

Six Words: Resurrection
Easter Sermon
Rev. Todd Smith Lippert
Matthew 28: 1-10, 15-20

Since the beginning of Lent, we've been working through a theme titled, Six Faith Words That Aren't So Bad. Pastor Abby and I know that for many in our church, and for many who have a one foot in and one foot out relationship with Christian faith, some faith words and concepts provide some obstacles for the spiritual life. The hope was to be honest about some of these obstacles and to point to helpful meanings. We talked about five faith words that aren't so bad during Lent: sin, confession, forgiveness, revelation, and cross. Today we finish this series with the sixth word: resurrection.

Also during Lent, many First UCCers took on the challenge of writing a six word spiritual memoir. We received over 90 of these statements of faith, and I've been reading over and over again. They are beautiful and as I've read them I've thought, "well look at us. We have more faith than we think we do." I hope you will take time to look at the display in the hallway, and maybe write your own if you are so inspired.

What you will notice as you read these First UCC faith statements is that many of them hold faith and doubt together, and as I prepared for Easter I kept returning to the statements that speak of resurrection and doubt and mystery. This is where my Easter faith lives, with all of these mixed together. Let's start with doubt. Maybe some of these examples of First UCC six word spiritual memoirs say something about your faith journey: "still not sure what I believe..." "God? Not finished with me yet?" "Seek answers while living the questions." "Searching, Questioning, Listening, Accepting, Loving: Gratitude." "I embrace both faith and doubt."

If there is something in these statements of faith that resonate with you, Easter might be a particularly challenging day in the church year. As someone who has wrestled with the miraculous in the Christian faith, Easter has been a day when suddenly there seemed to be a firm boundary to Christianity, and to be inside the circle you couldn't ask questions that any modern person might ask. I felt like I was on the outside of the Christian faith looking in. I didn't want to be on the outside. I was drawn to Jesus, drawn to this self-giving, faithful life. As a church-goer all my life, Jesus had already shaped me, and I wanted Jesus to keep shaping my life. But as I grew into my faith as an adult, on Easter I would wonder if there was a place for me.

There was a moment, though, when I felt like the Christian circle stretched to include me, and I realize now that this is the moment that resurrection faith began for me. The moment was the middle of an Historical Theology class in seminary. Not many people will say that they had a spiritual awakening in the middle of an historical theology class. The class was taught by my favorite professor, an ordained Presbyterian minister who was very honest about his faith and his questions, and about the struggles in his life. I sensed that honesty right away and I didn't

feel alone with my questions when I was in his class. During one class, he invited another professor in to talk about his faith. This guest lecturer was my advisor. He was a brilliant Old Testament professor, also an ordained Presbyterian minister, and I liked him very much too. Both of these teachers knew their Bibles inside and out, knew Christian history, and were deeply faithful Christians.

My advisor was telling the class about his faith, and at the end of the conversation, my professor said to my advisor, 'let's talk about the resurrection. What do you think? Did it happen?' "My advisor said, "I tend to think it happened." My professor said, "interesting. well, I don't." Then they both looked at each other and laughed, and we laughed with them. There were no accusations of heresy, and there were no accusations of foolishness. Just an acknowledgment like, "this is how it is with Christians and the resurrection." My advisor then said, "but I believe in resurrection because I've experienced resurrection in my own life. God brought me back to life." He then went on to share some of his story. He struggled with major depression. There was a time when he was hopeless, suicidal, and then somehow love grabbed a hold of him and God brought life out of death for him." Meanwhile, my doubting Thomas professor was nodding in agreement, acknowledging that now we were getting somewhere.

I was stunned. I had never heard resurrection talked about like this. The different starting points of everyone in the class were honored. We were all in the circle. But an important shift had happened. Instead of talking about resurrection as something that God did, we heard a testimony that resurrection is something that God, that sacred love, does. In that class that day I heard an affirmation that God is not contained by the pages of the Bible, but that God, powerful love is alive, still acting and moving and bringing life from death in people's lives, and in our world. I was introduced to the view that the resurrection stories are a window where get to see into the heart of reality, what is most true, and we see what God does. And we are invited to be on the lookout for divine love acting in this way. And we are invited to trust, when we are in crisis, that love acts this way.

That conversation changed the nature of my faith.

The Gospel of Matthew's resurrection story is my favorite. Matthew's story has the best special effects, and I need a little sparkle to keep my attention. As the two Mary's go to the tomb, there's an earthquake. The angel has an appearance like lightning with clothing white as snow. The guards shake like dead men. The angel rolls away the stone and then sits on it, with an attitude.

"Do not be afraid" is a refrain of Matthew's resurrection story. The women are afraid and the angel tells them not to fear. Then they leave the tomb with fear and great joy. Jesus meets them on the road and tells them again, "do not be afraid." Clearly, there's something about resurrection faith that should calm our fears. That sounds good to me.

Then at the very end of the gospel, when the disciples are told to go to Galilee where they will see the Risen Jesus, meaning, go back to where the movement is alive, go back to where the church is, there you will see that God is still alive, the gospel acknowledges that resurrection faith and doubt come together as a package deal. The story says, “When the disciples saw Jesus, they worshipped him: but some doubted.” The disciples who doubted aren’t ridiculed, or turned into an example of what not to do. The gospel just shrugs its shoulders at doubt because the most important concern is still on the way. The gospel of Matthew wants everyone to hear what is next.

The last line of the gospel is the Risen Jesus saying, “I am with you always to the end of the age.” We don’t need to fear because divine love is still here, and nothing is more powerful. This love never turns away from us, and nothing can separate us from it. The worst of sin, that has been done to us, or that we might do, and even death cannot separate us from this sacred love. This is what the resurrection stories proclaim. I don’t think the writer of the gospel is concerned about whether we have doubts or what they might be. Welcome to life and Christianity. What the writer is concerned about, is as many people as possible hearing the message that love is more powerful than we think it is. The gospel writer wants each and every one of us, no matter how much or little faith we think we have, to grow in our trust that love is more powerful than anything else, and then to live with hope.

To say that God’s love overcame death on a cross, is to say something outrageous. Any first century person would have known that the cross was a Roman tool of execution and intimidation and oppression. Easter proclaims that God’s love is more powerful than the most powerful leaders in the world and whatever destruction they might do. Easter proclaims that this love is with us to the end of the age, and it is here in the church, and we are invited to trust it.

The resurrection affirms that God’s love is stronger than the sin that touches our lives so personally. God’s love is stronger than the greed and selfishness of Judas, and the fearful betrayal of Peter. God can bring new life out of this sin. God’s love is also able to bring new life out of the grief and hopelessness of the disciples. God’s love is stronger than death itself. We don’t belong to death. We belong to God. I plant my feet firmly in that affirmation and it changes me.

Listen for resurrection in these six word spiritual memoirs of First UCC. Faith statements like, “profound help, hope in darkest times.” That is a resurrection proclamation. “Life from ashes is love reborn.” That is a resurrection proclamation. “Come home to love, weary traveler.” That is like the Risen Christ saying, “love is with you always to the end of the age, do not be afraid.” One person wrote, “I am a person who hopes.” This is the outcome the gospel wants. One statement was, “Embracing the mystery, knowing love prevails.” That is Easter in a nutshell.

This is resurrection faith. A proclamation, and a reminder, that love is more powerful than we think it is. Faith and doubt will be all mixed together on the Christian journey. Maybe

we will doubt the miraculous, or maybe we will doubt that love can truly be this powerful. That's part of the journey. It doesn't exclude you from the journey, it is part of the journey. And, we are invited to surrender to this good news. To trust it with more and more of our lives. As we do, we will discover hope for us and hope for the world, and we will be a community who hopes. Thanks be to God. Amen.