

## HOLY WEEK 2022 – CHAPEL IN THE PINES PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Maundy Thursday (April 14, 2022)

John 13:31–35; Philippians 2:5–11

There is no Easter without the cross.

A child read *Charlotte's Web* over and over,  
not that she thought it would end differently—  
the wonderful, writing spider would still be dead.  
She learned about herself from the sadness.

Each year we hear about the night that Jesus died,  
how he sat at table, took the bread and cup,  
and asked us to remember him being poured out,  
betrayed and broken, seemingly lost.

There is no Easter without the cross.  
We learn the hard truths when we open our hearts.

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And now...to preach about something *controversial*... What do you think of spiders? Do they frighten you? My children still yell, "Daddy, there's a spider in our room! Get rid of it, but don't kill it!" I'm happy to deposit the little one safely outside.

I'm fascinated by spiders. Especially their webs. This is the best time of year for web watching. Daylight comes early to the woods, illuminating the shimmering threads stretched across the redbuds. Water beads glisten on spiderwebs like pearls on a string.

Lately, I've been thinking about spiders not only in nature but in fiction. E.B. White's famous spider, Charlotte, wished to prevent Wilbur the pig from being slaughtered. In the corner of the barn doorway, Charlotte spun actual words in her web: Some Pig, Terrific, Radiant. Not only did it catch the farmer's attention, people came from miles around to see the famous pig.

Then, Charlotte spun one final word: Humble. But this time, no human noticed.

In the Gospel of John, Jesus spun mighty deeds that drew crowds and made him famous. He turned water into wine, gave sight to a man born blind, and raised Lazarus from the dead. Some Man! Terrific! Radiant!

But, on the night he was betrayed, Jesus did something that we would call humble—he washed the feet of his disciples. This act did not draw huge numbers of people. Only a few paid any attention at all. Humility rarely makes the headlines...

Yet, the Lord of lords humbled himself. Paul put it this way: *Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but **emptied** himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he **humbled** himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross.*

Jesus emptied and humbled himself to model what love looks like in action. Then, he gave us the new commandment to love one another in the same way so that we, too, would be humble and serve one another.

When I think of what loving service looks like in action, I think of the people of Mount Zion and the Sunday afternoon fellowship that Chapel in the Pines is blessed to share with them. For almost two years, we have met together and shared stories, spun tales of laughter and love, shared our hopes, fears, and beliefs. Certain moments have stood out like one of Charlotte's words in the shimmering web.

But I think it has been the humble effort of getting together, week in and week out, that has spun and woven the strongest bonds of love between us. As Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. once preached, "We are caught in a web of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny." As Rev. Neal often says, our churches have been yoked together by God so that one cannot fall without the other. By God's almighty love, these bonds are stronger than even death. This is the great resurrection hope of Easter: eternal life in the beloved community, a communion with God and each other.

But before Easter, tonight on Maundy Thursday, we set our sights on more humble things. We glimpse the heavenly banquet through the humble table, eternity in a bit of bread in the palm of our hand. Humble, yes. But let us not miss the shimmer of extraordinary in the ordinary, the mystery of miracle.

Thinking again of Charlotte the spider, there is a woman named Mrs. Arable who asked Dr. Dorian, "Do you understand how there could be any writing in a spider's web?"

"Oh, no," the doctor replied. "I don't understand it. But for that matter I don't understand how a spider learned to spin a web in the first place. When the words appeared, everyone said they were a miracle. But nobody pointed out that the web itself is a miracle."

Mrs. Arable replied, "What's miraculous about a spider's web? It's just a web."

Then, Dr. Dorian asked, "Have you ever try to spin one?"

What's miraculous about washing feet or sharing a meal? What's miraculous about any humble act of service? What's miraculous about two churches coming together to study scripture and share fellowship?

Have you ever tried it?

After describing the humility of Jesus, Paul asks us to live into Christ's commandment to love: *Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility, be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind.*

That, my friends, is the wondrous love that God commands us. Love that is spun of humble acts of service that bind and weave people together in the web of the beloved community. What wondrous love! Amen.

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Easter Morning (April 17, 2022 - 7:00 am)

Mark 16:1–8

“The Little Stream Sings” by Wendell Berry

The little stream sings  
in the crease of the hill.  
It is the water of life. It knows  
nothing of death, nothing.  
And this is the morning  
of Christ’s resurrection.  
The tomb is empty. There is  
no death. Death is our illusion,  
our wish to belong only  
to ourselves, which is our freedom  
to kill one another.  
From this sleep may we too  
rise, as out of the dark grave.

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The women were at the foot of the cross to the very end. They watched as his body was taken down and wrapped in linen and placed in a tomb. I imagine them wailing; or, perhaps mute and numb, their limbs as heavy as their hearts.

In dealing with the spectrum of grief, ritual helps. It gives us something to do. The women came that morning expecting to anoint a dead body with spices—a tender act, but a formal one. There was a script and they had a role to play...then, everything changed!

The earliest telling of the story ends as we have ended this morning: “Trembling and bewildered, the women went out and fled from the tomb. They said nothing to anyone, because they were afraid.” I think there were questions at the root of their fear: Could Jesus really rise again? Could there really be another answer to the terrible human freedom to kill one another? Could it really be that the violence of empire and the pain of loss would be denied the final word? *Could* it be so?

In that ancient telling, we don’t get an answer. There is no resolution. There is no certainty. Scholars have argued that, surely, Mark didn’t mean to end that way...the original text was lost! Later authors even added to Mark’s Gospel, borrowing resurrection appearances from other gospels.

But what if Mark intended to end as he did? If the story is left open-ended, we are invited to live into the ending. What strikes me about the ancient text is that it was not only Jesus who rose up that morning. It was also the movement that his teaching sparked: a community who rose up to spread his message of power in weakness and the victory of love. Mark ends his story, but we know that the church formed, hardly perfect, yet at its best a movement that taught love in selfless action, people who belonged to one another.

From our vantage point in history, we know the story of the church. But we still have questions: Is new life possible? Is love stronger than death? Could it be so? These questions invite us to rise up, and to live as though it were true—to make it be so in our lives.

This is morning of Christ's resurrection. Love will have the final word, even if that word is just a question, a possibility like an empty tomb, a hint in a little stream singing in the crease of the hill. Love can be crucified, crushed, buried...but it will rise. Love will reach for the sun...and we will reach for each other. Even when everything is uncertain, even when we are grieving and the losses keep coming, even when we are weary to the bone and heavy in the heart, we keep reaching for one another, rising in love as out of a dark grave. Let us pray:

Light and Love Eternal, rise as the spring in our hearts, dawn with Easter hope that our minds would be illuminated by love. Help us reach one another. Love us back to life in all its fullness as we blossom and unfold amid days that will always contain beauty and terror alike. No matter what else they may hold, may each day contain impossible, inexorable, blooming love. May it be so. In the name of the crucified and risen light, we pray. Amen.

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Easter (April 17, 2022 - 9:00 & 11:00 am)

Luke 24:1–12; Isaiah 65:17–25

Easter Feast - *First line by Susan Cyr*

We eat. But the main thing is  
we gather. That's why it's called a "feast."  
Sure, some of us are a little rough around the edges.  
Call us your blessed & bruised neighbors,  
folks down on their luck, but—  
there's room for everyone at this table.  
Pull up a chair. Break the bread. Pass the cup.  
We're all being fed

a story that's good enough to eat—  
how death couldn't hold him and he leapt  
from the tomb one shining morning  
to meet his friends, just as they were.  
The main thing is that we gather;  
the feast will follow like Amen to the prayer.

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Jesus was dead. He was raised and now lives forever. The tomb is empty.

I cannot fill the air with explanation. I will not attempt to liken the mystery of the resurrection to something that is known. Neither will I try to prove what you should believe nor issue implied threats if you do not.

Jesus was dead. He was raised and now lives forever. The tomb is empty...and I will invite reflection upon a lingering question in the air: So what? So what does this mean for our lives today?

Our scriptures offer two *invitations*, ways at looking at our lives that seem contradictory at first. But the *truths* are complimentary, for life is complicated. So, we need multiple ways to draw comfort and strength.

First, from Isaiah, we hear the promise of new heaven and new earth, a vision repeated in the Book of Revelation. This new reality is described by what it is NOT—no more crying, suffering, or pain. No more loss of any kind, for death is no more. Therefore, Isaiah invites us “not to remember the former things.” This is an invitation to live today by the promised hope of tomorrow.

And second, from Luke, the angel standing in the light of the empty tomb tells the women to *remember!* To remember what Jesus said and who he was. Again, these two invitations do not conflict; to live in this world, we need both a promised future and a remembered past.

The “former things” that the angel would have us remember involve what Jesus said about his crucifixion and resurrection. These are the first glimpses of the new heaven and new earth when death shall be no more.

Yet, when Jesus asked his followers to dream of the heavenly banquet, he called attention to the very tables of this blessed and broken world. Breaking the bread and sharing the cup, Jesus invites us to “do this in remembrance of me.” In his absence, we make him spiritually present by the physical things of a shared meal.

This calls to my mind lines from Wendell Berry: *In our dinners together, the dead enter / and pass among us / in living love and in memory.*

A caveat: I know that an empty chair at the table, where a loved one once sat, can also be painful. Loss is real.

So, I try to remember both the future hope of resurrection and that, right now, the dead can be present “in living love and in memory” not only in church during Communion...

But also during other meals! Whether the Easter ham or Thanksgiving turkey, a pot of store-bought spaghetti sauce or tacos on a random Tuesday, the dead can rise to mind in living love and in memory. This is the gift of remembering. It can be a private experience...

Also, think of the word “remember” in yet another way. *Re*-member, that is, “r-e” as a prefix meaning “again,” and the word “member” referring to part of a community. *Re*-member—members coming together again, a re-union, with re-joicing.

Jesus was dead. He was raised and now lives forever. The tomb is empty...so what?

We are invited to consider that it was not only Jesus who rose up that first Easter. It was also a movement, a community who remembered his teaching and lived into his promise. Who then rose up to spread his message of power in weakness and the victory of love! The church is broken like the bread. Yet, we remember we are members who belong to one another, again and again. And becoming once again a part of the whole, there is healing.

Again, I offer no explanation. It turns out the only proof is...in the pudding! So, break the bread. Pass the cup. Take sweet rolls hot from the oven. Ice the tea. Slice the pie. Make the coffee. Dig into those doughnuts!

The main thing is we gather to sit at table together, crying and laughing, enjoying the present communion *as the dead enter and pass among us in living love and in memory.*

And then, like Peter, we go home amazed at what happened. Alleluia. Amen.