

# The Stewardship of Resurrection

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**Third Presbyterian Church**  
**April 1, 2018 (Easter)**  
**Mark 16:1-8**

The origins of April Fools' Day are uncertain, or so Wikipedia tells me. I am almost certain, however, that dozens, perhaps hundreds, even thousands of preachers this morning are making Easter and April Fools' Day references. Some, I hope, will be less than embarrassing, though there's no guarantee. I bet many will be a variation of death being the ultimate April Fools' Day prank victim, which is very true, of course, if not a little cheesy to say.

Regardless, a blessed Easter to you, all of you, long-time member, visitor or guest, seeker, all of you, all of us. We are grateful for and honored by your presence and for the ways that this story of resurrection is engaging your own life journey. If you are a visitor or guest and would like to learn more about Third Church, please see one of us or go to the welcome table in the corner over there or visit our website or social media. There is copious content to consume, print and electronic, and people eager to connect with you. We warmly invite you to come back so that we might get to know you, and you us.

So welcome – may the blessings of Easter be with you this day, no fooling!

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Third Presbyterian Church is engaged in two observances this year – a celebration of our 190<sup>th</sup> anniversary and a themed year called a Year of Stewardship. A 190<sup>th</sup> anniversary is pretty straightforward, though it still begs the question of what you get a church that's 190.

The word "stewardship," however, has a little of that insider church-y feel to it. We quickly associate it with finances, money, and it is partially that, of course, and rightly so. But at a deeper level, a steward, biblically and culturally, is one

who cares for something, nurtures it, so that its value grows. A land steward, or a wine steward, or a union shop steward.

This year we have spoken of money. Yet we have also spoken of stewardship of relationships, stewardship of legacy, stewardship of story, stewardship of values. It is a wonderful notion, I believe, because it helps us to be mindful of all that we have been given, an abundance of gifts we receive gratefully from a gracious God.

Easter is the ultimate Stewardship Sunday. Every other gift we are called to nurture flows from this gift. We have heard the Gospel of Mark's version just now. It is spare on the details.

Through the lens of stewardship, images cascade over us. Three women take their valuable spices and perfumes to anoint Jesus's body, offering things of great value to care for their departed leader and friend. When they arrive that morning, the stone is already gone. They are alarmed, we are told. No kidding! A young man first assures them, and then tells them the story. "He has been raised; he is not here..."

Then something powerful happens – the women, the first witnesses, become the first resurrection stewards, as the story is entrusted to them. They are temporarily silent for fear – who wouldn't be? They then find their voices and tell the story, first to Peter, then to others, handed on and handed on, across generations, even to April 1, 2018, living into their clear vocation.

A steward's call is to cultivate the story, nurture it, then share it, with words, with actions, with courage, with hope. Every other good thing flows from that, a resurrection abundance where all who *need* to hear *can* hear, where a people who are broken and hurting and a world that is broken and hurting can experience this transforming good news.

The alternative to stewardship is, of course, something like hoarding, or privatizing, or burying, or even discarding. None of those will do. Think what would have happened if the women had done that – had kept the story to themselves, or discarded it as a different kind of April Fools' prank? They did not. They summoned courage, called up resilience, relied on one another, and shared

the story. That is our calling, no more than that, and no less. That it is a difficult calling, no less than a joyful one, is not in question. That it is needed now, perhaps as much as ever, is also not in question.

Douglas John Hall, a leading theological voice of the last generation, wrote a book several decades ago, *The Steward: A Biblical Symbol Come of Age*. It proved so popular that it has been reissued. As theologians do, Hall's language is lofty, but his point is not; he draws a direct line between the cross, resurrection, stewardship and the world.

The practice of stewardship is grounded in the cross, Hall writes, and is not fully understood "until it has been wholly incarnated in the life of the world." (p. 127) "The resurrection faith of the people of the cross must mean," he says, "that this world must not be abandoned, that this world is worth all the care and love and sacrifice that we can devote to it." (p. 121)

What does that look like, sharing the abundance of resurrection, being stewards of the story of the empty tomb, incarnating Easter in the life of the world?

Our history teaches us some lessons. You know when you need to procrastinate and you tidy your desk or some other non-essential task? I go to the church archives. Sometimes I even call it research. So in the name of research I found three Easter bulletins from our archives.

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April 5, 1931. On that Easter morning we sang, as we have sung this morning, "Jesus Christ Is Risen Today." Included in that bulletin, as has been this morning, was a list, flowers adorning this sanctuary in honor and in memory of those we have loved.

There was an announcement for something called a "mothers and fathers dinner," to which children were also invited. A guest speaker from CRCDS would be speaking on "Authority and Obedience." I was trying to imagine myself as an eight-year-old, or my own at that age: "Gee, mom and dad, the church is having a

dinner and the speaker is talking about parental authority and obedience. Can we go? Pretty please?"

There was something else in that bulletin, a meeting of the Committee on Unemployment. The church itself, in the middle of the Great Depression, was matching members who *needed* work with those who had housekeeping and housecleaning work *to offer*. Think about that.

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Or think about Easter 1943, April 25. Right in the middle of World War II. On that Easter morning we sang, as we have sung this morning, "Jesus Christ Is Risen Today." Included in that bulletin, as has been this morning, was a list, flowers adorning this sanctuary in honor and in memory of those we have loved.

There were announcements for adult classes: "conditions of a lasting peace," "winning the peace in Rochester," "religion and politics." The very same issues – the many permutations of faith and politics in a conflicted world– that we consider today.

There was also an announcement for a young adult square dance, but, you know, that's just what churches do sometimes!

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Easter 50 years ago, April 14, 1968. On that Easter morning we sang, as we have sung this morning, "Jesus Christ Is Risen Today." Included in that bulletin, as has been this morning, was a list, flowers adorning this sanctuary in honor and in memory of those we have loved.

We received the One Great Hour of Sharing offering.

In the newsletter sent out the following week, there was notice of a memorial service held in our chapel for Second Lieutenant Bruce R. Archer, USMC, killed in Vietnam.

In that same newsletter was a quotation from Martin Luther King, Jr., assassinated just 10 days before that Easter morning. King said, and we

remembered: “There was a time when...the church was not merely a thermometer that recorded the ideas and principles of popular opinion: it was a thermostat that transformed the mores of society.”

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As important as history is, and as valuable as remembering our stories can be, the point is not the history itself, which can be sentimental and nostalgic. The point is being inspired by our forebears as stewards of this great gift, and to ask ourselves what we will do now, how will we respond, how we will steward the resurrection story in our moment.

We have sung “Jesus Christ Is Risen Today.” We have been blessed by the beauty of these flowers while remembering those in whose memory they are given. As our announcements remind us, we will do the things that churches do. We will nurture our faith, teach our children, care for one another, build community, because even though the culture is not always sure how it feels about organized religion these days, we also know that people are hungry for connection and finding meaning and the church is a pretty good bet for that.

Perhaps you read the *New York Times* piece this week by Margaret Renkl, “Easter Is Calling Me Back to the Church.” Renkl writes that “I love my parish, but I have always had a vexed relationship with the church.” “The worldly church is always a work in progress,” she continues. And she is right. Still, she will be in church this morning, because, she says, “I couldn’t not believe.” And, she admits: “I do miss being part of a congregation.”

“So,” she says, “I will be at Mass again on Easter morning...I will...remember the ones I loved who sat beside me in the pew and whose participation in the eternal has found another form... I will lift my voice in song and give thanks for my life. I will pray for my church and my country, especially the people my church and my country are failing. And then I will walk into the world and do my best to practice resurrection.”

Practicing resurrection is what we do, we who have received the story and have been called to be stewards of it. We will do all those things – gather, remember,

sing, pray, connect, because the stone was rolled away and a young man shared the story with three courageous women all those years ago. And then...

Then we will “walk into the world.” We will take this resurrection news from this place to all the places, all the conversations, all the relationships, all the situations where it needs to be taken – just like those three women, confused and afraid, did that very first time. We will find our voice, our resurrection voice. We will move from the “what” to the “why” and then to the “how.”

We will identify, as our forebears did in 1827 and 1931 and 1945 and 1968, what our crises are – our Great Depressions, our world wars, our Vietnams, our civil rights movements, and “apply” the promise and power of resurrection to them. Look around at the world – how will we be stewards of this gift?

How will we turn up the thermostat? Guns? Race? Poverty? #Metoo? Education?

Douglas John Hall writes that “Stewardship means our incorporation into the being and work of the One who came to serve and not be served.” (p. 249) Says Hall: “The deed springs from the gift – the gift of new life. It presupposes endowment by an abundance that must be shared by others.” (p. 243)

New life. Service. Abundance. Our resurrection vocabulary and our resurrection invitation. May we be faithful, joyful, hopeful stewards of it, practicing resurrection, because death has lost its sting, love is come again and Christ is risen! Alleluia! Amen.