



Sunday, April 19, 2020

Second Sunday of Easter

A worship service created by the staff of the Iowa, Nebraska, and South Dakota Conferences of the United Church of Christ

Words of Welcome

Welcome to worship! The Ministerial Staff of the Iowa, Nebraska, and South Dakota Conferences of the United Church of Christ have been holding all of our churches and pastors in our prayers in this time of extraordinary upheaval living through the pandemic of COVID-19. We have all been finding new ways to be church together. We hope that this worship service is an invitation for pastors to maybe take a break and to breathe for a week. We hope that this worship service may offer blessing and encouragement across our conferences and our denomination, our communities and our world. We hope that you will know the real presence of Jesus Christ in your life and in the connections that we all have, one to the other, across the physical distances as we celebrate together the blessing that it is to be human in this world, creatures of God, siblings in faith. Welcome, let us worship.

Call to Worship

Leader: We rejoice that our resurrected Savior, Jesus Christ, is with us.

People: Our lives are full of God's blessings.

Leader: Although we hear words of doubt, we are called to believe.

People: May we focus on the light amidst the darkness in the world.

Leader: Christ gives us victory.

All: Alleluia! Amen.

“We Are Gathered” Sing-Along

Text by Amanda Udis-Kessler, 2020;

Tune: “Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing” (Nettleton)

We are gathered in the Spirit though our bodies are apart,
Filled with joy and touched with wonder, separate hands but mingled hearts.
Giving thanks and singing praises for the love that calls us on.
From our many different places we are gathered into one.

We are gathered in our sorrow. We are gathered in our fear.
In our pain and in our worry, in our anger and our tears.
As we tend to one another with our gifts and with our care,
Our community is strengthened through the faith and hope we share.

We are gathered in commitment to a planet that is whole.
Works of justice, acts of kindness bless the world and heal our souls.
As our voices join together, may our song of peace resound.
May we offer in abundance all the grace that we have found.

Pastoral Prayer

Prophets of a Future Not Our Own

It helps, now and then, to step back and take a long view.

The kingdom is not only beyond our efforts, it is even beyond our vision.

We accomplish in our lifetime only a tiny fraction of the magnificent enterprise that is God's work. Nothing we do is complete, which is a way of saying that the Kingdom always lies beyond us.

No statement says all that could be said.

No prayer fully expresses our faith.

No confession brings perfection.

No pastoral visit brings wholeness.

No program accomplishes the Church's mission.

No set of goals and objectives includes everything.

This is what we are about.

We plant the seeds that one day will grow.

We water seeds already planted, knowing that they hold future promise.

We lay foundations that will need further development.

We provide yeast that produces far beyond our capabilities.

We cannot do everything, and there is a sense of liberation in realizing that.

This enables us to do something, and to do it very well.

It may be incomplete, but it is a beginning, a step along the way, an opportunity for the Lord's grace to enter and do the rest.

We may never see the end results, but that is the difference between the master builder and the worker.

We are workers, not master builders; ministers, not messiahs.

We are prophets of a future not our own.

Time Especially for Children

Hello my name is Jonna. I'm one of the pastors in the bigger United Church of Christ who cheers for your pastor and for your church and I'm glad to be here with you today.

Something's different isn't it? We're not going to church. We're not going to the big church building where we usually go. We're going to church right in our own houses. Sometimes we are going to church in our own house with a video. And that can be very good.

I wanted to make sure you also knew that you could make your own church service. I wonder if you've tried it. I sure hope you will. Maybe you're so big that you have a Bible that was given to you and if you're so big you have your own Bible, then maybe you can find a page that you know. A story that you really like and you could read it for everybody in your house. And you could talk a little bit about why you like that story so much, what you wonder about it. And that would be a very good thing.

Even if you're not so big to have your own bible, maybe you have a song that you learned in Sunday school and you could help everybody in your house sing it. You could sing something like "Jesus Loves Me This I Know" if you know that song. It could even be a silly song! Maybe at your church you learned this song: it starts out "Allelu,

allelu, alleluia, praise ye the Lord!” That’s a silly song, if the others in your house know that song they might sing along with that one too.

And everyone in your house together can take a turn saying a prayer. Telling God what you’re thinking, telling God what you’re feeling. Telling God thank you, telling God when you’re sorry. You might have people you love and people you care about and people you’re wondering about that you’d like to say their names and ask God to help and bless them. And you can do that too.

I’ll be thinking about you as you make your own church service. The grownups in your house will know how to send me a note and let me know how it’s going. And I am so looking forward to coming to see you one day at your church. And I am so looking forward to the day when all of us will be back in the big church buildings where we love to be. Bye bye!

The Story from Scripture

The Christian tradition has been passed from generation to generation in the form of stories told and retold. They have been told around dinner tables and campfires, on fishing boats and family road trips, in holy places and in places where God’s presence was wholly unimaginable until the moment the story was spoken aloud.

This morning, we tell again a story told by the gospel writer of John. We pick up the unfolding story, on Easter evening, with the disciples capturing our attention. Remember, the disciples had heard Mary Magdalene’s words and her proclamation. She had come to them proclaiming, “I have seen the risen Lord.” The disciples had heard her story, of the stone rolled away, of two men glowing white in the tomb, of the man she thought was the gardener but who called her by name. The disciples had heard her, but her story didn’t make much sense. Mary’s claim was impossible. *No one rises from the dead*, they had thought.

The disciples had heard Mary Magdalene’s joyful proclamation, but it hadn’t made any sense and it hadn’t eased any of their fears. So they did the only thing they knew to do: they gathered together. Everyone except for Thomas. The disciples met, terrified and afraid...huddled together behind locked doors—deadbolted, chained, a chair wedged beneath the handle—that kind of locked. Listening for every step on the stair and for every knock at the door, fearful that they would be the next to be arrested, tried, and crucified.

But as the ten disciples cowered behind these locked doors, Jesus came and stood among them. The disciples had no idea who this man was and he had just suddenly appeared among them. Out of fear and adrenaline some of them stumbled to their feet ready to fight; others sat paralyzed with fear. This man hadn’t made a sound. Their darting eyes hadn’t noticed him in the moment before. But there he

was. Tension and fear heightened in the room, but he calmly said to them, “Peace be with you,” and he stretched out his hands and extended his fingers so that the marks of the nails were unmistakable. The disciples’ questioning eyes stared into his, while the words and proclamations of Mary Magdalene came flooding back. Their eyes connected with his, seeming to ask, “Are you him?” Then the man pulled aside his garment and revealed the wound in his side. He watched their questioning eyes change to that of bewildered joy. The disciples recognized him. And then Jesus said to them again, “Peace be with you.” It was a greeting, a blessing, and a hope all in one. As if to say may peace be with you, not your fear. Then Jesus breathed onto them the Holy Spirit, the very presence of God, and the disciples knew, the way Mary Magdalene had known, that they had *seen* and *experienced* the risen Christ.

Thomas hadn’t been with the other disciples that evening. He had been off on his own. Thomas hadn’t been afraid to die with Jesus. When Jesus had proposed to go to Bethany to the tomb of Lazarus, Thomas knew that Jesus’s life would be in danger. Thomas knew there were folks in high places plotting to kill Jesus, but he said to the other disciples, when they had been hesitant and afraid, “Let us also go, that we may die with him.” Thomas hadn’t been afraid then and it seems he wasn’t afraid now. There wasn’t a need for him to lock himself behind closed doors.

When Thomas met up again with the others, he must not have expected what he saw. The scared and trembling friends he had left behind were no longer hiding in fear. They were gathered, but the doors were not locked. No one nervously fidgeted. No one’s eyes darted in panicked despair. Instead, when they saw him, they grew excited, and they told Thomas, “We have seen the Lord.” Thomas took in a deep breath as if more air in his lungs might help him understand. The news was so strange and perhaps too good to be true. He couldn’t believe it. Still bewildered, he muttered to them, “Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands and put my finger on them, and my hand in his side. I cannot believe.”

A day went by, then another, then another. No doubt Thomas grew more and more convinced that what Mary Magdalene and the disciples had told him were only wild rumors. An entire week rolled by before he met with the disciples again. They met together, where the ten had hid in fear. And like he had a week before, without making a sound, Jesus appeared and stood among them. He looked around at each of them, saying, “Peace be with you.” Thomas’s eyes grew wide as he stared at who was now in front of him. The words of Mary Magdalene and the words of the disciples, the words that had seemed too good to be true, flooded through his mind.

Jesus turned towards Thomas, extending one hand and gesturing with the other, and told him, “Put your finger here and see my hands.” Then Jesus pulled aside his garment and gestured to the wound in his side, saying “Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt, Thomas, but believe.” Thomas gazed at holes and the wound in Jesus’s side. Then, he reached out and touched them. And *he knew*, the way Mary Magdalene had and the way the disciples had. Jesus had come offering his wrestling mind peace, and Thomas cried words of joy and excitement; words of relinquished doubt and renewed faith. He exclaimed, “My Lord and my God!”

The Message

Thomas is remarkable, his honesty, his self-awareness that just hearing other people's stories wasn't enough for him to believe, his desire for an actual experience of Jesus. But as much as this story is about him and what he saw, and the disciples, and Mary Magdalene. But it's about something else, too. It's about *how* Jesus appears and the *words* he speaks. There is a pattern, did you catch it?

For Mary Magdalene it was in the garden that Easter morning, amidst her grieving that Jesus appeared. Remember? She had seen the crucifixion, the burial, the stone rolled away, his body gone. Jesus had meant everything to her. She had been overlooked, disregarded, unnoticed, and ignored. Jesus had spoken to her when no one else would. He had shown her the unconditional love of God. That Easter morning, feeling the full weight of being alone, she sunk down outside the tomb to cry. Maybe you've known that feeling? Tears still flooded her eyes and ran down her cheeks, when she simply felt a presence behind her. She hadn't expected it, not in the least. "Mary," he said, calling her by name, which was all that needed to be said, to convey that she was not alone. For Mary Magdalene, it was at the tomb, amidst her incredible sadness and grief, that Jesus appeared and peace washed over her. It was at the tomb that he comforted her, showing her that all was not lost.

For the ten disciples, it was amidst their fear that Jesus appeared. They had grown afraid for themselves and afraid for their friends. They had grown so afraid of the world and of people that all they could do was conceal themselves behind locked doors, on guard, and on edge. Maybe you've known that feeling? They hadn't expected to see him, but Jesus came among them, and said to them, "Peace be with you." For the disciples, it was in their hiding place, amidst their fear and terror, that Jesus appeared and peace washed over them. It was when they were too scared to move that he comforted them, pronouncing hope.

For Thomas, it was amidst his doubt that Jesus appeared. He doubted that such a ridiculous thing could be true. He couldn't believe it, not without seeing it for himself. When a week had rolled by without seeing the risen Christ, Thomas's doubt gave way to disbelief and his heart grew troubled. Thomas grew to no longer expect to see him or to have some sort of confirming experience. Maybe you've known this sort of feeling? But Jesus came and stood in front of him, saying, "Peace be with you." For Thomas, it was in the community he had separated himself from, amidst his doubt and troubled heart, that Jesus appeared and peace washed over him. It was there that Jesus disclosed the hope and promise that peace was possible even in the midst of doubt.

Read this story as history or as metaphor, either way, there is something incredibly important in this. What we see and hear of is Jesus, coming to each of them, meeting them where they are, in the conditions they are in, bringing peace to

their minds and to their very beings, and promising to be with them and with all disciples always.

As close to science fiction as this story might seem to our modern sensibilities, Easter, that morning and that evening, are a part of our story. For some of us God, appears in big ways, when we least expect it...in undeniable ways that leave us with a sense of peace and knowing. For some of us, God appears after we have lost hope that we will ever experience God's presence, surprising us in unimagined ways, bringing us the peace of knowing and believing that God is God. And some of us are waiting, maybe we've seen and long to see again, maybe we've never seen. And maybe some of us have asked and asked to see God, to experience God, so that we find peace and may know in our hearts and in our minds that God is God. Maybe some of us have asked so long and wanted that peace for so long that we've lost hope in ever seeing, ever experiencing it. Where do you find yourself? Where do you find yourself in this story?

If there is one thing that the stories of Mary Magdalene, and the disciples, and Thomas reveal, it's that that God's mysterious ways and ways of being move in this world--that God meets Her people where we are, in the reality of our lives, in real ways, addressing our grief and fears and doubts by revealing God's self and speaking the words of promise and assurance, "Peace be with you."

It's easy to miss these moments and these words, especially since many of us don't come home to Christ standing in our living rooms. It becomes easy to lose sight or forget to look when the muck and mire of life clouds our vision to see clearly. But these moments, these moments where God appears and speaks, are all around us. We know them by the peace they bring to us.

They're in the laughter of a child that invites us to experience joy.
 In the compassionate eyes of a friend who sees our deepest need.
 They're in the trees that move from barrenness of winter to the new life of spring.
 In the songs that give voice to those emotions words alone cannot capture.
 They're in the beauty of a sunrise that reminds us each day is made anew.
 In the embrace that assures us we are loved and understood.
 They're in the bird that soars overhead, unhindered and untethered.
 In the words of greeting we offer to one another sometimes across pews and sometimes across screens, saying, "Peace be with you."

These moments where God appears and speaks, surround us. God is all around us, meeting us in times of doubt and fear; in times of joy and celebration. Whispering softly, offering us words of peace so that we may know God's presence.

Peace be with you.....Amen and amen.

“Simple Gifts” Special Music

Tune and lyrics attributed to Joseph Brackett (1797-1882) - Shaker dancing song

Tis a gift to be simple, tis a gift to be free
 Tis a gift to come down where we ought to be
 And when we find ourselves in the place just right
 It will be in the valley of love and delight.

When true simplicity is gained
 To bow and to bend we shan't be ashamed
 To turn, turn will be our delight
 'Til by turning, turning we come 'round right.

Sacrament of Holy Communion

(adapted from the UCC Book of Worship)

Pastor: Eternal God, we unite in this covenant of faith, recalling Christ's suffering and death, rejoicing in Christ's resurrection, and awaiting Christ's return in victory. We spread your table with these gifts of the earth and of our labor. We present to you our very lives, committed to your service on behalf of all people. We ask you to send your Holy Spirit on the bread and wine, on the crackers and juice, on all the foods, and all the drinks we've gathered, your gifts, and on us. Strengthen your universal church that it may be the champion of peace and justice in all the world. Restore the earth with your grace that is able to make all things new.

All: Be present with us as we share this meal, and throughout all our lives, that we may know you as the Holy One, who with Christ and the Holy Spirit, lives forever. Amen.

Blessing and Sharing of the Elements

Pastor: Will you pray with me? We give you thanks, God of majesty and mercy, for calling forth the creation and raising us from dust by the breath of your being.

We bless you for the beauty and bounty of the earth. And for the vision of the day when sharing by all will mean scarcity for none.

We remember the covenant you made with your people Israel, and we give you thanks for all of our ancestors in faith. We rejoice that you call us to reconciliation with you and with all people everywhere and that you remain faithful to your covenant even when we are faithless.

We rejoice that you call the entire human family to this table of grace and reconciliation. We come in remembrance and celebration of the gift of Jesus Christ, whom you sent, in the fullness of time, to be the Good News. Born of Mary, our sibling in faith, Christ lived among us to reveal the mystery of your Word, to suffer and die on the cross for all of humanity, to be raised from death on the third day, and then to live in glory.

We bless you, gracious God, for the presence of your Holy Spirit in the church you have gathered. With your children of faith, in all places and in all times, we praise you with joy. Amen.

Pastor: We remember. We remember the night that Jesus gathered with his friends and disciples. We remember that some were afraid. Some were in awe. Some were trying to keep the rituals and practices of the day constant and unchanged. We remember that Jesus gathered with his friends and disciples, sharing the meal even with the one he knew would betray him when it was over.

And we remember how he took the bread of the table, he gave thanks for it and blessed it. And we remember how he shared it. With everyone. And he taught us to remember, saying, "Take and eat. As often as you do this, remember me. My body, broken and offered for you."

We remember how he took the cup of the table, he gave thanks for it and blessed it. And we remember how he shared it. With everyone. And he taught us to remember, saying, "Take a drink. As often as you do this, remember me. My lifeblood poured out for you."

Holy Spirit, enter the elements we have prepared here and around the church in the rooms where we all gather and claim them as your own. Make them holy. Regardless of where we sit and the ingredients used in the food and drink we consume, we remember. Bless us as we remember Jesus the Christ.

Please, eat and drink, and share with those gathered in your room with you, the Bread of Life and the Cup of the New Covenant, offered for you.

Pastor: Please join me in praying aloud together.

All: Bountiful God, we give you thanks that you have refreshed us at your table by granting us the presence of Christ. Strengthen our faith, increase our love for one another, and send us forth into the world in courage and peace, rejoicing in the power of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

“Down to the River to Pray” Sing-Along

As I went down to the river to pray
 Studying about that good old way
 And who shall wear the starry crown
 Good Lord, show me the way

Oh children let's go down
 Let's go down, come on down
Oh children let's go down
 Down to the river to pray

(1st - oh children, 2nd - oh family, 3rd - oh neighbors, 4th - all God's children)

Benediction:

A benediction for you all. We have been fed, receiving welcome and nourishment, hope and consolation through our worship. May we cling to the understanding that Christ has been and continues to be among us always. And may your life glow with Christ's peace in all the ways that you have capacity for in these days. Amen and Amen, and all God's people said, Amen.

A message from Rev. Brigit Stevens:

Thank you for joining us today and THANK YOU, PASTORS! I see you! You are working extra hours and carrying heavier burdens than most Lenten and Easter seasons. Thank you. I see you learning new technologies fast enough to inspire software companies to make upgrades in the middle of the chaos. I see you making phone calls for hours on end to check in on members. I see you connecting leaders to each other to create safety nets of care and communication. I see you convening committee after committee to make decisions faster than the virus. I see you worrying about the stability of your congregation's finances. I see you weeping and grieving over the losses in your communities. I see you caring for your own children and parents while caring for your flock. I see you praying. Thank you. You are beloved children of God called to this particular time and place and you are enough. You are beautiful and beloved. Thank you for your gifts!

Rev. Brigit Stevens
 Executive Conference Minister

Worship Leaders:

Rev. Brigit Stevens.....Executive Conference Minister
Rev. Darrell Goodwin..... Associate Conference Minister
Rev. Ellis Arnold..... Associate Conference Minister
Rev. Jonna Jensen..... Associate Conference Minister
Rev. Samantha Houser..... Associate Conference Minister
Kerry Steever..... UCC Licensed Minister and Placerville Camp Director
Aidan Spencer.....Communications Specialist, The Maidans
Marie Sauze.....Artistic Collaborator, The Maidans

Thank you for joining us! God bless and be well!