



North Congregational UCC New Harford CT
WORSHIP: EASTER SUNDAY (ON LINE WORSHIP)
April 4, 2021

FOR YOUR MEDITATION:

“There is a curious paradox that no one can explain. Who understands the secret of the reaping of the grain? Who understands why Spring is born out of Winter’s pain? Or why we must all die a bit before we grow again?” El Gallo character speaking from The Fantasticks Musical 1960 lyrics by Tom Jones.

“Those who love their life will lose it and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life.” John 12:25

PRELUDE MUSIC

The Day of Resurrection

INVITATION TO WORSHIP:

This is the day when tears are wiped away; shattered hearts are mended; fears are replaced with joy. This is the day the Lord rolls away the stone of fear; throws off death’s clothes; goes ahead of us into God’s future. This is the day the Lord has made: death has no fear for us; sin has lost its power over us; God open the tombs of our hearts to fill us with life. Christ is risen! Halleluia!

Jesus Christ is risen today, Alleluia! our triumphant holy day, Alleluia!
Who did once upon the cross, Alleluia! suffer to redeem our loss. Alleluia!

Hymns of praise then let us sing, Alleluia! Into Christ our heavenly king, Alleluia!
Who endured the cross and grave, Alleluia! Sinners to redeem and save. Alleluia!

But the pains which he endured, Alleluia! our salvation have procured. Alleluia!
Now above the sky he's King, Alleluia! where the angels ever sing. Alleluia!

Sing we to God above, Alleluia! praise eternal as God's love. Alleluia!
Praise our God, ye heavenly host, Alleluia! Father, Son and Holy Ghost! Alleluia

OPENING PRAYER

We come rejoicing in Christ's empty tomb. We come trusting in the good news that tells us Christ is with us. We know that you care about us. You offer glimpses of hope even amidst the most difficult of times. The empty tomb reminds us that love is everlasting. Amen.

EPISTLE LESSON: 1st Corinthians 15:1-11

Now I would remind you, brothers and sisters, of the good news that I proclaimed to you, which you in turn received, in which also you stand, through which also you are being saved, if you hold firmly to the message that I proclaimed to you – unless you have come to believe in vain. For I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers and sisters at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have died. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me. For I am the least of the apostles, unfit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me has not been in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them – though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me. Whether then it was I or they, so we proclaim and so you have come to believe.

GOSPEL LESSON: Mark 16:1-8

When the Sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices, so that they might go and anoint him. And very early on the first day of the week, when the sun had risen, they went to the tomb. They had been saying to one another, "Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?" When they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had already been rolled back. As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man, dressed in a white robe, sitting on the right side; and they were alarmed. But he said to them, "Do not be alarmed; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here. Look, there is the place they laid him.

But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you.” So they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.

May God bless this reading and add to our understanding what God is asking of us this day.
Amen.

HYMN OF PREPARATION

Lord of the Dance

No. 157

<https://youtu.be/zDdQhsjNHcw>

Refrain:

“Dance, then, wherever you may be, I am the Lord of the Dance, said he,
and I’ll lead you all, wherever you may, and I’ll lead you all in the dance said he.

I danced in the morning when the world was begun, and I danced in the moon and the stars
and the sun, and I came down from heaven and I danced on the earth
at Bethlehem I had my birth. (Refrain)

I danced for the scribe and the Pharisee, but they would not dance and they would not follow
me. I danced for the fisherman, for James and John.
They came with me and the dance went on. (Refrain)

I danced on the Sabbath and I cured the lame. The holy people said it was a shame.
They whipped and they stripped and they hung me high,
And left me there on the cross to die. (Refrain)

I danced on a Friday when the sky turned black. It’s hard to dance with the devil on your back.
They buried my body and they thought I’d gone,
But I am the dance and I still go on. (Refrain)

They cut me down and I leapt up high. I am the life that will never, never die.
I’ll live in you if you live in me, I am the Lord of the dance said he. (Refrain)

SERMON:**“Back to Normal- Not on your Life”****The Rev. Art Yost**

This may be my last opportunity to preach an Easter Sunday sermon. Of course, every Sunday is a celebration of Easter but this is the BIG E. I do supply preaching, often covering for pastors who are on vacation. Few pastors would want to be away from their faith community on Easter. So since my retirement in 2007, 14 Easters have come without an Easter sermon from me-almost as long a time as the cicadas have been gone- soon to emerge again this spring. At North Church, New Harford, I have been pretty regular as a supply pastor since the late fall of 2020. The faith community is in discernment about what they will be doing as a congregation and what their needs are for a pastor. So, it is my honor, privilege and blessing to be with you at North Church this glorious Easter Sunday.

If this were a term paper instead of a sermon, I would have many pages of footnotes because what I want to say has come from so many different sources over all the years I have been a pastor. With proper footnotes this sermon might be as big as the 618 page bill passed by Congress called The American Rescue Plan. I’ve learned from seminary professors, students, parents, friends, churches, neighbors and the congregation at North Church. I doubt there is an original thought of mine in today’s sermon. Maybe the “gestalt” of how I have put together the pieces of this sermon shows some originality. I will be mentioning a few sources throughout the sermon, giving credit whenever I can.

All four Gospels speak about the core of the Christian faith and summarized beautifully by Paul in his letters to the church in Corinth. “For I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures.” After listing many appearances, Paul relates he also had an experience of the risen Christ. Paul felt it as an act of grace since he started out as a zealous persecutor of those who believed in the teachings of Christ. Of the four Gospels, today’s passage from Mark is unique in that there is no physical appearance of the risen Christ. When the three women come to the tomb they are met by a stranger in a white robe who informs them that the one they seek is not there but has gone on to meet the disciples in Galilee. This messenger asks the women to go and tell the disciples and Peter. They don’t, in Mark’s account. Instead, they flee from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them and said nothing to anyone for they were afraid. Haven’t you ever seen a family member or a friend looking very strange and then say to them-“what’s the matter, you look like you’ve seen a ghost.” Well, that must be how Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of Jesus and Salome looked. There might be another reason as well. Who would believe them? In Luke, he does mention that the women did report that they had gone to the tomb and did not find the body there. The response of the disciples was “these words seemed to them idle tale, and they did not believe them. The stereotype of women as being emotional, irrational was true back then and remains that way in many cultures around the world today-yes even in the USA. I love the saying on a t-shirt, “A woman’s place is in the house-and in the senate.” It wasn’t that long ago that women couldn’t vote in this country. Times are beginning to change but it is a very slow process. Even back then however, we need to remember that, with the exception of the disciple John, the people at the foot of the cross experiencing the suffering and death of Jesus and the

others were these same women. And they were the ones, after the Sabbath day, who braved going to the tomb to anoint the body of Jesus.

So, what should we make of the fact that Mark leaves the story unfinished? I remember seeing more than once the rock opera Jesus Christ Superstar. While graphically portraying his death, there are no resurrection scenes except for some beautiful music and a light that shines in the auditorium. It is up to the audience to decide whether or not there is resurrection after death. The Rev. Dr. Cheryl A Lindsay, UCC pastor Sermon Seed writer providing insights into lectionary readings has an interesting thought about this. She points out that Mark is the only synoptic gospel writer that excludes a birth narrative. Jesus comes upon the scene as an adult to be baptized and, in his baptism, proclaims that Jesus is the Son of God who steps out to enter the human condition. A voice from the heavens proclaim who he really is. Dr. Lindsay believes that Mark intentionally avoids the various sightings of Jesus since he has proclaimed that Jesus is not in the tomb but has gone forward to meet them thereby announcing resurrection power in the human situation. Now there are added verses in Mark's gospel that are included as a footnote because scholars believe these were added in later by a different writer or writers who were trying to blend together some of the appearances of Jesus in the other Gospels. It would be like my stopping at this point in the sermon only to have someone else come in to finish it. That person might include some of my thoughts but the style of writing would be very different from my style. And the language and words used in those added verses inaccurately account for some of the appearances in the other Gospels.

There are many examples of encounters with the risen Christ. You can read them in Matthew, Luke and John. To insert them into today's lesson would be like playing a parlor game I loved to play called MAD LIBS. Maybe you remember playing it. One person is the reader and selects a story that has many blanks that need to be filled in to complete the story. The reader asks for the individuals to give a noun, a verb, an adjective, a place, a name of a person etc. until all the blanks are filled in and then, using those additional words, the story is read, usually with hilarious results. There are other ways for us to fill in the blanks that Mark has left for us this Easter Day. No matter how many appearances we read 2000 years ago, it will not prove anything to us. We could still be left out like Thomas-rightfully skeptical and unable to place our hands inside the wounds of Christ.

How do we live into the resurrection? It is not easy- it seems so abnormal. We like normal. How often, during this past 14 months, have we heard- can't wait till things get back to normal. In the USA Newspaper for Holy Thursday they asked Americans what they are excited about once life gets back to something like pre-pandemic normal. Top five responses: not thinking about virus/distancing, ditching masks in public, meeting friend and family, greeting with a physical touch, traveling on a vacation. YES, many of us would agree. Normal seemed not so bad after Jesus' death. There had been wild dreams; a messiah who would establish a heaven on earth, natural and supernatural miracles, healings, great sermons, elevation of dignity of all women, justice for the downtrodden. And then came talk of servanthood, loving enemies, forgiving a ridiculous number of times, love of foreigners even hated ones like Samaritans, then arrest, trials, and painful, excruciating painful death, darkness, veil in temple torn in the holiest of holies. Then

the normalcy of the emperor and power of the Roman Empire. Yep, back to normal. After honoring the Sabbath day, women going to anoint a dead body, fisherman repairing nets to go back to fishing, tax collector collecting taxes. Back to current times. We don't like uncertainty. Bring back the good old days- before Covid-19, before 100 year storms occurring every year, and can't those rain forests grow faster. And, if there really wasn't a resurrection, then all those things Jesus taught about unconditional love, compassion, sharing and strange paradoxes like the quote at the top of our bulletin-all not normal- we can forget it all.

Go back to normal means looking backward to what was. In Genesis, God's judgement was about to come down hard on Sodom and Gomorrah but Lot was a good man so he is warned get out of town. He packs up whatever he can including his wife and children and heads out. Only his wife, unnamed, isn't sure she wants to go. Although warned not to look back, she does and she turns into a pillar of salt, perhaps a euphemism for being stubborn, reckless, paralyzed, afraid to move on. In therapy, both client and therapist realize how difficult it can be to make a change. Even if life is hellish, the hell you know is more comfortable than the fear of what might lie ahead. Therapy, at its best, spends just enough time in looking back in order to move forward. My wife tells of the time she had to get rid of her beloved mustang for, of all things, a Honda Accord hatchback. She received a call from the dealer who took the mustang in trade who said, we can't get the car backed out of the garage. How did you get it in reverse? Her response was honest. I can't-why do you think I traded it in?

In the musical *The Fantasticks*, two fathers pretend to feud in order to get their children, a daughter and son to fall in love. The girl Luisa is entering a new physical change in her life. Trying to deal with all the emotions, she offers this fervent prayer "please God please, don't let me be normal." The Rev. Dr. Lindsay would say amen to that prayer. She wrote in her Sermon Seed entry for this day, "We weren't created for normal. We were crafted for transformation." Now that is thinking outside the box (coffin). The lives of the women at the tomb that first Easter morning never went back to normal. The fishermen, turned disciples, never returned to fishing- at least not for fish. Paul never went back to being a Pharisee-instead he took God's grace with him on three prolonged missions and his reward was numerous imprisonments.

Kayla Mueller was a devout Christian who in college was involved in an ecumenical campus ministry became, after graduation a human rights activist. She travelled to the Middle East working in Turkey in 2012 assisting Syrian refugees. There she was ambushed and taken prisoner by ISIS who sexually assaulted and physically abused her because of her faith and the fact that she was an American. While a prisoner she enabled others to escape while she stayed behind. She died despite rescue attempts. Her life is an example of living forward into the resurrection of Jesus. Jim Friedrich writes for the *Christian Century*. His take on Easter is expressed this way. The central question of Easter is not what happened to Jesus way back then. The question is "Where is Jesus for us-now? To live an Easter faith will make people look at us and probably say- that person isn't normal. Thank God. A prayer from yet another musical is the way I want to end this sermon-from *Godspell*-inspired by a 13th century Bishop Richard of Chichester; Day by day, dear Lord, I pray: To see thee more clearly, love thee more dearly, follow thee more nearly, day by day. Happy Easter!

PASTORAL PRAYER AND LORD'S PRAYER

God of all ages and of all people, the shadows and gloom of Good Friday have been dispersed by the light and color of Easter. At this time, in church, we rejoice that we assembled here can be together for the first time in this New Year. We also miss those who are not here and hope and pray the service here will be welcomed however and whenever they get to share this worship experience. We rejoice in your power, Merciful God that turns sorrow into joy, our despair into hope, our defeat into victory and evil into goodness. Help us, as we celebrate Easter, O God, to burst out of the tombs that have trapped us. Roll away any stones that block us from seeing the light of a new day with lives transformed in ways we never expected. The only normal we need to celebrate is the normalcy of your everlasting presence in our lives, the promise you made that nothing can keep us apart from your love, that all matter of death is not the end as we go forth into a new way of being in your company along with others who have journeyed before us and will journey after us. As you welcome us help us to welcome others; as you forgive us, help us to offer that same grace to all others; as you challenge us to step out beyond our comfort zone, imbue us with the spiritual fortitude to know all the possibilities of transformation within us and in the lives of others. As we participate in the Sacrament of Remembrance which is the holiest of all meals we share, that the elements blessed will take hold inside each of us to help us be true to who you want us to be- healers, workers for justice, teachers of your Truth, ambassadors of your holy place which truly is everywhere in your creation. In Jesus' name we pray, Our Father....

MEDITATION

Now the Green Blade Rises

THE SACRAMENT OF HOLY COMMUNION

(Liturgy from Thom M. Shuman: Lectionary Liturgies)

INVITATION

PRAYER OF CONSECRATION

WORDS OF INSTITUTION

SHARING THE BREAD AND THE CUP

<https://youtu.be/HxABYhA2zWQ>

Will you come and follow me if I but call your name?
Will you go where you don't know and never be the same?
Will you let my love be shown; will you let my name be known;
Will you let my life be grown in you and you in me.?

Will leave yourself behind if I but call your name?
Will you care for cruel and kind and never be the same?
Will you risk the hostile stare should your life attract or scare?
Will you let me answer prayer in you and you in me?

Will you let the blinded see if I but call your name?
Will you set the prisoner free and never be the same?
Will you kiss the leper clean, and do such as this unseen?
And admit to what I mean in you and you in me?

Will you love the 'you' you hide if I but call your name?
Will you quell the fear inside and never be the same?
Will you use the faith you've found to re-shape the world around,
Through my sight and touch and sound in you and you in me

Lord, your summons echoes true when you but call my name.
Let me turn and follow you and never be the same.
In your company I'll go where your love and foot-steps show.
Thus I'll move and live and grow in you and you in me.

BENEDICTION:

May God's abiding love and hope give us new life. May God's unmerited grace and mercy keep us hope-filled. And may God's restorative justice bring to us all, perfect peace. For Christ is risen! Praise God! Amen

POSTLUDE

Hallelujah, Amen G. F. Handel