

UCC Core Values: Continuing Testament
Luke 24:1-12

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Most of the scripture that we read in worship is on a schedule that repeats every three years called the lectionary. The schedule is so complex and takes so long to work through that most people don't realize there is a pattern from week to week, and many of us arrive surprised at whatever the story or theme is each Sunday. This is typical in churches all across the world. We're only in trouble when the preacher arrives surprised about what the story or theme is on Sunday morning.

The exception to the lengthy, complex schedule of scripture is the stories we read at Christmas and Easter. When you show up for those holidays, you pretty much know what story you're going to hear. We rotate between different versions of the Jesus' birth and resurrection, but the core of the story remains the same, and we return to them over and over again each year.

We return to the Easter story much more than once a year. In fact, we call every Sunday when we gather for worship a "little Easter" - a celebration of life resurrected; a celebration of God's love that never ends, not even after death. We are an Easter people, and it is, perhaps more than any other Biblical story, central to our shared faith.

In the United Church of Christ, one of our core values is Changing Testament. That means that our understanding of our faith evolves as our understanding of God, our world, and our cultures evolve. It means that, for example, when we hear the Easter story today, we do not expect or assume that we will have the same interpretation or find the same meaning as people one hundred years ago did. We know that experience and circumstance shapes our relationship and understanding of God, and therefore shapes our interpretation of scripture, which is itself an

interpretation of a particular group of people's experience of God. We often say, "God is still speaking." This means there is room for new stories and experiences of God, but it also means that there are ancient stories that we continue to tell, understanding that they have taken on new meaning throughout the years and across various peoples and cultures.

For example, two thousand years ago, Jesus's first disciples didn't read the Easter story in a book. They lived the Easter story, each with their own experience and memories. The disciples lived it first hand, and then they went out into towns all across the countryside and they told others the story. This story was the pivotal moment in their lives – the point they knew that nothing could go back to the way it was and they would be forever transformed because of their Easter experience. It was so new and awe-inspiring that they did not have the word Easter to describe what they witnessed in the days after Jesus's death – there was no shorthand. All they could do was describe their experiences, tell the story as they understood it.

For the disciples Easter was deeply personal – the death of their beloved leader Jesus, Christ's identity revealed in the resurrection of his spirit, a firm resolve to commit the rest of their lives to continuing the ministry Jesus started. Easter was not just a story to them – it was everything to them. It was the anguish of a violent death and the hollowness of grief. It was the disbelief that life could continue beyond their despair, and it was the hope they discovered when they realized that Jesus's body was resurrected and that his Spirit would always remain within them.

As time went on, the story of Jesus' resurrection was passed on through communities, moving from folks who had intimate memories of Jesus and his early followers, to people who only knew someone who knew someone who knew someone who was impacted by their ministry. Eventually the Easter story and others were written down – some of the details inevitably omitted, others shaped by oral tradition and the memories of the storytellers.

Soon the oral tradition moved to the side and it became the written word that was passed down – translated into different languages, moving across the oceans to new peoples and impacted by their own unique perspectives. Different Christian communities emphasized different parts of Christ’s resurrection, and each of them found something that gave them meaning for their particular time they lived in. Despite these changes and shifting of meaning, the story retained its power and its hope-filled spirit carried through.

This was true 1800 years later in the United States, where the Easter story came to represent God siding with the oppressed in issues of injustice – of God remaining steadfast and present in the midst of violence and pain and the threat of death. I imagine the Easter story reminded early Congregational Christians, our ancestors in the United Church of Christ, that when Jesus was cruelly and legally killed, God did not abandon him, and in his death God reminded all of humanity that death does not have the last word – love and hope cannot be vanquished. Christ’s resurrection gave the early Congregationalists the strength to fight for justice and speak out against inhumane policies and practices.

Some of these Congregationalists included lawyers who became the legal defense team in the case *The United States vs. The Amistad*. The Amistad was a ship that held enslaved Mende peoples who had been captured in modern-day Sierra Leone and transported to Cuba. From Cuba they were taken aboard a ship, La Amistad, to be brought to be sold in the Caribbean. The Mende prisoners staged a revolt on La Amistad ship, killing the captain and some of the crew, and demanding to be sailed home to Africa by the remaining crew. Instead the crew secretly maneuvered them north, landing in Long Island, New York, assuming the Mende passengers would be severely punished for their revolt.

Their case came before the courts, with the central issue being whether or not the Mende people were property or free humans. It eventually made it all the way to the Supreme Court.

Thanks to a hardworking legal team, spearheaded by Congregationalists, the Mende people were victorious, freed, and returned to their home country. The fundraising that enabled the Mende people to return home was led by the United Missionary Society, a group of black Christians, led by Reverend James Pennington, a Congregational minister and himself a former slave. The Amistad case propelled the abolitionist movement forward and became a foundational moment in the United Church of Christ for our commitment to anti-racism and justice work.

Throughout that, we can see how Christ's resurrection laid a foundation for the Congregationalist's faith, pointing them toward a God who is present in the most difficult moments and guides us to a new day where love and justice prevails. And so the Easter story continued to be told. From Congregationalists in New England to later day UCC members, including ourselves, Christ's resurrection finds powerful meaning and new ways to speak to new generations of Christians in our churches.

Today we continue to find power in this story, knowing that even in this sanctuary it finds different meaning for different people. Some of us think of the Easter story when we see flowers blooming after a long winter. Some take comfort in God's presence both in death and the journey with us beyond death. Some of us are strengthened by the belief that God stands on the side of the oppressed. Some of us struggle with the idea of a bodily resurrection, but see resurrection in other ways: resurrection of hope after a season of depression, resurrection of relationships that were once broken, resurrection of love where there was once loneliness, resurrection of the spirit of community when we were once aimless.

We keep telling this story, knowing that it is many things to many people, but believing that God is still speaking through our sacred stories, through our ancient traditions, and through Christ's resurrection. We lift up "Continuing Testament" as a core value in gratitude that God comes in many languages to many different people, and that there is a wideness in our

understandings and entry points to a relationship or awe of our Creator, Christ, and the Holy Spirit. May God continue to speak through our generations, helping our us all find power, hope, and meaning in the old, old story. Amen.