

Sermon – Easter, It's Everywhere

May the words from my mouth and the meditation of all our hearts be acceptable to you O God, our rock and our redeemer. Amen. Grace and peace be with you on this day.

When I was a young man, so young that many would say I was still a child, I joined the US Navy. It was there where I first encountered the vast diversity of people among us. I befriended another young man by the name of Muller. He was the son of farmer from a mid-western state. Muller knew how to farm and hunt, but he had never seen the ocean. He knew from textbooks and movies that the Pacific and Atlantic Oceans existed, but he had never dipped his toes in ocean water and experienced the real thing.

When Muller learned that I grew up in a Caribbean Island, and that I knew how to surf, he asked if I could take him to the beach and teach him. Although I considered myself a less than average surfer, to Muller who had never heard of a rip tide, I was an Avatar of the Ocean. So, I agreed to teach him how to swim in the ocean and ride a wave. He swallowed several mouthfuls of ocean water, and he got a scorching sunburn on his pale skin, but he managed to ride enough waves to brag about it to his friends back home.

How many Muller's are in our lives today – People who know, only in concept, that there is a God, an important day called Easter when we praise the Risen Christ, and like Muller, have never dipped their toes in the waters of faith? How many people know of Easter from an egg hunt, or from a family dinner, but have no idea what it means to experience the Risen Christ? We, the Avatars of the faith, know there is no substitute for a God experience and swimming in the waters of the Divine. We also know that in the spectrum of faith, there are miles between the concept of faith and the living of faith.

That is why our faith was initially called The Way. It is a path we walk.

And as we walk this path, we are transformed into the people God calls us to be.

We are in the season of Easter. A time when we celebrate the Risen Christ and incorporate the meaning of Easter. I recognize that for many people it's a stretch. There are many "Thomases" among us, people who require an experience of the Divine in order to believe. And there are many Mullers, people who need a seasoned mentor. That is the underlying goal of pastors and churches – to provide a God experience, a brush with the Holy Spirit, and mentor people to move further along the path.

Contrary to popular belief, we are not Christmas Christians. We are Easter Christians. Baby Jesus may be a lot cuter than a suffering Jesus on the cross, but Easter is the focus of our faith. Historically, it was Easter that provided the early followers of The Way the message that transformed the world.

In the 1st, 2nd, and 3rd centuries of the common era, followers of The Way lived in small tight communities with a disciplined understanding of the faith and of loving their neighbor. They stood out and at first, they were persecuted, but eventually people recognized there was something attractive to this faith. They learned about the Risen Christ, dipped their toes in those waters, and became followers of The Way. Over the course of 2 ½ centuries, the faith grew, and it reached the ruling classes, until one day, in the year 313 CE, Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire.

Fast forward 17 centuries to our reality. We are the descendants of those early followers of The Way. We recognize that we too are on a path to experience the Love of God that

is in Christ Jesus our Savior. We have moved from knowing it as a concept to becoming Avatars of the faith. Seeking better ways to experience and interpret the Holy Spirit. We are Easter Christians who see the big picture.

We understand the teachings and actions that led to the crucifixion of Jesus. We know that Jesus taught and promoted a new version of God that threatened the power and authority of the Temple. This concept that the love and grace of God is available to all people, regardless of who they were, or of their ability to follow the laws of Moses was radical ... heretical ... blasphemous ... punishable by death. More than wanting to kill Jesus, the religious leaders wanted to kill the concept before it became practice.

And then Easter happened, and our eyes were opened. Now we understand what he meant by the first shall be last the last shall be first! Now that we have a Risen Christ, we understand why Jesus said, "Where your treasure is, there your heart will be."

Easter is the big awakening, the big AHA. We see the big picture. It all makes sense. This is why Jesus taught us to turn the other cheek, and to forgive seventy-seven times. It's Easter that created the cosmic opening of John's Gospel: In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God.

As Easter Christians we become joyful with the smaller blessings of life: a child's innocence, the gentle hand placed over our own, the warm cup of tea on a cold night, the beautiful voice of a soloist, the sunrise and sunset over glassy skies. And yet, it's because of Easter that the injustices of the world hurt more. Easter removes layers of indifference and apathy and the injustices become wrongs that needs to be made right.

An Easter Christian, Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. held on to the hope and promise of the Risen Christ to undo a society that had woven injustice into its fabric. It's because of Easter that he believed the arc of universe is long, but it always bends toward justice.

And so, we fight with righteous anger for justice to prevail even though the fabric of our society glorifies violence and greed. We call for an end to war, and to the economies that benefit from it. We call for peace in Gaza. More importantly, we call for peace with our neighbors, co-workers, brothers and sisters. I can't do anything about Prime Minister Netanyahu and the anger in his heart, but the Risen Christ calls me to reconcile the anger in my heart and seek peace with my neighbor. (PAUSE) Because I can't feel the joy of Easter if grief and loss have a permanent home in my heart. (PAUSE) I can't feel Easter if I hold on to resentment and how I have been wronged.

Easter Christians have a new perspective. We become the people who stop lamenting what is lost and instead we are the people who look forward to all that can be gained.

It was on August 8th of last year, that wildfires destroyed the town of Lahaina in Maui. In the months that followed there was much anger over the mismanagement and governmental failures were all justified, and all of it justified. Life-long resident of Lahaina, Ululani, had to jump over the seawall and into the ocean, to escape the fires. She states that her journey from anger and grief to hope and joy is a work in progress. She talks about being on a path and following the Way of the Risen Christ. And I quote, "Jesus didn't rise on the 3rd day so that I could hold on to the ashes of what I've lost. No. Jesus came out of that tomb so that I might know of a new life for me and my family and all of Lahaina."

Powerful words for us to consider, especially when we all have ashes of loss in our lives. Many here know the grief of loss, whether as an individual or as part of a collective. I think of my own family and the loss they suffered when they were forced to leave Cuba and leave everything behind. As a child growing up with the stories of Cuba, I saw, firsthand, how some family members were bitter and resentful, and how others were able to move forward. In my opinion, those who weren't able to let go of the pain had Easter as a concept. Those who were able to release the loss, had Easter as practice.

So here is the question: Are we holding on to the ashes of what was lost? Are we always looking back at what was and dreaming of a past that won't return, or are we able to look forward to a future full of possibilities, excited about our contribution to it?

Easter is the call to open our eyes and see a new life - full of new opportunities to enjoy the love of God that is in Christ Jesus.

And like the early followers of Christ, our eyes are opened and we see Easter everywhere. We see how Jesus became the Christ. It's no longer just a concept. It's a force of nature. Easter is the cycle of death and rebirth all around us. It's the spinning of the Milky Way Galaxy. It's the Cosmic Christ that the Gospel John described in the opening chapter. It's the child that Jesus held in his arms. It's the Samaritan woman at the well, knowing her sins are forgiven. It's us, Pass-A-Grille Beach Community Church, UCC, people in the midst of a new dawn full of new possibilities.

Can you see it? Open your eyes. Easter is everywhere. Amen.