

Call to Worship

Our loving and ever-present God seeks us, up and down the roads of life, assuring us that we are beloved children. **Our Creator chose to give us free will and released us to learn and grow. Even so, God remains with us.**

Because of Easter we now know that nothing can snatch us from God's hand or remove us beyond the reach of our Creator's care. **And so it is that we worship God, giving thanks for this wondrous message of Easter resurrection.**

Prayer of Invocation

Life-creating God, we worship you for the revelation of your amazing love and mighty power at work through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. **Trusting in him and his victory over sin and death, we too are assured of victory in our temptations, doubts and fears, even fear of the grave. What cause for rejoicing! May the worship we offer give honor and praise to our risen Lord in whose name we gather. Amen.**

The Word

Early in the morning of the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been taken away from the tomb. She ran to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said, "They have taken the Lord from the tomb, and we don't know where they've put him."

Peter and the other disciple left to go to the tomb. They were running together, but the other disciple ran faster than Peter and was the first to arrive at the tomb. Bending down to take a look, he saw the linen cloths lying there, but he didn't go in. Following him, Simon Peter entered the tomb and saw the linen cloths lying there.

He also saw the face cloth that had been on Jesus' head. It wasn't with the other clothes but was folded up in its own place. Then the other disciple, the one who arrived at the tomb first, also went inside. He saw and believed. They didn't yet understand the scripture that Jesus must rise from the dead. Then the disciples returned to the place where they were staying.

Mary stood outside near the tomb, crying. As she cried, she bent down to look into the tomb. She saw two angels dressed in white, seated where the body of Jesus had been, one at the head and one at the foot.

The angels asked her, "Woman, why are you crying?"

She replied, "They have taken away my Lord, and I don't know where they've put him." As soon as she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she didn't know it was Jesus.

Jesus said to her, "Woman, why are you crying? Who are you looking for?"

Thinking he was the gardener, she replied, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have put him and I will get him."

Jesus said to her, "Mary."

She turned and said to him in Aramaic, "Rabbouni" (which means *Teacher*).

Jesus said to her, "Don't hold on to me, for I haven't yet gone up to my Father. Go to my brothers and sisters and tell them, 'I'm going up to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'"

Mary Magdalene left and announced to the disciples, "I've seen the Lord." Then she told them what he said to her.

Living the Word

Thirteen years ago, in 2004, I was the Associate Pastor in Wausau at First UMC. I had been there for 3 ½ years, but agreed to stay one more year to help the congregation transition to a new Lead Pastor, Karen Ebert. We had one year of ministry together and then I was appointed to Grantsburg and Atlas UMCs. One year of ministry was short, but I learned in that time of her grace and spirit for God and a heart for all people. During Holy Week four years ago, on Wednesday I received the news that Karen had died after years of a tough battle with cancer, three days after her 50th birthday.

Though I had been following her journey on Caring Bridge, as she has detailed with elegance her day to day struggles and joys; though I had prayed fervently at times as she faced another new kind of chemo or treatment, death still came as a blow to my soul.

Death is never convenient, but it will happen to all of us. I want to share a part of the obituary she wrote for herself: "Karen Ebert died today after a long journey through cancer, and a longer journey through life. In her work as a pastor she was most proud of the young people she saw respond to God's call and enter ministry, also helping grow a congregation in Lithuania and almost balancing the budget at Wausau First. She never realized how many friends she had till she was diagnosed with cancer. And she never doubted how much God loved her through it all. She hopes you can know that immense love for yourself as well."

We are never ready to lose the ones that we love, no matter their age or the circumstances. But today, Easter Sunday is about God's victory over death. Jesus died in a most horrific way. The disciples were in agony; even more so because most of them had deserted him in the end. But God sent Jesus back after death to proclaim life...

You may have noticed that in each of the last two sentences I used the word 'but.' I remember reading somewhere that you have to be careful because every time you add the word 'but' to the conversation it negates everything that came before it. Here, that is most important: There is death 'but' then there is resurrection. Death in life will come, but new life will sprout from that loss.

Last week I spoke of how quickly the 'arrivals and receptions' of our lives happen while we are in them and how it is upon reflection when we have time to slow down the process, that we can take time to review and learn from things. How many of you have ever actively prepared for a party; watched it not happen how you thought and then later, sometimes years later, you understand better what happened as you look back.

The disciples can't seem to catch a breath, they haven't had a slowdown from the moment they entered Jerusalem with the cheering crowds, through the Passover meal, to the cross and now this – Jesus is missing; and then Jesus is alive before them. That is a lot to take in, all in one week. It will be a very long time before they can process all of it.

We have had thousands of years and we still get caught in the 'amazing race' of this last week. It is now Easter. Some have dropped out of the 'amazing race,' yet even for those who continue, many of us can't quite get our minds around what Easter really means for us. From death comes the beginning of a new life.

We face many deaths in our lives, beyond the death of our physical bodies: end of jobs, end of relationships, end of the ability to do what we used to...the list goes on. Grief comes and we wonder 'what just happened here?' But in time we may understand and be able to move forward because of resurrection. Surely we are changed, things are never going to be the same, but because of Easter, there is always hope for tomorrow.

This is what the prodigal son felt the moment he decided to give up the life he had now, for a new life. His resurrection included a plan to be a new person, his father's hired hand, even if that meant lowering his status and standards to a new level of life, whatever it would take to be back home to the heart of the father. The Bible is rich with stories about people who moved from death to a new life.

John 3: "There was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a Jewish leader. ² He came to Jesus at night and said to him, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God, for no one could do these miraculous signs that you do unless God is with him."³ Jesus answered, "I assure you, unless someone is born anew, it's not possible to see God's kingdom."⁴ Nicodemus asked, "How is it possible for an adult to be born? It's impossible to enter the mother's womb for a second time and be born, isn't it?"

⁵ Jesus answered, "I assure you, unless someone is born of water and the Spirit, it's not possible to enter God's kingdom. ⁶ Whatever is born of the flesh is flesh, and whatever is born of the Spirit is spirit. ⁷ Don't be surprised that I said to you, "You must be born anew."⁸ God's Spirit blows wherever it wishes. You hear its sound, but you don't know where it comes from or where it is going. It's the same with everyone who is born of the Spirit."

⁹ Nicodemus said, "How are these things possible?"¹⁰ "Jesus answered, "You are a teacher of Israel and you don't know these things?¹¹ I assure you that we speak about what we know and testify about what we have seen, but you don't receive our testimony. ¹² If I have told you about earthly things and you don't believe, how will you believe if I tell you about heavenly things?"

Later as tensions were rising, Nicodemus tried to defend Jesus to the other Pharisees and after Jesus died on the cross, Nicodemus was one of the ones who helped remove the body brought 70 pounds of spices to prepare it for burial. His was a life reborn as he heard what Jesus taught him and turned to have new life. Jesus is no longer nailed to the cross. The cross is empty, the tomb is empty. The disciples, Mary included are confused. They haven't been able yet to put together all that has happened with what Jesus had told them. This is all hard to believe! Mary runs to the disciples and says: *"They have taken the Lord from the tomb, and we don't know where they've put him."*

Mary doesn't pause long enough to realize that the 'they' is God. It is God who has recovered Christ, not some thief in the night. When we look for answers or someone to blame, we often turn to the most common denominator that we are aware of. Mary chose one of the 'they' groups that had been a threat: the Romans or the Pharisees.

Swallowed up in her confusion and miserable heartache, she cries outside the tomb as other disciples enter to explore what may have happened. Verse 9: *"They didn't yet understand the scripture that Jesus must rise from the dead."¹⁰ Then the disciples returned to the place where they were staying."* They are all still scared of how the threat of the 'they' is out there and seeking them personally. The disciples have totally missed what God has done here...for the moment anyway.

So Jesus comes back to enlighten and reassure Mary. She doesn't recognize him at first; because her vision is burred with tears or blurred with the incredulous idea of Jesus rising from death. But (again the word but) when he says her name, she knows him. He tells her: *"Go to my brothers and sisters and tell them, 'I'm going up to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'"*

Mary still has little idea of how this all just happened, but she knows Jesus had been resurrected from the dead and her only thought is to tell the others *"I have seen the Lord."* If we can look beyond our tears and grief, Christ points us toward the way home to the heart of God. There is victory over death! Mary has evidence within her that Christ is risen. This is our evidence that Christ is both home with God and inviting all of us to join him there.

During Lent God has used the story of the Prodigal Son to show us the way home. We began on Ash Wednesday by feeling the ashes on our foreheads – a sign of the death and loss that we all suffer from when we aren't able to see God. We were reminded to leave the worst of us behind as the Prodigal son had to; drawing our strength from Christ through prayer and acceptance; Realizing that our Creator wants the best for us. Lent is not a punishment, but an opportunity to be something more. God invites all of us to come home as the homecoming reception is sweet!

During the Sundays in Lent we explored the journey that the Prodigal Son made. He traveled home with low expectations and his father made sure he was well fed. Like him we can run off to the buffet line to over indulge, for that is really about learning when we have had enough and then sharing so that others can be well fed, too. The quality of God is never diminished. The quantity of God won't run out, but it is not to be hoarded just by us. We should know by now that there is more love in God than there is capacity in us to receive it.

When we are well fed, then what? We are asked to put away our indulging practices to take time to notice where and by how much we are missing the target God has set before us. Our real need is to come home to be well fed, by God. When we share Holy Communion we share a feast, Christ in our midst. And then what? God only knows...But we are invited to pray about the future and what it might be.

On Confirmation Sunday I will speak about the challenges for the Confirmands as they explored what they thought they knew as truth, as they developed their own faith out of the child's faith that they had before. Their faith is maturing, but they, and us, have a lifetime to keep growing toward God. What Confirmation tries to do is to open a new door of faith for them and give them a peek into all there is to experience with God.

It cannot give them all of the answers, because none of us have those. But it may give them the faith to hold on to, when the doubts come. We weren't able to connect each one of them with each one of you, but they learn much by example. They have witnessed you sharing your prayers, your presence in worship and at the church events, they see you putting your gifts in the offering plate. The prodigal also had a solid base as his example, which helped turn him back toward home.

Lent has been a time to reflect on 'How am I to be happy?' For the Prodigal Son, true happiness began in a 'Epiphany' moment; the 'aha moment' when "he came to his senses." He thought he would find it in 'extravagant living.' He had to lose all he had and find himself starving before the moment of acknowledgement came to him and he could really see what he had become and where he now was.

Just as the prodigal son thought he was ready to move on without support, there comes a time for everyone. I'm sure that his father had given him all of the warnings about the big evil world out there, before he ever stepped outside. But we all have a yearning to find out what 'evil' really is, for ourselves, and then we have to find maturity through the experiences.

We are always able to keep growing toward God. Just like in Confirmation class, the one who created us has expectations of us throughout our lives. God knows our strengths and weaknesses and expects us to keep reaching for home.

The prodigal son rehearses what he will say. "I have sinned against heaven and before you" He names it, by reviewing over and over what is the best way to face his father. Trying to be right with God, doesn't mean to be sinless, but to be able to find happiness by paying attention to how you live your life in a way that avoids sin and recognizes when you have gotten caught in it and moving back toward happiness with God. Atonement with God, at-one-ment with God, being at one with God.

There is more love in God than there is sin in us. Can you even wrap your mind around that? This takes more mind work, more 'Thinking Greater.' Beyond however far you have come to this point. Put this in your brain and swish it around this week: That on the proper course, your sin can be what leads you to knowing God better and accepting forgiveness, in order to live a happier life.

Isaiah 43 verses 18 and 19 say: ¹⁸ *Don't remember the prior things; don't ponder ancient history.* ¹⁹ *Look! I'm doing a new thing; now it sprouts up; don't you recognize it? I'm making a way in the desert, paths in the wilderness"* The father had two sons, the younger left home, wasted all that he had and came home begging. The older son stayed home, but resented that he didn't have what the younger son had. They each had the same choice: to review their past and dwell in bitterness, or to accept where they had been and move on. Neither can now go back. The younger has been changed by his experience, but so has the older son.

Have you ever heard: *"Inside each person there are two dogs fighting – one good and one evil. Do you know which one wins? The one you feed the most."*

As they and we return, home is more or less than it was before, not because anything is physically different there, but because they and we have been changed. The future is unknown, but the younger son and the older son have the same choices – two possible responses: to live in Bitterness or Praise.

Our greatness in this life is yet unknown, individually or as the church. Putting the past behind us we look to the future. It is about our knowing that God can make a way when we can't see any way. God does 'think greater'; we should work at it also. Have you let go of the past and turned your heart toward home? It is a homecoming with God, worth seeking!

The younger son got lost from the connection. Once there, it takes some time and effort to reconnect. But he was ready to humbly go home and see if his dad might have a job he could do to reacquire just the basics of food and housing. When we are lost it may take us time to remember what to say to God. Because God is always aware of us, just crying out to God is a good place to start.

The first of the gifts was that the Father had been waiting, a sure sign of his love, along with the hug. The rest of the list is not about the things but what they represented the best he had to give to celebrate. Visible signs of the depth of that Father's love.

So it is with our God, who puts out a feast for us every time we return our hearts toward home. Some would tell you that our God is foolish, always giving us another chance. Blessing us beyond what we deserve. That is God's grace, the undeserved love we receive just by coming back home to our Creator.

Here is the catch: The party can't start, until we decide bring our heart back home. God waits for us to decide, not forcing us to return. But the old self has to die. The Bible is all about God's continual reaching out for us, wanting a relationship. When Adam and Eve had done the very thing God told them not to do, they hid in the garden. God went walking among the bushes, calling "Adam, Eve, where are you?" All through the Bible God calls people into relationship.

Last Sunday we had a wonderful Palm Parade. This is the moment, now is the time, the beginning of the end. Jesus intends for us, to remember this moment as a realization of who he is and that he came to save all of humanity throughout time.

In that moment he is offering salvation one more time to those who haven't been able to accept it before then. In that moment we are given another chance to recognize God's saving grace for ourselves. And then the moment is gone and the parade moves on.

It is interesting how we can view all of these events through our 'history glasses.' Like the disciples in the years following the events, we can look back and see how it all became muddled in the last week in the minds of the people, disciples included.

It is also pretty clear that Jesus was able to stay focused through it all; eye on the prize, heading toward the cross, but able to see even beyond that to a victorious win over death, through the resurrection. What we have as we look back that they didn't recognize at the time is that Jesus came as 'the prince of peace' to lead us toward home.

'Home is where the heart is,' a familiar plaque, sometimes seen in people's houses. The heart of who we are as God's people is all of our hearts together finding God and showing others how to find home. Where is your heart today? Coming home is a great feeling when you know what God is waiting for you...this Easter as you continue to seek God, where is your heart today? May you know the Easter blessings of resurrection!