

# SAN MARINO CONGREGATIONAL UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST

## Reflections by Pastor Donald Shenk (Delivered on EASTER Sunday, April 17, 2022)

Text: **John 20:1-18** (*The Inclusive Bible*)

*Our scripture for this Easter Sunday was introduced by and then read in dramatic form by our two liturgists.*

LIT 1: Our scripture for today from John's gospel, points to the best news of the Christian year: through the resurrection of the Christ, we too shall live!

LIT 2: In light of this news, we are called to live fully and deeply, and we are called to proclaim our joy from the rooftops.

LIT 1: As you hear this wonderful story told once again, may your heart be opened like a tomb giving way to light.

LIT 2: Early on the morning on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary of Magdala came to the tomb. She saw that the stone had been rolled away from the entrance, so she ran off to Simon Peter and the other disciple--the one Jesus loved--and told them,

LIT 1: "The Rabbi has been taken from the tomb! We don't know where they have put Jesus!"

LIT 2: At that, Peter and the other disciple started out toward the tomb. They were running side by side, but then the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. He didn't enter, but bent down to peer in and saw the linen wrappings lying on the ground.

LIT 1: Then Simon Peter arrived and entered the tomb. He observed the linen wrappings on the ground, and saw the piece of cloth that had covered Jesus' head lying not with the wrappings, but rolled up in a place by itself.

LIT 2: Then the disciple who had arrived first at the tomb went in. He saw and believed. As yet, they didn't understand the scripture that Jesus was to rise from the dead. Then the disciples went back to their homes.

LIT 1: Meanwhile, Mary stood weeping beside the tomb. Even as she wept, she stooped to peer inside, and there she saw two angels in dazzling robes. One was seated at the head and the other at the foot of the place where Jesus' body had lain. They asked her,

LIT 2: "Why are you weeping?"

LIT 1: She answered them, "Because they have taken away my Rabbi, and I don't know where they have put the body."

LIT 2: No sooner had she said this then she turned around and caught sight of Jesus standing there

LIT 1: but she didn't know it was Jesus. He asked her,

LIT 2: "Why are you weeping? For whom are you looking?"

LIT 1: She supposed it was the gardener,

LIT 2: so she said,

LIT 1: "Please, if you're the one who carried Jesus away, tell me where you've laid the body and I will take it away." Jesus said to her,

LIT 2: "Mary!"

LIT 1: She turned to him

LIT 2: and said,

LIT 1: "Rabboni!" which means, "Teacher!"

LIT 2: Jesus then said, "Don't hold on to me for I have not yet ascended to Abba God. Rather, go to the sisters and brothers and tell them, I'm ascending to my Abba and to your Abba, my God and your God!"

LIT 1: Mary of Magdala went to the disciples. "I have seen the Teacher!" she announced. Then she reported what the savior had said to her.

LIT 2: Please pray with us...

LIT 1: God of joy and delight, open our hearts to receive the risen Christ with hope in the new life you promise.

LIT 2: Calm our fears and free our voices to sing out for all to hear:

BOTH: Christ is Risen! Amen.

### Reflecting with Pastor Donald Shenk: *"Seedburst"*

Two seeds lay side by side in the fertile soil. The first seed said, "I want to grow! I want to grow and send my roots deep into the soil beneath me and thrust my sprouts through the earth's crust above me. I want to unfurl my tender buds like banners to announce the arrival of spring. I want to feel the warmth of the sun on my face and blessing of the morning dew on my petals." And so, she grew.

On the other hand, the second seed said, "If I send my roots into the ground below, I don't know what I will encounter in the dark. If I push my way to the hard soil above me, I may damage my delicate sprouts. What if I let my bud open and a snail slithers over to eat the sprouts? And if I was open to my blossoms, a small child may pull me from the ground." The second seed thought for a while and decided to not grow until it was safe, and so, she waited.

Then, one day. A yard hen scratching around in the early spring ground for food found the waiting seed and promptly ate it.

Of all the things I read in preparation for our exploring time today, this wondrous day called Easter, the one I loved best was from Christian Century columnist Jim Friedrich, who wrote: "At the entrance to Jerusalem's Church of All Nations, next to the Garden of Gethsemane, there is a sign warning every visitor: NO EXPLANATIONS INSIDE THE CHURCH..."

"Easter," he asserts, "[is] not a matter of our questioning the resurrection but of allowing the resurrection to question us. Who are we now, and what must we become, in the light of the risen Christ?"

For, just as those seeds, planted side by side in the garden must decide whether they will take the chance to grow and change or just wait it out, so each of us has a decision to make. Will we allow the promise of Easter and the belief that new life is possible after being

buried in the ground or in a garden tomb to create a *seedburst* in our lives, allowing our creator to resurrect our spirits to live and grow in the light of Christ's love? Or will we give in to the fear and cynicism this world is constantly serving up so that we get eaten up by the big old hens of this earth and have no possibility of flowering or growing the fruit that God created us to produce in this bountiful garden of life?

As we read and try to comprehend the phenomenal story of Christ's resurrection from the tomb and identify most surely with the disciples, especially Mary, as she is depicted in John's gospel, we can feel most viscerally the fear and wonder and surprise they would have felt. In fact, I don't think we have any trouble understanding why they would have been convinced that the seed of Jesus' life was surely dead and gone and buried. For wouldn't we as they, no matter what Jesus had told us, have come to the tomb believing we'd find his decaying remains rather than be told that he had done just what he had said and burst forth from the grave into everlasting life?

One of the most fascinating parts of this Easter story as John relates it, is the way in which each disciple who comes to the tomb must themselves be convinced that what Mary has seen and told them is true. In fact, they actually feel they have to race each other to the tomb to verify the story with their own eyes and bodies, thinking, no doubt, that they will need to mansplain this whole thing to Mary and what she thought she saw. But when they do each finally get there and see for themselves, they don't stay or involve themselves with Mary, but rather simply go back home trying to work it out intellectually.

Only Mary stays. Mary, whose love for Jesus and for what he has taught her has burst open a seed in her heart and given her insight so much deeper than the other disciples, that she wants to stay in the garden and grieve and wonder there much as Jesus had just a few days earlier in the Garden of Gethsemane. And when Jesus, her actual gardener, appears to her there – an experience I GUESS the other disciples could have had if they had bothered to stay there with her – she is rewarded with the manifestation of her beloved and given the gift of insight so profound that she will proclaim the rest of her life, "I have seen the Teacher." A true *seedburst* moment if ever there was one. For surely, she has been changed forever and will continue to grow and proclaim the good news of her Gardener, the One who had died but now lives again.

"Jesus Christ is risen from the dead, and with his resurrection is born the new creation," commentator Bob Cornwall proclaims. "The old is past and needs to be forgotten. The past no longer holds sway over our lives. The journey to the cross and then to the tomb has led to this point when something new is born, for out of death comes life, like an acorn that falls from the tree and is reborn as another oak tree."

That's you and that's me, my friends – not just some nuts falling from a tree, mind you, but seeds, scattered by God, planted by the Christ and fed and watered by the Holy Spirit so that we may grow into hearty strong spiritual plants able to germinate and plant more seeds for the Kin-dom. Yes, you and me, we are seeds - choosing whether we will burst forth with

new life and walk through all the fears and the mysteries of this life, or if we'll wait in the dark, hedging our bets until some old hen comes along and eats us for dinner.

“Nearly every plant we see, every flower that perfumes the atmosphere, every tree or bush that takes root in the ground required, at some point, that a seed fall to the ground, be buried beneath the dirt, and die to its life as a seed,” notes our UCC commentator the Rev. Dr. Cheryl Lindsay. “The transformation that takes place means that the seed has to relinquish its former self to become something new...[and] the new life that springs forth [from that seed] needs a lot of things to go as planned...but none are as necessary as that seed letting go of itself.”

What are you waiting for today on this Easter Sunday, I wonder? What are you being asked to let go of in order to flourish? Has there been something nudging you – urging you to change something, to grow something, to allow something to happen within you and around you? What holds you back?

Do you plant yourself within a garden filled with the weeds of worry and fear and concern that overwhelm you when you try to send up a sweet tender sprout of an idea or a possibility? Perhaps as an Easter gift to yourself you might consider choosing another gardener to work the soil with you. Somebody who understands what it is to lie dormant for a while before bursting into life. Perhaps there's even a place where other seeds are being planted by this Gardener and bursting into life where you could find encouragement and nourishment to do the same.

“The story of the resurrection is itself a seed,” asserts my colleague, Rev. Jim Burklo. “We receive it into the soil of our souls, and there in the darkness of our unconscious it sinks roots and grows. The myth changes the narrative of our lives from being victims of abuse and suffering into being agents of reconciliation and renewal. This potent story becomes the scaffold upon which we take the rough, raw material of our lives to construct a new and beautiful edifice.

“At Easter, [we] celebrate this transformation by coming together in the “spiritual body” that is the church,” he says. “We are the compassionate community that rolled away the stone and emerged from the tomb. The Christ lives through us! That's what we mean when we repeat the ancient Greek chant: “Christ is risen! Christ is risen indeed!”

Alleluia and Amen!