfort in the assurance that God still loved them, despite their many failings and wanderings. They imagined that the greatest wrong to be righted involved relief from Roman domination of their rightful land, a return of Jerusalem and her country to the Israelites. We can empathize with the excitement they must have felt as their savior was received as a victor on the day we have called Palm Sunday. And then, just four short days later, he was shockingly and utterly unexpectedly out of the picture, unlikely to lead them to the final triumph they envisioned, unlikely to even live past the week's end. Loss overcame them. They had had such a good feeling about this one, this prophet among so many at the time; how could they have been wrong...again?

Disappointed or not, Mary still cared about this man she had believed since the beginning and, once the Sabbath's rest had ended, she went to the place where Jesus had been laid to rest. It had been bad enough that he had been killed in such an awful way, and had been lumped in with criminals, thieves, and bandits, those who represented what he stood against. To find that his tomb was disturbed

compounded that insult. Who would have moved his body and to what end? Running to get others who could confirm her suspicions, and perhaps share her indignation, she returned with Peter and the other disciple whom Jesus loved. They came and they saw what she saw, and the other disciple understood that Christ had defeated death as he had said he would but neither understood the full truth about his being raised from the dead. And then they left, leaving Mary weeping and still convinced that worse things had happened to Jesus' body. While violent and unfortunate, the story to her was still of an ordinary death.

Then he appeared. "Teacher! You have returned!" Christ is risen! And Mary became the first to spread the gospel, the good news, going back and sharing that she had seen the Lord and telling what he had said to her. In that first day, in the beginning, the details were still fuzzy but they knew now that they had not been wrong, that there was nothing ordinary about Jesus, that he wasn't just another prophet. "Wait," they may have said, "I remember that Jesus told us that he would destroy the temple and rebuild it. He didn't mean the literal temple, did he? What else did he tell us that we might have misunderstood?" As they listened to Christ before he ascended to heaven and after, when they continued to piece together their memories of what he had told them, they began to realize how big the picture was, how extra-ordinary his message and his mission were.

Paul, coming to believe later, with the benefit of the work of the earliest Christians in understanding and re-interpreting what Jesus had taught and shown, and assuming the acceptance of Jesus' extraordinary life and teaching, offers concisely a summation of Christ's mission. He says Christ died for our sins, he was buried, he was raised on the third day, and he appeared. He appeared to Cephas, who we also know as Peter; he appeared to the twelve and then even more. Then he appeared to Paul. Paul affirms there were many witnesses beyond him. Christ is risen! If it is true that Jesus conquered death, then all else he taught must be true. His teachings may now be familiar but they remain far from ordinary.

To name a few: God is love. God sent the Son into the world that the world might be saved through him. Jesus came that we might have life, and have it abundantly. To paraphrase: God loves even those who make the biggest mistakes and God has hope for them beyond their mistakes, like Jacob and Moses and King David and Paul, who when he was known as Saul, was acclaimed and feared for his far-reaching and effective persecution of early believers. God loves those who make mistakes and God has hope for them beyond their mistakes, like me and like you. And how can we show our thanks? Jesus teaches by loving God and loving our neighbor as ourselves. Paul and Mary teach us by spreading the good news of God's amazing love.

There is nothing ordinary about what we do here in this space we call a sanctuary. The stories we

share, the meal we share, the love we share are not ordinary. The Father, Son, and Spirit whom we worship are not ordinary. God did not step away from creation when the world was begun and, when God saw that we did not understand nor appreciate nor feel the love with which the world was created, God came as one of us, to speak to us in our language, in our experiences, in our struggles. When the time came for God to fulfill the promise to overcome death so that we might all know life as God had planned it, eternal and abundant, God sent the Spirit among us so we might never forget again, so that we might never lose hope again. Well beyond ordinary, indeed.

There is nothing ordinary about what we do when we leave this space. If survival of the fittest is part of our nature, is normal, then when we show kindness to people, in whatever way we do it, our behavior is far from ordinary. And if we do it because we believe in Christ's words to love one another, then he has appeared through our actions.

This day is extraordinary. Today, together with all the followers of Christ, gathered in sanctuaries and on shores, in squares and coffee shops, in movie theaters and cathedrals, Christ's church is extraordinary. In gathering to celebrate the joyful news of Easter, which Paul and Mary witnessed to, and which we witness to in our own time, we do not accept the status quo. We do not accept that poverty and sorrow and hatred and selfishness and war should win over kindness and mercy and justice and equality and peace and love. We will not settle for ordinary, for our God is not ordinary and the charge to love one another is not ordinary. So, if inside and outside of this place people know we are Christians by our love, as the old hymn says, then Christ has risen above the sorrows and hurts and angers that color daily life. We taste and share eternal and abundant life here and now. Christ *is* risen! He is risen, indeed! Alleluia! Amen!