

**Spiritual Growth – A Core Value of BAPC**  
**John 20:1-18 and Ephesians 4:7-13, 15-16**  
**4 April 2021 – Easter Sunday**

While I haven't **quite** crossed the career **finish** line yet, I did back in **November** reach a milestone. On November 16<sup>th</sup>, I marked the fortieth anniversary of my ordination as a Pastor in the Presbyterian Church USA. I've been at this now for forty (plus) years! And **throughout** those forty years, with the exception of six when I served as a Presbytery Executive, I've had the blessing and the challenges of working as a pastor of **congregations**. God help me, I **do** have **affection** for congregations... and for those who make them up.

One thing I've especially **treasured** about shepherding **congregations** is the way it has allowed me be **involved** in the lives of persons of **all** ages and stages of life. The 90-year-old widow who walks into the sanctuary and takes her seat on a Sunday... four days after her husband's funeral. The enthusiastic college student signing up for a year as a Volunteer in Mission at a clinic in Peru. The preschool student who for the first time comes up for a children's sermon. The forty-five-year-old high school teacher who, trembling, shares that she has been sensing the Spirit urging her to go to seminary. The middle-aged contractor who lets me know that he has completely changed how he runs his business because of what he's been learning in his Bible Study group. What a **gift** it has been to be a part of all those lives, to be a spiritual friend to them, a guide, sometimes, a supporter, a companion, and a witness to their growth in faith and understanding, in devotion and discipleship... to be a witness to what the **Spirit** has been doing in **all** of those lives.. and the life of the **congregations** where they were being nurtured, where they were serving, where so much spiritual growth was going on.

Recently, many of Bon Air's leaders – members of the Session and your Pastor Nominating Committee – recognized that **Spiritual Growth** is deeply **valued** by this congregation. It is, in fact, a **Core Value** here. Bon Air has shown a long commitment to nourishing, supporting and seeking **spiritual** growth for those associated with Bon Air Church – persons of all ages and stages of life.

You may **understand** that spiritual growth is a long process, a life-**long** endeavor, actually. Sometimes, as in physical growth, it happens in spurts. And sometimes it comes in the context of challenge, trial, when one can perhaps more easily get what the Apostle Paul meant when he said, *Whenever I am weak, then I am strong.*

Individuals experience spiritual growth; and communities do, as well. The growth of a church's various individuals... their desire for that growth and all the activities provided to **pursue** to stimulate it – studies, pilgrimages, working for justice, spiritual friendships – all of this flavors and affects a **congregation's** whole being, its sense of itself, its spiritual maturity and how it engages with the world.

One certainly can think of spiritual growth as something **people** initiate, encourage and pursue... as a way to develop their own or another's spiritual depth, vigor or maturity. But I also... and more **basically**... look at spiritual growth as something **God** does with individuals and

congregations and communities. The Spirit of **God** stirs, provokes and engages us... draws us into a spiritual relationship through which we're helped to grow... or through which our gifts are so employed that the **church** grows, is built up, becomes more fit for carrying out its calling. That's Spiritual Growth as **God's project**... as a *God thing*... which **we** may be blessed to be a part of.

You know that Pastor Nominating Committee you elected to find a pastor to lead you in addressing **your** Mission – *Seeking and Serving Christ, Sharing God's Love for All Creation* – that PNC is looking for someone who values Spiritual Growth... who understands it **both** as **God's** work and desire for us... and as **our** effort and desire... looking for a **pastor** who will contribute to that work enthusiastically... so that each of you will experience spiritual growth and the congregation as a whole will come to thrive, more and more. Pray for the PNC as it carries out its important work.

So, with this as a frame of reference, now, I'd like to take you **back** to the story John put before us this morning... of the very **first Day of Resurrection**. You might think of it as a kind of video clip that shows the way that **one** of Christ's **first** followers, in a terrible hour, grew spiritually quickly... with the help of God... and the tender ministries of her Risen Lord. (I suspect that John chose to share Mary's story with us in part to inform and inspire us as we **seek** to grow spiritually... or perhaps as we are **being led** into spiritual growth.)

As soon as she **could** that morning, Mary Magdalene went out to the tomb – even while it was **still** quite **dark**, we're told. And maybe not only dark **around** her but **within** her, too. She went out seeking to be as **close** as she **could** be to her Lord's body. Seeing the stone removed from the entrance – a sign of something troubling – she ran to alert Peter and another disciple. *They have taken the Lord out of the tomb! They have, I know it... and we don't know where they've laid him.* O, the grief... the **anger** she felt... as they all ran toward the tomb. Peter and his companion, getting there ahead of Mary, saw that, in fact, Christ's body **was gone** from the tomb. The companion *believed*, John tells us – believed what **Mary** had said, I suppose – that **They'd** taken their master's body somewhere else.

So, the two men left the tomb, although Mary stayed, stood by and wept... continued weeping. She didn't know where **else** to be than there... how else to be than weeping, grieving, wanting his body. Maybe buried deeply **within** her was a whisper of Christ's affirmation that he would rise. But it would have been a very deep whisper, crushed and hidden by the weight of what she'd witnessed, lost and now had taken even further away from her. The **weight** of it, as she wept, bent her over... so she also looked into the emptied tomb; and, through her tears, she saw two angels. *Woman, they said, why are you weeping? Fresh wounding! Because they have taken away my Lord...I don't know where they've laid him!* **Perhaps** she noticed they were looking **past** her (there was a pastor **there**, I guess!). And when she finally followed their gaze... she saw Jesus standing... there.

*Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?*

*For the body of my Lord! Please, just let me have it back!*

Mary, he answered her. *Mary!!*

Slowly, slowly, she turned herself completely toward him. *Teacher?* Suddenly the whisper within her augered up through everything to emerge as a cry of joy: **Rabbouni** – Risen! Risen! **Rabbouni!** Indeed, her **teacher was** there with her again. And **this** day the lesson he was teaching her was on how to move from death again to life: Let go. Let God. “It is the Spirit that gives life,” remember?

So, now, Mary, *do not hold onto me... but go to my brothers and tell them I’m ascending to my God.* And Mary did. She let go. She left... left fortresses of grief, anger and fear there at the tomb; and... **having**, through her encounter with her Lord, **grown** into the person Christ needed her to be, Mary became the first witness of the resurrection! Having **grown** spiritually with his help, Mary went and announced to the disciples, *I have seen the Lord.* She went to **tell** them, to **inspire** them, to encourage and to help **them** grow into the witnesses Christ needed them to be. Mary went in Christ’s name and power to **help** Christ build up the budding church.

And whether you realize it or not, the Risen Lord is still, very much, at this sort of thing with you! He is still sending **you** his messengers. Catching your attention. Stirring you spiritually. Helping you see him, hear him, take in his love. Helping you to grow spiritually, to deepen in your trust and devotion, to become more mature in faith and more fruitfully involved in his life and ministry... to help you contribute in your **own** ways to building up his church. I’m absolutely sure he’s actively growing the **church** while he is specifically growing you. It is the same power at work (or at play) in the part or the whole... in the single rising flower or the full budding forest... in Christ’s dear friend Mary or the entire community of believers: Spiritual power... God’s life-giving power... the power of Divine love, at work or at play in all parts of the creation through Jesus Christ, Mary’s Rabbouni, our Lord.

This select little story that John has shared about Mary Magdalene’s spiritual growth is, essentially your story, too. It is Bon Air Church’s story. And it’s replete with hope and inspiration for us all. Thank you, Jesus!

When I was being considered for that Presbytery job, I was asked to describe in writing a **spiritually thriving congregation**. So, I thought about it a day or so, and then sat down and, apparently, I let the Spirit have some fun with me.

Here’s what emerged – I share it with you because it’s not far from what I think God wants for you. Or from what your spiritual leaders want for Bon Air Church.

A thriving congregation is a thing of beauty – it exhibits the Kingdom of Heaven to the world.

Its worship is focused on the living God.

Its members share both a keen sense of call to be in ministry together and a clear understanding of their distinctive mission, of the difference they’re meant to help Christ make.

Its leaders are self-consciously servants whose attentiveness and care keeps the congregation close to Christ, engaged in its mission, healthy in its functioning, and generous in sharing its gifts with the world.

A deep trust in **God** underlies the openness that characterizes it –

its members are open to the direction and encouragement of the Spirit, to taking on challenges, to trying and maybe failing;

they are open to learning and to growing in various ways;

they are open-hearted toward strangers, open-handed to those in need around them, and ready to receive Christ in them all.

When members gather, there is much laughter among them, and not a small amount of prayer; and when they part, the praying continues, so the distance does not diminish the congregation's sense of its unity or the expression of its care.

The congregation sees itself as a treasured part of what God is doing in the world, but only as a part;

and, therefore, it is eager to be in partnership with other congregations, groups and programs through whom God is working.

Because it lives both from and for Christ, the congregation is amazingly free, but also intensely engaged;

and those who make it up do not hesitate to tell others that their involvement in its life and ministry has been not only life-changing but profoundly satisfying.

May it indeed **be** so for you, friends; through the grace of the Risen Lord and the stirring activity of the Holy Spirit.

Happy Easter to you, one and all!