

**Easter-1-c2007**

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First Church of Christ in Longmeadow UCC  
Easter Sunday  
April 1, 2007

1 Corinthians 15.19-26  
**Luke 24.1-12**

The Path From Perplexity

“...they were perplexed about this...”  
—Luke 24.4

Let us pray: In all that we say and do, may the words of our mouths and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen. (Congregation is seated.)

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We are likely to associate Easter with the feeling of a New England spring morning: sun shining, birds singing, a crisp breeze blowing. Today is a bit cooler than this ideal, but still suggestive of it. But the first Easter almost certainly was *not* like this. Historically speaking, we are not really clear on the exact time of year. But Jerusalem is not New England. I'm guessing that it might have been hot and muggy.

And so, the women walking to the tomb were not cool and comfortable, not decked out in their Easter best. They were hot and tired. Their clothing was rumpled from lack of sleep. Their hair was limp with humidity. And the smell of death was in the air.

Nevertheless, they were up early. They had a duty to perform. Jesus deserved a proper burial. A small group of women could do nothing to reverse his mob-manipulated trial and cruel execution. But they could take care of his dead body. They knew how to do that, and the rules of their society permitted them this one bit of access to the political arena—or, rather, to the residue of politics. Then, as now, women often found themselves cleaning up the messes made by men.

The trouble was this: they came prepared for one task, but God had a different task in mind. They came to care for the body of Jesus, but God had appointed them to declare his resurrection. The expected task—however painful and unpleasant—was at least familiar. It was known. It was comfortable. It was something they were taught to do by their mothers. But God's alternative was utterly outrageous. To declare such news was no job for a bunch of women. Women were not even

considered reliable witnesses in official legal proceedings. They knew in advance how their news would be received: as an “idle tale” born of overwrought emotions and fanciful imaginations.

### *Perplexity*

All of this hits the women without warning. And so, scripture tells us, “they were perplexed.” Perplexed. Maybe perplexity is the proper starting point for all of us on Easter Sunday. It is no accident, I suspect, that in their moment of perplexity the women are visited by the angel-like characters in the story:

While they were perplexed about this, suddenly two men in dazzling clothes stood beside them. The women were terrified and bowed their faces to the ground, but the men said to them, “Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen.”  
(Luke 24.4-5)

God visits the women in their perplexity. God also visits us in ours.

This very day, many of us have arrived here perplexed. Perhaps you haven’t been to church in a while. Then maybe you’re perplexed

about why it still seems to matter to you. Something made you get up and get dressed today. But what? What is it that still tugs at your heart?

Or maybe you're here every Sunday—faithfully warming the same pew. But, still, this day is different. This day confronts you with the central affirmation of our faith: Christ is not here, he has risen. Do you really believe that? It runs so counter to all of the things we know best—the repeating cycle of the seasons, the rhythms of life and death. These things we know. But resurrection? That is different. That is a one-time event, a broken moment of history, an intrusion into our sense of the normal and expected. It can be perplexing indeed!

Or maybe you didn't arrive here in a theological mood at all. You are thinking about human things, patches in life's quilt that no longer seem to fit together. What does it mean to experience your first Easter as a widow? Or as a divorced person? What does Easter have to say to you as a parent who is struggling with sleepless nights and tireless toddlers? Where is Easter joy in the midst of clinical depression? Perplexity, you see, comes in all shapes and sizes.

It can feel disorienting, but according to the Bible, perplexity is a good place to start on Easter morning—perhaps the only place to start. If we are not perplexed by Easter, then we must be asleep. Perplexity is appropriate...

...as a starting point. The Easter story begins with perplexity, but it does not *end* there. The story itself lays out a path from perplexity, a way up from confusion toward understanding. The first step is perplexity itself. It is a necessary response to the jolting news of resurrection. It is the first step. But what comes next?

### *Listening*

What comes next is *listening*. Despite their perplexity and their fear, the women manage to take notice and to show reverence in the presence of the “two men in dazzling clothes.” In order for them to begin to receive the Easter message, they must be quiet and listen. It would not do for them to scream out in fright. It would be no help for them to chat among themselves. A word is coming from outside, from another place. They must listen.

Listening is one of the hardest—and one of the most essential—practices of the Christian faith. We are all pretty good at asking God for what we want. Some of us even excel at doing good works. But how many of us really take the time and the effort to *listen* for God's guidance in our lives? We may have something to pray for, but God may wish to direct our concern to a different matter. So, while we need to talk to God, we also need to *listen*. We may be slaving away on what we consider to be the Lord's work. But God may have a different job in mind. So, while we need to be active for God, we also need to *listen* for God's guidance as to what activity is needed now.

By stopping to *listen* to the angel-characters, the women put themselves in a position to get moving on the path from perplexity. They made themselves quiet and they “bowed their faces to the ground.” It would have been so easy to do something else—to run away, perhaps—but they had the presence of mind to stop and listen.

### ***Memory***

Because they stopped to listen, the women were given the clue they needed to take the next step on the path from perplexity. The “men

in dazzling clothes” spoke to them, saying, “Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, that the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners, and be crucified, and on the third day rise again.” (Luke 24.6-7) The third step on the path from perplexity is *memory*. Before the women can move forward to a post-Easter understanding, they must look back to reconsider pre-Easter happenings.

It is no different for us. It is because of the need for memory that so much of what happens in church involves the Bible and the traditions of our faith. You’d think that after 291 years of reading the Gospel on Easter Sunday, our church in Longmeadow might want to do something different. A contemporary story, perhaps. Or a poem. Or a personal testimony. No, none of these will do, because we must *remember*. The Christian journey is something of a paradox. We are always moving forward—toward the return of Christ and the establishment of Christ’s reign. We are always moving forward, but we are also—at the same time—looking back. Week after week we recall the history of ancient Israel, the teachings of Jesus, the events of his life and ministry, and the

struggles of the first Christians. Histories, psalms, prophets, gospels, epistles—all of these things are the *memory* of the Church.

Like it did for the women on Easter morning, this memory can help us to make sense of what God is doing in our lives now, at this moment in time. If you were providing cartoon illustrations to the Easter story, what picture might you draw for this verse: “Then they remembered his words...” (!) ?

I think it would be a light bulb! This is the great turning point on the path from perplexity. One minute they are perplexed and fearful and then—boing!—they remember what Jesus said and they are off and running.

### *Sharing*

First they are perplexed. Then they listen. Then they remember. And then their memory propels them to go quickly and to share the news with others. The final step on the path from perplexity is *sharing*.

The Good News of the resurrection cannot take root—it cannot even be understood—until it is shared with other people. The Easter faith is not an individual religious experience. The very news of the resurrection sends us running to share the experience with others.

For the two Marys, Joanna, and the other women, this meant returning to share the news with the disciples. Like any human communal experience, this one was a mixed bag. Even though they had amazing news to share—practically straight from God—most of the disciples did not believe them. That must have been enormously painful and disappointing.

Life that is shared in community can be that way. Whenever we take the risk of crawling out of our shells to relate to other people, we face the possibility—the likelihood, in fact—of disappointment. But the risk is worth taking, because it is only through sharing with others that we come to experience the fullness of life and faith. Sure, lots of the disciples dismissed the report from the women. But Peter believed them, and that was enough to launch the Christian Church that is still celebrating Easter 2000 years later.

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The Easter story in the Gospel of Luke begins with the hot and stagnant air of the tomb. It ends with the breeze in Peter's face as he runs to see for himself the Good News that has been proclaimed by unlikely witnesses. The story begins with perplexity, but ends with shared joy. Along the path there is time for listening and memory.

Perplexity. Listening. Memory. Sharing. All of the steps on this path are available to us—as God's gracious gift—this chilly Easter morning. The path is set before you.

Now...get moving!

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Let us pray. On this day of resurrection, O Lord, set us on a new path—a path away from death to new life, a path from perplexity, to listening, to memory, to sharing. Amen.