

The Main Event
by the Rev. Dr. E. Scott Jones
Easter Sunrise Meditation
First Central Congregational United Church of Christ
24 April 2011

In early November we began the journey of the church year – a journey that would take us through significant moments in the life of Jesus the Christ. During Advent our anticipation was high as we prepared to “Greet the New Morn.” Christmas was a rousing celebration of the birth of the Christ. During Epiphany we “Let It Shine” as we renewed our baptismal vows, explored the Sermon on the Mount, and gloried in the mysteries of the Transfiguration.

The Gospels tell us that at a point in his ministry Jesus “set his face toward Jerusalem.” In other words, Jesus prepared for that final journey that would take him to his death. On Ash Wednesday we set our own faces towards the cross and have journeyed to it over the previous six weeks. As we prayed for “Hearts That Open,” we explored spiritual and communal practices of care and engaged in a robust series of church work days to prepare for spring and provide hospitality and welcome.

Last Sunday we laughed and sang and waved palm branches as the Christ entered Jerusalem. We covered our cross with palms and left it in the center of our labyrinth to remind us all week of where our journey was heading.

On Maundy Thursday we commemorated the Last Supper and the central role that the meal and communion plays in our on-going scriptural tradition. It is this sign and symbol of the fullness of the reign of God which reveals so much about the purpose of the days that follow.

On Good Friday we encountered crucifixion. Through scripture, music, and silent moments of prayer and meditation, the multiple meanings of this event intersected with our everyday lives and our current concerns.

The last few days, as the cross was darkened and the altar was stripped, we have meditated upon Jesus lying in the tomb. Our Easter Vigil was a silent nature walk.

Today we take the next step in that spiritual journey that began with the anticipation and preparations of Advent. Today is Easter Sunday morn and we proclaim “Christ is risen!”

John Irving is one of North America’s leading novelists, and one of Irving’s most wonderful books is *A Prayer for Owen Meany*. In this novel the character John Wheelwright explores the nature of his own faith and the role played in it by his best friend Owen Meany. I’ve always been drawn to the following excerpt:

I find that Holy Week is draining; no matter how many times I have lived through his crucifixion, my anxiety about his resurrection is undiminished – I am terrified that, this year, it won’t happen; that, that year, it didn’t. Anyone can be sentimental about the Nativity; any fool can feel like a Christian at Christmas. But Easter is the main event;

event; if you don't believe in the resurrection, you're not a believer.

"If you don't believe in Easter," Owen Meany said, "Don't kid yourself – don't call yourself a Christian."

We can rejoice loudly and exuberantly on this Easter Sunday because we have been through the valley of the shadow of death. Those of you who have known grief have experienced Good Friday and the Easter Vigil. You may have even shared the sentiment of Jesus, himself, "Oh, God, where are you?" I remember my own grief upon the death of my father, and how I moved about numbly for days afterwards. I imagine the disciples of our Lord did the same.

But this morning is not about sadness. It is about joy! It is about life! Mary Magdalene comes to the tomb and there she does **not** find the body of her friend. Instead she finds that friend alive. And she grabs hold of him. Imagine the joy you have felt every time you have made it through some dark trial. Or when a loved one has come successfully through surgery. Or when your children were born.

Jesus, so full of understanding, tells Mary she must let go, because she has a task ahead of her. "Go," Jesus tells her. She has a message to spread. "I am alive and ascending to my Father."

In what sense does Owen Meany have it right? Our Christian faith rests upon an absurdity -- something ridiculous, something which our rational, scientific, historical minds consider impossible. Our core narrative is that someone rose again -- that death is neither final nor absolute.

And it is in that sheer absurdity, we are to find hope, faith, and joy. This is the same gospel that absurdly proclaims "love your enemy" or that there can be "peace on earth." The same gospel that says "the first shall be last" and "blessed are those that mourn." This comes from the God who brought us the platypus and the giraffe and the roly-polly. Listen to the song of a bird. In the struggle to survive and propagate the next generation, birds in their short, limited lives find time to sing with incredible rapture. That's absurd. That's a joke.

The Resurrection tells us "life will find a way." That existence is not merely necessity. It is not merely birth, growth, decay, and death. The Resurrection reminds us that we don't merely struggle to survive, but that we can absurdly hope for peace and mercy and justice and love and beauty and life. Or, as Wendell Berry put it, "Be joyful though you have considered all the facts." It's like God dancing and chanting "I can overcome all things and you can overcome them with me!"

Jesus said, "I am the resurrection and the life," and because of that, we can proclaim, "O death, where is thy sting?" Good Fridays most surely come, but Easter comes a few days later. And together we shout "Alleluia! Christ is risen! Christ is risen indeed."