

So What?
Easter Sunday, April 4, In the Year of Our LORD, 2010
First Congregational United Church of Christ
Gloversville, New York
The Rev. Ralph S. English, Pastor

John 20:1-18

During High School, I thought I found my calling ... to teach mathematics. I enjoyed numbers (still do), quickly grasped algebra and geometry, and raced with excitement into trigonometry and all that lay ahead. I hit a brick wall. As soon as mathematics became abstract, conjectural, with its “imaginary numbers” and other such “imponderables,” I was lost. As my grades went from A to B to C, I had good reason to question my “call”. My love of math soured. I distinctly remember fearing how each next lesson might baffle me. Mr. Fontenot, my math instructor, was kind, but firm. He perceived that as much as I breezed through the more concrete expressions of mathematics like algebra and geometry, I would probably struggle with the more theoretical levels that lay ahead.

Fortunately, despite my frustration with higher” math, I never lost my sense of curiosity – or my love of counting things. Albert Einstein once wrote of theories and mysteries that even he barely comprehended and of how curiosity and questioning should be an ongoing part of each person’s journey of life. As Mr. Einstein put it,

The important thing is not to stop questioning. Curiosity has its own reason for existing. *One cannot help but be in awe when contemplate[ing] the mysteries of eternity, of life, of the marvelous structure of reality.* It is enough if one tries merely to comprehend a little of this mystery every day. *Never lose a holy curiosity.*

Just as Mr. Einstein never stopped being curious about life’s mysteries, I am thankful I am curious about the unknown and the extraordinary! So, while I understand the *existence* of “higher” math, I will always be perplexed by its complexity. Once, Sally tried to explain how Einstein’s “theory of relativity” was followed by “string theory” and now how that idea is challenged. That much of that is beyond my comprehension does not stop my curiosity. In a similar fashion, that I cannot comprehend the mysteries of our God does not stop my curiosity or journey of faith and certainly does not stop me from sharing the good news of Jesus Christ.

After more than forty days of Lent, a period during which we recall the weighty themes of Jesus’ sacrifice and rejection, after services held here Maundy Thursday and at the Presbyterian Church on Good Friday when we recalled the Last Supper, Judas’ betrayal, Peter’s denial and the brutality of Jesus’ arrest and subsequent death on a cross, ... after all of that, it was time yesterday to sit down and compose this message. I selected the title for this message weeks ago and now it was time to decide the tone and tenor of today’s message. “So What?” was just vague enough to allow me some wiggle room. One possibility, “So What Do We Do Now?” was premature as that is our theme for the rest of April. Another option was fraught with a slippery slope and danger. That version was: ”So What Difference Does Easter Make To You?” with its implicit temptation to suggest that Easter, the resurrection, and God’s promises to us matter very little to most people and that this Easter Sunday will come and go like all of the rest and the world, much less we, will change not one whit.

I know that today, Easter Sunday, is, to use Paul Harvey's phrase, "the rest of the story," the crowning and glorious conclusion to a journey during Lent that took us to and through Holy Week. Frankly, I don't blame those who jump from Palm Sunday to Easter Sunday without wanting to face what occurred in the days between! How easy it is to get caught up in a downward spiral of sadness if not despair that concludes with the stark and harsh reality of "Good" Friday, when the best of the best, the best teacher and storyteller that ever lived, the greatest gift of God, for so many the Only Begotten One, was betrayed, rejected, arrested, killed, dead and buried, and with it – presumably - the hopes and dreams of His followers.

In the middle of this last week, Sally, who knew the answer, asked anyway - whether I was listening to Jesus' pained words as expressed in the rock opera "Jesus Christ Superstar." I do that every Holy Week. On Thursday evening, the drive from church to home was long enough to play the most poignant part three times as I tapped the repeat button twice on the car's CD player. I listened to the section when in the Garden of Gethsemane Jesus' voice sings

"Then I was inspired, now I'm sad and tired. After all, I've tried for three years, feels like ninety, why then am I scared to finish what I started, what You started, I didn't start it"

That Jesus picked Himself up from kneeling in pained prayer in Gethsemane and went through with the arrest, trial, mockery and sacrificial death that followed awes me. It inspires me to pick myself up and continue whatever task I might otherwise avoid – as every so-called sacrifice or task in my life pales by any comparison to that of Jesus, my Mentor, Friend and LORD.

So what are we about this morning? What is the message? Why are we here? What is Easter all about? Are we at least *curious* about God's power – particularly as it impacts our lives? After this service of worship, many of us will enjoy watching our younger disciples race around upstairs with baskets to find the eggs filled with candy. Perhaps in all of the hoopla of colorful baskets and colorful eggs, we have forgotten the reason, origin, rationale and significance of *eggs* on Easter – that out of seemingly hard, lifeless-looking ovals might spring new life! And is the hunt – the infamous Easter-egg hunt – not a metaphor for the search for the promise of new and renewed life so often hidden from our eyes, if not in the shut-down or closed parts and recesses of our lives?

I recall the first of three Easter Sundays in Harvard, Massachusetts where I served as a Student Pastor. The sunrise service was held on a hilltop farm outside of town. It was cold, there was snow on the ground, and there was the distinct odor of animals as a cold breeze swept up the hillside to the brave (or foolish) who gathered to greet the morning sun and remember the first Easter. I remember how I was interrupted in the middle of my first Easter sunrise service homily. About twenty feet away, a sheep started to moan, then groan. Attention was drawn away from what I thought were words of inspiration as people turned to look at ... well, to hear what I can only describe as "sploosh." Right then and there was a new born lamb. No one remembers what I said that Easter morning. The Easter message, the gift of new life, was more visceral than I could ever express.

We gather here this morning because many of us want the promise – if not the awe – of the resurrection, to touch every part of our being – and in particular parts of our psyche and lives that so need God's grace, reconciliation, forgiveness if not new starts and rejuvenation. We seek resurrection of *all* that is dead: dying if not dead faith, strained if not hurt relationships, dashed if

not lost hope and confidence – lost faith in the leadership of nations, communities and the church, lost confidence in the economies, politics and societies of the world, perhaps lost hope in ourselves. We are because we want, once again, to capture a sense of awe and holy curiosity. We gather this morning because we don't want the answer to "So What?" to be ... "nothing."

We are here to be filled anew with the indwelling of our God – the injection of the power and blessings of the Holy Spirit into our being and souls. Like Mary Magdalene who went to the tomb, found it empty and wanted to believe the men in dazzling apparel that Jesus was alive, we want to believe in something beyond ourselves, beyond the norm, to be as awe-struck as were Peter and the other disciples. We want to be touched by something miraculous, to have our sense of mystery and imagination stretched beyond the tangible. As awe-struck as some may be by the birth of new animals, inspired by the promise of new life after the snows and cold of winter, are there not even more incredible miracles? Do we not know that the promises of faith, even the pie-in-the-sky, when-pigs-fly, promises of peace as found in Isaiah – when "the wolf and lamb shall feed together" – do we not realize in the depths of our souls that nothing, *nothing* is impossible with God – that the God Who stepped back and let humans put Jesus on a cross, leave Him there to bleed and suffocate in misery – and then pull off the greatest miracle of all – and demonstrate that the cross did not win, that the cross is empty, and that the sacrifice, as real as it was, was not the last word? As incredulous as it is, as unbelievable as it is, as so beyond reason that some of us reject the notion entirely, are we not at least *curious*? Is there not at least a sneaking suspicion that *all* things are possible with God? Are we not in awe?

God wants a response from us. This is not an occasion for us to shrug off an event. The sermon title is not intended to be a facetious "So What?" as though Easter is just any other day. We are to be awe-struck, *really* awe-struck, and to live as people of the Easter promise. To live as though these are days of awe, awe of the wondrous gift and promise of new life in Christ means to find ways to forgive, *really* forgive, those who have hurt us, ... to find reconciliation with those we have wronged, ... to work for peace and joy in our lives, in our communities and yes, even to find ways to do our small part to bring about peace throughout the world, ... to work for reconciliation among persons determined to stand at opposite ends of political spectra, with those of the world who have so little when we, by comparison, have so much, with those who look different, speak differently, have different histories and different paths and do the evangelism, the sharing of the good news with peoples of the world in so many different ways.

How can we hear the words of the Psalmists and the prophets, the accounts of the Gospels – and then walk away and not be moved? Or will we succumb to pessimism, or worse ... indifference? The images and headlines, this week from Moscow and Baghdad and of a so called "Christian Militia" group in Michigan, images that so often depict shattered and torn lives, are a reflection of the strife so many face in life and remind us of shattered lives of those close to us. But, for Christians, another image is to prevail ... and it is not of shattered dreams but of promise and resurrection. As persons on that first Easter morning were awe-struck by the power and presence of God, so we ought to be awe-struck as well – and live – not in days of fear, discord, confusion, shattered dreams, or wondering if there is a point to our lives. What is the point of Easter? It is that we are to live all our days driven, shaped, and molded by the greatest single event of all human history – an empty tomb on that first Easter morning. So what? The "what" is that we are to live every day filled and inspired with God's love, grace, promises and peace.

Amen.