

# Greenfield Hill Congregational Church

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Date: April 7, 2013  
Sermon Title: After Easter  
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## **"After-Easter Litany"**

Leader: After Easter the women were joyful and afraid. Death and faith co-exist; reality and hope are not enemies but friends.

**People: After Easter the disciples didn't believe. Some things are a stretch, and sometimes we need to be stretched. We take the leap of faith into eternal life.**

Leader: After Easter the men walking to Emmaus were depressed. Much of Holy Week was depressing. Bad things do happen to good people. Good people do bad things. Thus Easter is even more important.

**People: After Easter Thomas was doubtful. Yet Thomas put himself in the right place to confront his doubts. Constructive doubt can lead to faith.**

Leader: After Easter Peter was nervous and ashamed. He had reason to be, having abandoned Jesus, and denied him three times. No wonder Jesus embraced Peter three times with the same question, "*Do you love me?*" And the same blessing, "*Then feed my sheep.*"

**Together: After Easter we choose to be here again, in church, willing to be confronted by faith, to turn discouragement into hope, to face death with life to gain strength from our communion.**

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After Bible Study on Thursday night, I was watching the Yankees/Red Sox baseball game. The Yankees were winning 4-2. It was top of the 9<sup>th</sup>, two out, the Red Sox had a man on third, and so the batter up was the potential tying run. And the batter up was this incredibly exciting rookie, Jackie Bradley, Jr., the first rookie to start for the Red Sox in years. And Mariano Rivera was pitching for the Yankees. It was no match. The poor rookie had no idea what to do with Rivera. He struck out, looking bewildered. He had never faced anything like that in his life. And I said to the TV (as if the rookie could hear me), "Welcome to the Big Leagues, kid."

I think that's what the disciples were feeling "After Easter": "Welcome to the Big Leagues." They had never faced anything like that before either. The disciples had been with Jesus for three years, and it was pretty good: exciting, fascinating, intriguing inspiring, popular, wonderful, fun, and just enough hint of danger to make it even more exciting. There were crowds and miracles, and people loved them. It was crazy! Crazy good. But then, Holy Week had been tough, their little group torn apart by divisions, pettiness, jealousies, and fear. Jesus was killed, but they should have seen that coming. Once he wouldn't back down to the authorities, he was doomed.

The whole experience must have seemed like a shooting star. Brilliant and exciting at the start, then fizzling out, fading, then gone.

Nothing new there, the world is full of such stories: James Dean, Alexander the Great, millions of athletes and rock stars and would-be messiahs. Here today, gone tomorrow. Jesus just seemed like one more "shooting star."

Then came Easter. "Welcome to the Big Leagues!" Compared to Easter, everything else they experienced was like Little League or T-ball. But now, with Easter, they were facing the Mariano Rivera of religion, something beyond their experience, beyond their comfort zone, beyond their imagination.

I've long been fascinated by what those first hours and days "After Easter" must have been like for Jesus's followers. Let me give you a real quick recap. Some women disciples get up early Easter Sunday and go to the tomb. They expect nothing. They're going to wash the body of Jesus. Nothing more. When they get to the tomb, they are stunned, horrified, to find it empty, the body gone, "taken away," Mary Magdalene fears. The inference is clear. They think grave robbers have stolen the body, desecrated the tomb. In the midst of this tragedy, the women meet two angels ... and then Jesus! Apparitions, ghosts, voices! What's going on here?

All this leaves them astonished, bewildered, tearful, fearful, trembling. There's a part of them that wants to believe the unbelievable, that Jesus is truly alive; and there's a part that doesn't know what to make of it all. They run back to the men disciples, and the men are dismissive, mocking, insulting. Still, a couple of the men run to the tomb, and they don't know what to make of it all!

As that first Easter day unfolds, Jesus meets up with two depressed, discouraged ex-disciples. They've given up completely, even with the rumors of resurrection. They don't even believe with Jesus standing right there! That night, the whole group of disciples is hiding out. They're not celebrating Easter; they're not singing, "Christ the Lord is Risen Today." They're not surrounded by lilies and chocolate Easter eggs. They're hiding out, "afraid," the Bible says. Then Jesus suddenly appears, coming through a locked door, he's standing there big as ... big as life.

"Welcome to the Big Leagues." This is like nothing anyone has ever faced before. Death defeated. Life victorious. God wins. And all for our benefit. And yet ... let me show you two startling verses. In Luke's Gospel, when the resurrected Jesus stands right in front of the disciples, he even invites them to touch him, feel him, he even eats with them, still, there in verse 41 (Luke 24), it says, " ... and while they still did not believe it because of joy and amazement ..." *They still did not believe it because of their joy and amazement!*

It was too good to be true. They wanted to believe it. That's the "joy" part, but it was a huge stretch, that's the "amazement" part. So between the emotions of the day and the thoughts in their heads and things like reason and logic all tied up with hope and faith, they didn't know what to make of it all. The whole thing was stupefying.

Jesus hung around for 40 days, showing himself, proving himself, doing everything in his power to be convincing, for 40 days. On his final day on earth, he invites his 11 closest friends, his top disciples, to join him on a mountain. It's what we call "Ascension Day," the day Jesus gave his final marching orders, "The Great Commission" to "go ye into all the world," and the day he ascended up to heaven. It's a big day, following 40 big days. So there he is, after all this, with his closest followers, and the Bible reports, "When they saw him, they worshipped him. But some doubted." (Matthew 28:17) "Some doubted." When all was said and done, plenty said and plenty done, "some doubted." Faith is hard. It flies in the face of so much: experience, skepticism, doubt, reason, scorn, bad religion.

I listened to Pat Robertson this week, the popular TV evangelist. He was explaining why America doesn't have more miracles, while poor people in poor countries get lots of miracles. He blamed it on "Ivy League colleges." I'm not joking.

I knew it all along, the decline of religion in America is absolutely the fault of Jerelyn Luther up at Yale, Alex Beyer at Harvard, all the Brennan girls and the Dies boys and Anny Ward's kids and Christina Hwang and Ellen Benjamin. All our Ivy League kids destroying faith in America. No wonder America stinks spiritually. Thank God for lousy countries with lousy colleges. If we could just be more like them, we'd have more miracles! That's what he was saying. Let me be really serious, there is sooooo much of that kind of bad religion that honest-to-God religion (and I use that phrase on purpose, "honest-to-God religion") suffers.

Lots of things make it hard to have faith. Think about those disciples who "still doubted," who "could not believe because of joy and amazement." They had a front-row seat for the first Easter; they were visited by Jesus, they ate with Jesus ... and it was still tough. Yet, here we are 2,000 years later, still talking about that first Easter. And that's because of what happened "After Easter," even with all the lingering doubts and conflicting emotions.

That's why I've made "After Easter" our theme today. First with the litany, then with the sermon. For Jesus's followers, "After Easter," everything changes. They're in the Big Leagues now. When your religion is based on a man who has beaten back death and when that man has elevated forgiveness and love to the highest of holiness, that's as big as it gets. "After Easter" everybody had to decide what he believed, and where he stood.

I do enjoy imagining what those first days and weeks "after Easter" were like. I bet they sat at the kitchen table or around a campfire and swapped stories and memories about Jesus. I bet they did that for hours every day for days on end. One would start, "Remember when Jesus told that story about a good Samaritan? Why'd he make one of those people the hero?" And little by little they'd recall the whole story. Then someone else would say, "I loved that day we were at a mountain and he preached a long sermon, remember? It started with all those blessings. How'd it go? 'Blessed are the ...'" And another disciple would say, "... the peaceful ... no, the peacemakers, blessed are the peacemakers!" "Right," someone else added, "and he talked about the meek inheriting the earth, and he even said, 'blessed are they that mourn and those who are persecuted.'"

At that point I imagine the room going silent, the disciples reflecting until one has a sort of "aha" moment, and he stands up and smacks his forehead

as if suddenly remembering something important. "Holy cow," he says, "think about it! Think of all the things Jesus said and did trying to get us prepared, hinting about him and us, and what just happened! I mean, seriously, he told us, 'I'm going to be arrested. I'm going to be killed. I'm going to be raised from the dead,' and all that just flew right by my head. I didn't take it seriously. I thought he was exaggerating or being melodramatic, or perhaps it was like another parable, something to teach us a lesson. I didn't know he meant "really be dead" and really, really truly 'raised from the dead.'"

I think that day after day, week after week, Jesus's followers remembered bits and pieces; phrases, stories, people, events, lessons. And somebody said, "We need to write it down. And somebody else said, "We need to send it around." And that's how we ended up with a Bible.

Now, let's quickly look at our Scripture lesson for today. Open your bulletin, look for where it says, "Scripture." What do you see? Where it says, "Scripture," in the bulletin, there's an empty box. That's it. A box. Empty. Our Scripture today is nothing. It's an exact quote from my Bible. Nothing.

When you read the Gospel of Mark, in the final chapter it tells about Easter. The women go to the tomb. Jesus is gone, and an angel tells them that "Jesus is risen." And then it says this: "Trembling and bewildered, the women went out and fled. They said nothing to anyone because they were afraid." (Mark 16:8) "Trembling and bewildered and afraid, they fled, and said nothing."

Then there's a big empty box in my Bible with a small note that says most scholars believe Mark's Gospel ends right there. "Trembling, afraid, they fled, and said nothing." After the box there are some more verses, some of the usual "After Easter" stuff, but scholars say those verses were added much later by some other writer. There's nothing wrong with the added verses; they're just not written by Mark. For Mark, he takes "the greatest story ever told" and leaves it hanging. People afraid. People silent. The future of faith hanging by a thread.

We could have a lot of fun speculating on Mark's motive for such an abrupt, shocking ending. But I'll just throw out my take. "After Easter," Mark seems to be saying, it's up to us. Jesus did what he did. His followers will make of it what they can, doing their best to believe the unbelievable. They'll tell their story the best they can. But really, it's up to us. In each and every age, each and every generation, indeed each and every "After Easter," it's up to us.

What do we make of this story? What do we do with it? It strikes me that if Easter is true and if we believe it, that should be incredibly liberating and empowering. Our whole approach to everything should change if we really believe that God's love and God's life transcend everything else, even what St. Paul calls the "last enemy ... death." If we believe that, everything else falls into place, a better place: all of life's challenges, hurts, obstacles, worries, fears, failures, sins, sicknesses. If death is defeated, life changes.

The Trischman family lent me a very troubling, very inspiring book, *Escape from North Korea* by Melanie Kirkpatrick. It's the story of refugees escaping North Korea. North Korea is very much front and center today, isn't it? A secretive, oppressive, brutal, erratic nation, filled mostly with hunger and fear, led by three generations of megalomaniacs with nuclear weapons. They are rattling much more than their sabers these days.

This very week our own Rev. Pauline Lee, our Korean pastor, left for China, where, among other things, she will try to be of help to North Korean refugees. In the book, it tells of the harrowing and heroic efforts of people yearning to be free. Much like the Vietnamese boat people of 40 years ago, the Cuban escapees who risked it all to sail to Florida, the East Germans who scaled the Berlin Wall, these North Koreans ford the rivers to China, trying to take their first steps that might lead them to South Korea, even America.

The one thing they all know is, once they make it to China, "Look for a building with a cross on it." *Look for a building with a cross on it.* A church. In that world of fear and degradation, a church is synonymous with compassion, courage, boldness, generosity, sacrifice, plain old-fashioned help. You look for a building with a cross on it. In there, you know you will find a welcome, a meal, a bed, a friend, a way station, an oasis on the modern-day "Underground Railroad," a path not only to heaven, but also to that "Kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven" we pray for every Sunday.

That's an "After Easter" church, a place where death doesn't hold sway, a place where life really begins. Two thousand years "After Easter," the church is the best proof of Easter.