

Greenfield Hill Congregational Church

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Date: April 12, 2020
Sermon: Easter Sunday
Pastor: Rev. David Johnson Rowe and Rev. Alida Ward

What If? An Easter Litany

David: What if it all happened?

**People: What if
early on Sunday
the women came to the tomb
not believing
and the men slept late
probably depressed
and everything seemed sad, until . . .**

Alida: What if
the too, too heavy stone
with the Roman seal on it
and soldiers guarding it
so nobody could tamper with it
was mysteriously rolled away
and the tomb was wide open?

David: What if
nobody was in the tomb
nobody and no body
except an angel
who said things that couldn't possibly be true?

**People: What if
it was all true
that angels are real
and angels are sent from God at just the right time
and angels speak to us with just the right words?**

Alida: What if the right words are
don't be afraid
He is risen
She is risen
Your loved ones are risen

*You will be risen
Life wins
Love wins
Death is defeated?*

David: What if the women
scared, perplexed, overjoyed
all at once
told the men, who were
scared, perplexed, and not yet overjoyed . . .

Alida: Until
one by one
they see an empty tomb
with NO body
until somebody shows up
and they see wounds without sorrow
they see faith beyond doubt
they see a story that needs telling
They see God at work!

**ALL: What if
we lived the rest of our lives
with love stronger than sorrow
love stronger than doubt
love stronger than hate
with love that so loved the world
that the world was given
the greatest Love of all?
And we believed it?
All of it.**

DAVID: Once upon a time, long, long ago, in a place far, far away, it was a Sunday morning, very early, and a group of women, very sad women, went to the cemetery, to the graveyard. Their dear, dear, best friend, Jesus, had died.

In those days, it was the custom to show respect and love for a dead person by giving one last beautiful, loving, tender gift. They would surround the body with wonderful smelling spices, almost like perfume.

ALIDA: *That's what the women planned to do, anyhow . . . but instead—well, you know the instead. Instead, they arrive at the cemetery, and unbelievable things are happening.*

Luke's Gospel says the stone sealing the tomb was rolled to the side, Mark says there was an angel standing there. Matthew says there was a little earthquake. My guess is—all of the above. Most importantly: Jesus is not there. Jesus—says the angel—is alive. And the women—the story says, "left the empty tomb with fear and great joy." Fear and great joy. How else to feel when your heart's deepest longing has just come true . . . and it doesn't make any sense at all?

DAVID: This is not an easy story to tell. This is not an easy story to believe. It seems like a fairytale, a dream world, a miracle, a mystery. How can something that is dead be alive? How can something that is over and finished be up and running?

Every year, with our eighth-grade Confirmation class, we have them do a timeline, the impactful, memorable events of their young lives. It's usually all the "firsts" of their lives: first time they moved, first day of school, first broken bone. And always, the first experience of death: A hamster. A goldfish. A grandparent. A neighbor. One day they were there. Then they were gone. Something was lost.

And then they go through Confirmation, and in April they lead their own Easter service, telling that Easter Resurrection story, stretching to believe that story, that fairy tale/mystery/miracle: that Jesus came back alive. And so shall we.

ALIDA: *Because that fairy tale mystery miracle is exactly what happened. It wasn't just that the women saw an empty tomb. They saw Jesus.*

Running from the cemetery, hearts pounding, the first person they ran into was—him. And the first thing Jesus says to them is, "Don't be afraid"—isn't that just like Jesus? Always thinking about how other people are feeling? And it's Jesus again, later that day, walking alongside two of his followers on the road to Emmaus. It takes them a while to see that it's Jesus, because, why would it be? How could it be? But when he breaks bread at dinner with them, they experience the same amazed joy the women had. It's him. And Jesus meets up with his friends the disciples, too, he turns up in the room where they're all meeting that night, and he's really there, it's really him.

There's a line in the Bible that kind of sums up these days of miracle—it says After his suffering Jesus presented himself alive to them by many convincing proofs. Many convincing proofs.

DAVID: "Convincing proofs." I love that phrase, and I love to imagine what that was. We don't know exactly. The resurrected Jesus spent quality time with his friends. We know they talked, we know they ate together; that much is in the Bible. We can guess that there was enough evidence to be compelling, so they knew what they were seeing and experiencing of an alive, very real, walking and

talking Jesus was more than a dream. Or a vision or wish fulfillment or group-think. A lot of those people would later put their lives on the line to stand up for their beliefs in the resurrection.

But what would be “convincing proof” now? The problem modern Christianity faces is that we preach Christ’s resurrection, we rejoice in Easter, we lift Jesus up to the heavens, and we’ve done that pretty well for 2,000 years. We’ve created great art, great music, great Churches, even some pretty great people, all wedded to this idea of resurrection.

But now, it’s 2,000 years later. What are we Christians up to today with resurrection? It’s like celebrating how great the Founding Fathers were in 1776, but if we can’t get our act together now, those “good old days” are going to feel pretty irrelevant. Where’s proof of resurrection today?

ALIDA: *Well, to be honest, convincing people of the resurrection even back then wasn’t a slam-dunk. The part I didn’t mention was that when those women got back from the cemetery—the women who had literally just seen Jesus—they couldn’t get any of the other disciples to believe them.*

It says that the guys thought it was “an idle tale.” It took a bunch of the guys running over to the empty tomb and seeing for themselves for them to even start believing. And even then, they couldn’t talk that disciple named Thomas into believing it, not even with, like, 20 of them now insisting that it was true.

“I’ll believe it when I see it,” Doubting Thomas said. And that’s what happened. He was a holdout until he had Jesus standing right next to him. So, yeah. Even with the resurrection happening right in front of them, there were still folks who doubted

DAVID: In our world in April 2020, a doubting, skeptical, or just plain disinterested world wants to see “convincing proofs” from us today, in real time. All around us is a lot of sorrow, a lot of uncertainty, a lot of fear, a lot of sickness, a lot of death. The whole world is watching to see if we will be the living proof of the power of resurrection in our world in these times.

ALIDA: *That’s what those believers back then became. They became the living proof of the resurrection. People like Peter and John and Mary Magdalene. They just didn’t sit around later in their rocking chairs saying, “Wasn’t that amazing what happened, wasn’t that just so cool that Jesus came back?”*

No. They took it to the streets. They lived the power of the resurrection. They got out there and said to people let us tell you about the God whose love is stronger than death, let us tell you about this God of love. Let us tell you about our friend

Jesus, who showed us how to live and who helped us see that with God all things are possible.

And to everyone who was despairing, those Jesus-followers brought hope. To everyone who was hurting, those friends of Jesus brought healing. And they proclaimed the astonishing good news that life never ends, that death never wins, that love goes on forever.

Those people who had witnessed resurrection, they became the convincing proof of it themselves. And they promised, to everyone then and to everyone now, the resurrection power is alive in this world now.

DAVID: For 45 years, ASP, the Appalachia Service Project, has been at the heart of Greenfield Hill Church. There isn't anything we've done that's touched more lives, helped more families, transformed more teenagers, bonded more adults, given us more bang for the buck, opened more eyes, created and built more faith, shown more Jesus than ASP. And now, it's shut down.

Like the rest of our lives. Shut. No ASP trip for us; 320 of our teens and adults will not be going. Several hundred families will not be helped. ASP's annual lifeblood, all that summer mission work utilized many thousands of American teenagers and thousands of adult mentors. The economic engine of ASP, its reason for being, its *raison d'être*, will not happen. Leaving ASP, like many charities, almost dead.

ALIDA: *And if we weren't people of the resurrection, that's where the story would end. But we are people of the resurrection. The Appalachia Service Project was born out of the vision of one inspired Kentucky preacher back in the 60s, and ASP has been led by the spirit of the risen Christ every step of the way.*

We have resurrected homes and families and communities all across Appalachia. We have been in the resurrection business all along. So already ASP and all of us who love it are at work to make sure there's a resurrection again.

Already, led by our Church, we are making sure that ASP 2021 will be more powerful and impactful than ever before. Already Christ's followers are at work to figure out how people we love can still be helped this summer, in new and creative ways. And already teens like the teens in our Church are thinking of ways that they can be of service—if not there, then here. Already resurrection power is at work

DAVID: And what about America? Our resurrection? Our restoration? We Christians, we Greenfield Hill Church people, we are part of the tapestry of our America. And we want everyone to know that God raised Jesus up from the dead.

God took something that we thought was finished, over and done with, literally dead and buried, lifeless, ended, stopped dead in his tracks . . . and God breathed new life into him. And, we're told, Jesus is supposed to be Exhibit A of God's resurrection power. The "first fruits," the Bible calls the Easter Jesus, the down payment on future resurrections.

For months you've heard me talking about my Czech Catholic priest friend, Tomáš Halík. During the winter he lectured for five weeks at Boston College, and you can be sure I was there every Monday night. We often talked before and after, and I delved into the depths of what makes him so hopeful about the Church nowadays. One phrase he used I want you to repeat after me and memorize, make it your mantra for the months ahead: "Continuo Resurrecto." Go ahead, say it with me, "Continuo Resurrecto." One more time, "Continuo Resurrecto."

It means precisely what it sounds like: "Continuo Resurrecto," continuing resurrections, ongoing resurrections, lots more resurrections. Easter doesn't begin and end with Jesus. He started it. It's our turn now.

Jesus's "convincing proofs" were a return to normalcy. He met with people. He taught them. He went where they were fishing. He cooked breakfast for them. He wiped away their tears and fears. In the simplest terms, he was up and about. Soon, it will be our time to prove Easter across America, continuous resurrections, people's health restored, businesses reopened, kids back to school and games, families reuniting, hugs all around, people "up and about."

ALIDA: *"Continuo resurrecto." That's right. Continuous resurrection. And we're the ones through whom that happens. We, the Christ followers, we, the friends of the risen one, we are called to be the ones through whom the power of continuous resurrection is alive in this world. Just like those earliest followers of Christ, called to be the living proof of resurrection to a world longing for good news, we too are called to be convincing proof. We are called to be the ones who restore this world. Who prove resurrection again and again.*

Happy Easter! Amen.

Our closing hymn for this Easter Day is "Now Thank We All Our God"

*Now thank we all our God
with heart and hands and voices,
who wondrous things has done,
in whom his world rejoices;
who from our mothers' arms*

*has blessed us on our way
with countless gifts of love,
and still is ours today.*

*O may this bounteous God
through all our life be near us,
with ever joyful hearts
and blessed peace to cheer us,
to keep us in his grace,
and guide us when perplexed,
and free us from all ills
of this world in the next.*

*All praise and thanks to God
the Father now be given,
the Son and Spirit blest,
who reign in highest heaven
the one eternal God,
whom heaven and earth adore;
for thus it was, is now,
and shall be evermore.*