



# The New England Church Pulpit

New England Congregational Church UCC  
Aurora Illinois

EASTER EVOLUTION

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Luke 24.1-12

*On the first day of the week, at early dawn, followers of Jesus came to the tomb, taking the spices they had prepared. They found the stone rolled away from the tomb, but when they went in, they did not find the body. While they were perplexed about this, suddenly two men in dazzling clothes stood beside them. The women were terrified and bowed their faces to the ground, but the men said to them, "Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen.*

*Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, that the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners, and be crucified, and on the third day rise again." Then they remembered his words, and returning from the tomb, they told all this to the disciples and to all the rest. Now it was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women with them who told this to the apostles. But these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them. But Peter got up and ran to the tomb; stopping and looking in, he saw the linen cloths by themselves; then he went home, amazed at what happened.*

Perhaps you remember the story of the little boy who went to church for the first time on an Easter Sunday. On the way home his parents asked him what he had learned. He replied: "Aliens came from outer space, lived on earth for a while, and then left. God is one of those aliens and after death we go in a space ship to live with God." His parents looked at him incredulously and asked "Are you sure that's what they told you about Easter?" "No," he replied, "but if I told you what they **really** said, you'd never believe it."

We come year after year to hear the story, hoping to make more sense of it this year than last, hoping that some year we might even be able to believe the resurrection actually happened as the biblical accounts say it did. It's difficult for our modern scientific minds to make it fit into what we know of the way the world functions. But like the words of our Native American sisters and brothers, when passing on the stories of their tribes, say "Now I don't know if it happened this way, but I do know it is true," we come once again to hear the story we know to be true. We sense its truth in the things we see today, for just like Peter, it seems an idle tale until we experience the reality for ourselves.

Easter is an evolutionary process. It is a daily event, and sometimes so mundane that we miss it. While clamoring for world peace, we miss the peaceful sunset in our backyard. While dreaming of a world free from disease, we overlook the strides in modern medicine that give new life to people on a daily basis. While striving for unconditional love, we dismiss all too easily the sloppy kiss of a child or the slobbery lick of the family dog as just some inconvenience to wash off our face. While hoping for a better economy, we miss enjoying the good things in life that money can't buy no matter how good the economy.

Easter is as much a lifestyle as an event. Jesus's resurrection was a revolution against death's power to stifle life, against the fear of death that threatens to keep us from doing the right thing in spite of its consequences. His life and death was a revolution of trust in something, someone larger and more powerful than death and defeat. We don't want to spend time spinning our wheels looking for the living among the dead of the past, as the angels chided the disciples at the empty grave in our ancient story. But rather we want to engage Easter as it has evolved in the present day.

That great theologian and clergyman William Sloan Coffin reminds us that Christ is risen to convert us, not from this life to some other life, but from something less than life to the possibility of an abundant life. Easter is a demand not for sympathy with the crucified Christ, but a power to experience the extraordinary in everyday living. Resurrection is an event that has its own echo, reverberating through history as it ripples through the stories of our lives.

That echo is heard in the present when we see hundreds of first responders willing to risk their own lives to face an active shooter so that they might save others' lives. It ripples through the present when this community rises up in support of the LGBT+ community to fund a Pride Parade that was postponed due to lack of funds. It manifests itself when a community of Muslims rallies around their Jewish neighbors who have been terrorized by extremists, making of their own bodies a shield around the synagogue. It is made flesh each time we recognize with a 'thank you' and a smile the work of the grocery clerk, or give an overly generous tip to our waiters in a restaurant, or offer assistance to refugees through World Relief right here in our own back yard, or when we provide affordable housing through the Neighbor Project.

Resurrection is not the property of the past; it belongs to all times and seasons. It isn't something we remember, for indeed we weren't there. It is something that evolves by faith into the activities of our daily life in which we actuate the power of life by our words, our actions, our hopes, and our love.

Easter evolves in our lives as a mature faith that allows us to count our more complicated blessings: our failures which teach us so much more than our successes; our lack of financial resources, which points to the only truly renewable resource, the resources of the spirit; and even our experience and fear of death, for until we learn that life is by nature limitation, we are as formless and shallow as a stream without its bank.

Easter's evolution is existential as it moves from an ancient story to the reality of the here and now. C.S. Lewis, during WWII, said as the bombs were being dropped, "let the bombs find us, not huddled together like frightened sheep thinking about death, but doing sensible and human things: praying, working, teaching, listening to music, bathing the children, playing tennis, chatting with our friends over a pint and a game of darts."

Ultimately, Easter isn't something we understand but something we do. Easter isn't something we just believe; it's something we actuate. Easter isn't something that eliminates death but something we practice to keep death from having the final word. When we get down on our knees to look a child eye to eye at her level and call her by name, we honor the sacred space in an ordinary moment. When we pay attention to the trees around us and the children making noise and the immensity of the sky and the blessedness of rain and the joy of sunshine, we practice Easter by releasing something into our consciousness that is otherwise entombed.

Thomas Edison's laboratory was virtually destroyed by fire in December, 1914. Much of Edison's life's work went up in spectacular flames that December night. His son, watching his father glare at the flames, said "My heart ached for him. He was 67—no longer a young man—and everything was going up in flames. The next morning, Edison looked at the ruins and said, "There is great value in disaster. All our mistakes are burned up. Thank God we can start anew." Three weeks after the fire, Edison managed to deliver his first phonograph to the world.

Easter evolution. The presence of the living God in everything we do and say; in our attitude, in our disasters, in our successes. Easter blooms. Amen.

--Gary L. McCann

## PASTORAL PRAYER

Eternal Spirit, whose breath is at the center of every living thing and whose presence surrounds us on this glorious Easter morning, we offer our prayers of thanksgiving for life, for love, for sunshine, for beauty, for joy, and for hope.

We gather expectantly today to renew our trust in all that is good in this world, and to center our lives on the example set by Jesus, who, rather than succumbing to the temptation of personal power and acclaim, gave himself to loving the world. His victory over the power of death to destroy us gives us hope.

We seek to be people of faith who are made wise by experience and who are undaunted by disappointment. As people of faith may we model our lives after the Jesus who gave himself and his life to lift up the downtrodden, feed the hungry, clothe the destitute, and house the homeless. Give us a faith that reminds us that our influence is greatest when our power is weakest. May this day be a new beginning, a renewal of body, soul, mind, and spirit as you deliver us from hopelessness and cynicism.

Be our strength in times of trouble. Grant us your grace to count our blessings, including the ones we so often take for granted: our families and friends, our health, our food, our night's rest, the morning sunshine, and a spring that is bursting with new life in a kaleidoscope of colors.

To that end, may the living Christ be not only in our creed but in our experience. Let not Easter day represent to us only an historic victory but also a present triumph in our souls, so that we may live more abundantly and in that way make the world a better place for everyone. In the name of the living Christ we pray, amen.