

**Davidson College Presbyterian Church**  
**Davidson, North Carolina**  
**Lib McGregor Simmons**  
**“In Christ”**  
**John 20: 1-18**  
**Resurrection of the Lord**  
**March 27, 2016**

If anyone is *in Christ*, there is a new creation.

These words, today's first lesson, were written by Paul to the church in Corinth and may be, according to scholars, the earliest writings in the New Testament and thus the closest in chronology to Jesus's resurrection in the entire biblical canon. You may recognize the words as those which are often said in church as the assurance of pardon after we have confessed in our corporate prayer of confession the ways that we have fallen short of God's best intentions for us.

The Phrase, *in Christ* was an expression, which was used frequently by Paul. And for Paul, it means simply living inside the love of Christ and participating in this love, that is, love which is always unconditional and always present.(1) It is nothing less than being a part of Christ's own body, to use another favorite metaphor of Paul's.

It is from the perspective of being *in Christ* that we come to the resurrection story as told by John and re-enacted so wonderfully this morning by Julie Alexander as Mary Magdalene.

Mary Ann McKibben Dana has written recently of the experience of attending a Good Friday service with an unusual twist. The liturgy featured the Passion story from the Gospel of Luke; every last verse of the story was read aloud. As is often done, some lines of dialogue were parceled out to the congregation. Usually when this is done, the congregation reads the words of the crowds or maybe the words of the officials. (We did something along these lines at our own Good Friday service as we came forward and tossed some coins in a bowl and experienced how we play the part of Judas in our lives, how we betray Christ in so many ways, often unthinkingly. But hearing the clank of silver and copper in the metal bowl brought it home for me and I know for at least one other person who shared with me yesterday how she wanted to hold on to her coins and not let them go. Perhaps the reason for this wanting to hold on is that to let the coins go would be to admit complicity injuring Christ's body.)

The Good Friday service which Mary Ann McKibben Dana attended was different.

The congregation did not deny that they knew Jesus as Peter did before the cock crowed three times. The congregation did not demand the release of Barabbas. The congregation did not shout "Crucify him!" The congregation did not mock Jesus. The congregation did not utter the words of the thief on the cross, "Jesus, remember me, when you come into your kingdom." The congregation did not even proclaim Jesus's innocence as the Roman centurion did.

Instead, the congregation read aloud the words of Jesus. They said what Jesus said at the Last Supper. They prayed in the garden of Gethsemane for the cup to be removed. They cried with one loud voice, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing," and "Into your hands I commend my spirit." (2)

Now some would say that having the congregation voice the words of Jesus is a theological faux pas of the highest order. And, frankly, this reversal ought to give us pause. The reversal holds the potential of playing into our culture's foundational sin which is to make gods of ourselves. Playing the roles of the fearful disciples, the fickle crowd, and the "keep the peace at all costs" government bureaucrats shakes the lies we are prone to tell ourselves out into the light of day where we can see them for what they are. And this is important.

On the other hand, Paul says that when we are *in Christ*, we are a new creation; the old has passed away and behold, the new has come.

And so on resurrection day, as we celebrate the new creation which Christ's resurrection brings about, it seems right to consider how the church which is the body of Christ and we who are individually members of this body pass on life and love to others in the manner that Jesus himself did.

The resurrection narrative we are reading today suggests many situations in today's world which groan with eager longing to become new creations, but I will focus upon one particular scene in the resurrection narrative and how speaks to us of being in Christ.

In the resurrection narrative which John presents, we are given a rather humorous picture of a competition between two disciples on who can get to the tomb first. John, the NASCAR commentator, announces Peter at the pole position. That must have been the case, right?...since he is the one whom the gospel writer actually names. He and the unnamed disciple start out neck in neck. The other disciple outdistances Peter by a few car lengths. He gets to the tomb first. But then Peter sweeps around him and barrels right into the tomb to assess the situation himself. Then the "other disciple" (he isn't named by the gospel writer, but it could very well be that the other disciple is John himself and I have to think so because John makes a point of saying a second time that this other disciple "reached the tomb first.") comes into the tomb, and "he believed."

The gospel writer, perhaps even unknowingly, is giving us a glimpse not only into first-century disciple dynamics, but it is a pretty accurate picture of our own times, is it not?

I'm not telling you anything that you don't know when I say that we are living in adversarial times. Hulk Hogan versus Gawker. The People versus O. J. Simpson. Bernie versus Hillary. Donald Trump against fill in the blank. And, of course, Batman versus Superman! (3)

We live in a time in the United States of America where defining one another as adversaries is more and more becoming the prevailing narrative.

But we are the body of Christ. We live according to an alternative narrative. You and I, we live *in Christ* who makes all things new by bringing to bear love which is always unconditional and always present, love which comes without any stipulation whatsoever, love which is larger than any of us and makes us nothing less than brothers and sisters one with another.

And yes, we dare to continue to live the Christ narrative in the midst of a world which weeps as Mary wept. We dare to live in the love of the resurrected Christ who makes all things new as we lovingly embrace the families of those killed and wounded by terrorists and walk with them through their pain and at one and the same time refuse to define faithful Muslim brothers and sisters as adversaries. We dare to live in the love of the resurrected Christ who makes all things new when we make a stand against *any* form of discrimination against *any* child of God for *any* reason. We dare to live in the love of the resurrected Christ who makes all things new when we embody for those for whom the fortress-like walls of depression block out all light and joy and demonstrate to them in every possible way, Here is God's own truth: You have value. You have worth. You are loved. We dare to live in the love of the resurrected Christ who makes all things new when we are not shy about sharing the stories of resurrection that we ourselves have witnessed and lived, stories like the inspirational story of St. Benedict's School in Newark, New Jersey.

St. Benedict's School in Newark, New Jersey, had a long and successful history, having educated white, Catholic boys for 100 years. Then in 1967, unemployment, racism, and violence hit Newark full force. The school closed for a year and there was even talk of the monastery itself relocating.

But one young priest did not believe that racism should close the school. The school reopened, and Fr. Edwin Leahy became the headmaster. (He is still the headmaster of St. Benedict's today.) At the age of 26, Fr. Leahy didn't know a single thing about running a school for boys so he turned to "the Good Book"—that is, the Boy Scout handbook. And it was the Boy Scout handbook which provided a leadership model where students are required to run much of the school.

Today there are 550 students in grades 7-12 at St. Benedict's. The student body is diverse racially, but not economically, as nearly all of the students are from impoverished neighborhoods. Their day begins with a chant they call "the affirmation:" You can be! You can be! You go and conquer!" They call each other "brother," and the school motto is: "Whatever hurts my brother, hurts me."

Today, in a neighborhood where the dropout rate averages 30%, 98% of the students at St. Benedict's graduate. And 85% of those who graduate go on to earn a college degree.

Father Leahy says, "I tell people all the time, I've seen dead people come to life. Talk about resurrection." (4)

Your stories, my story, the story of Davidson College Presbyterian Church...our stories defer from the story of St. Benedict in their details. But our stories are based upon the same foundational narrative. It is a narrative based on living *in Christ* and trusting that when we so live, there will be a new creation.

Father Edwin Leahy: I tell people all the time I've seen dead people come to life, talk about resurrection.

Your story, my story, the story of Davidson College Presbyterian Church...it is not the exact same story as St. Benedict's. But it is based upon the same foundational narrative. It is a narrative based on living *in Christ* and trusting that when we live as Christ's body, brothers and sisters one to another, there will be a new creation indeed.

1. Richard Rohr, "The Four Loves," Center for Action and Contemplation, [www.cac.org](http://www.cac.org), March 15, 2016.
2. Mary Ann McKibben Dana, "Living the Word: Luke 22: 14-23:56," *The Christian Century*, March 2, 2016, 21.
3. A.O. Scott, "Keep Your Cape On, It's Time to Rumble," *The New York Times*, March 25, 2016.
4. "The Resurrection of St. Benedict's," *60 Minutes*, March 20, 2016. <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/60-minutes-newark-school-st-benedicts-scott-pelley/>