

UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST CONGREGATIONAL
Wallace, Idaho

Alice M.C. Ling, Pastor

Easter Sunday

April 4, 2021

PRELUDE

WELCOME AND ANNOUNCEMENTS

Good morning! Aren't you a sight for sore eyes! This is a day that we've longed for for months. A day about which some have said, let's go already, while others have said, let's take it slow, be cautious, watch the numbers and follow the advice. I'll be honest with you: it feels really good to be here, with you, to see your faces and feel the energy in the room. Much better than looking into a camera and hoping you'll check in from home. But being here also makes me nervous. We've come a long, long way with this pandemic, but we're not there yet. And I want us to do this right and keep each other safe. So that's why the precautions. My understanding is that those of us who have been vaccinated can still get the virus; we're just assured we won't likely get very sick or die from it. But we can still pass it on to others. So until the science says otherwise, we need to wear masks and keep our distance from each other. I plead with you to keep the socializing to a minimum, and remind you that outside is safer than inside. The good news I have to share is that I've read the guidelines from the state of Washington, a state that has walked through COVID more cautiously than many. In their updated guidelines on March 23, which moved them to Phase 3, they said that it's okay to sing together – provided we're all wearing masks. So I've decided to go with that today – not quite as much as we used to sing, but certainly more than just me singing for you.

When the Executive Committee and Trustees made the decision to meet here today, we agreed we would continue to worship in the building indefinitely – or until numbers tell us we need to pull back. We're committed to watching the situation, and will let you know immediately if it seems we need to return to online worship. We're still figuring out the details on things like communion, but expect to share that next Sunday. And we're not planning to record worship after today. Feedback and input about all of this reentry are welcome, so please don't be shy. Share your ideas and your thoughts.

CALL TO WORSHIP

Christ is Risen!

Christ is risen, indeed!

Hope is alive!

Hope is alive, indeed!

God's love is eternal!

Hallelujah! Let us give thanks for what God has done. (Rev. Dr. Sheila Harvey Guillaume,
pastor of Union Congregational United Church of Christ in West Palm Beach, UCC Worship Ways)

HYMN No. 217 “*Christ the Lord is Risen Today*”

Christ the Lord is risen today, Alleluia! Sons of men and angels say: Alleluia!

Raise your joys and triumphs high, Alleluia! Sing, ye heavens and earth reply: Alleluia!

Lives again our glorious King, Alleluia! Where, O death, is now thy sting? Alleluia!

Dying once He all doth save, Alleluia! Where thy victory, O grave? Alleluia!

Love's redeeming work is done, Alleluia! Fought the fight the battle won, Alleluia!

Death in vain forbids Him rise, Alleluia! Christ has opened Paradise, Alleluia!

PRAYER OF INVOCATION (in unison)

God of grace and power, we come rejoicing in Christ's empty tomb. We come trusting in the good news that tells us Christ is with us. For the Risen Christ is living proof that You care about our lives, O God. The Risen Christ offers to us glimpses of hope, even in our tears. And the tomb is not quiet. It speaks. It proclaims! It is a promise of eternal life! Thank you, gracious and almighty God. Amen.

(Rev. Dr. Sheila Harvey Guillaume,
pastor of Union Congregational United Church of Christ in West Palm Beach, UCC Worship Ways)

SCRIPTURE READING 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.

SERMON

There are weekends and then there are weekends. This was clearly one of the longest, hardest, most turbulent ones ever. They replayed every moment of the past three years, the adventures, the healings, the crowds, the brilliant moments of insight and clarity; their teacher's encouragement and exasperation, words of welcome and warning. They'd seen things they'd never imagined and dared to believe possibilities they'd never thought possible. And then they tried to figure out when things turned, where they went wrong, and what they could have done differently. That was the question that really haunted. What could they have said, done, dared or believed to get to a different outcome? Could they have stopped this freight train, spared him the betrayal and arrest, trial and beatings, humiliation, abandonment and agonizing death? His closest companions scattered to every cave and crevice they could find, in the desperate hope they wouldn't be next; and while they were cowering in the corner, they replayed every scenario, wishing they had a chance to do it over and make it right. The women managed to hang in there better than the men, but even they watched from a distance. They honored the Sabbath by laying low and staying home, but that couldn't keep them still. I expect every last one of them paced and cried, stared and startled, all the while constantly checking to make sure danger wasn't lurking outside.

Finally the Sabbath ended and a new day dawned. At the first crack of dawn, the women headed for the tomb where they had seen Jesus laid to rest on Friday afternoon. It was painfully clear that he was gone, that all they had left of him was his body, so they took oil and spices to finalize its readiness for burial. It was the only thing left for them to do, and they had to do something. As they walked, they fretted about how in the world they were going to move the stone that had been placed to seal the entrance of the tomb; when they finally looked up to see what was right in front of them, they were shocked to realize it had already been moved. They looked at each other with a glance that said, this can't be good, crept forward, and cautiously stepped inside, clueless about what they would find. What they found was an angelic visitor, sitting on the right side; and yes, Mark tells us they were alarmed. Wouldn't you be? But they didn't bolt. They stayed and listened to the man tell them not to be frightened (easier said than done, but the kind of thing angels were famous for saying). He then went on to tell them the obvious, that they were looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who had been crucified. He is

not here because he has been raised. Then he pointed to the place where the body had been laid on Friday, telling the women to go and tell the disciples, and Peter, that he is going ahead of you to Galilee. You will see him there, just like he told you you would. At which point, the women fled from the tomb, saying nothing to anyone, because they were very afraid.

And thus ends Mark's gospel. Everybody agrees that that is the original ending of the Gospel, but since it's so unsettling and unsatisfying, early scribes added a couple of other endings, trying to make Mark sound more like Matthew, Luke and John. The good news for us preachers is that we have Matthew, Luke and John, so we normally come to Easter with a version that tells of sightings and reunions, and a joyous festival of the great good news of Jesus' resurrection. But every once in a while, you get stuck with a preacher who feels compelled to leave you hanging, standing in the middle of that empty tomb, staring at the young man dressed in white, looking over your shoulder at the dust from the women's escape, wondering what in the world comes next and what sense we are supposed to make of any of this. The disciples are nowhere to be seen, and the women are doing their darnedest to make the same true for them, so who does that leave to tell the story and spread the good news?

One commentator suggests that the only one left to go and tell is the reader of the Gospel. Which would be us. The disciples have failed; the women have failed; but clearly, God is not done with this story yet. Charles Campbell writes:

Jesus is loose in the world. He is not in our present as a lifeless corpse or in our past as a distant memory. Rather, he goes ahead of us into the future to meet us there and claim us, not on our own terms, but on his. We can no longer deal with Jesus as a dead body, safely buried in a tomb, but now we encounter him as a living reality. There is no escaping him, no containing him, no forgetting him. Business as usual is no longer safe because Jesus goes ahead of us to call us to discipleship again and again. (Charles Campbell, *The Lectionary Commentary: The Gospels*, page 284)

If we'd been paying attention at the beginning, we might have seen this coming. The Gospel of Mark opens differently than any of the other gospels; there is no story of Jesus' birth, no genealogy to identify his credentials, no visitation by angels, shepherds or wise men, no lofty prologue about the Word made flesh. This gospel simply opens with the words, "the beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God." Now that we've read all the way through, we begin to catch on to what he said to us from the start: the story Mark tells is only the beginning; it isn't finished at all, and we have a part to play. God is alive and well, Jesus is on the loose, and we're being called up to go and tell, to meet Jesus in Galilee and Wallace, in Silverton and Spokane, in Kellogg and Missoula.

Have you seen the risen Christ lately? We've lived in a Good Friday world, with death breathing down our necks for so long, that probably sounds like a ridiculous question. And yet, it seems to me the record is pretty clear that Good Friday worlds are precisely where our God is most likely to show up. I really like a list of sightings that retired professor of preaching Tom Long offered: "...a daughter lovingly kissing the Facetime image of her father on her phone screen, saying goodbye, and praying with him as he dies alone in the ICU; a COVID nurse at her dinner break, seated by her computer screen with a cup of grape juice and a morsel of bread, participating in an online Eucharist; police officers kneeling alongside protesters at demonstrations following the death of George Floyd, Rayshard Brooks, and Breonna Taylor." (Journal of Preachers, Easter 2021, "Tread Marks and Roses: Glimpses of Resurrection") I think about my own visit to see Evy May recently, and the way in which she reached out her hand, asking me to take it and hold it – the presence of Jesus felt in a simple touch after a year of being told touch was off limits.

One of the subtle pieces of this story that I love is the message the visitor gives to the women that they should go and tell the disciples – and Peter – that the tomb is empty and that Jesus is going ahead of

them to Galilee. I like to think of it as a message Jesus left as he rose and headed out: make sure Peter gets the message that I'm waiting for him in Galilee. Peter who has spent the weekend tormented by that interchange beside the fire, when one after another, people kept asking him if they hadn't seen him with Jesus. Every time he closed his eyes, all he could see was Jesus looking at him, watching his lips form the words, I don't know him! That wounded, haunted Peter is now being invited to come to Galilee, to reunite with Jesus, to accept the grace of the resurrection and the reconciliation made possible by the friend who seems not only able to forgive the unforgivable but even to forget it. That Jesus has gone on to Galilee, and to Wallace, to Osburn and Coeur d'Alene. That Jesus is on the loose and still very much alive and at work in the world. That Jesus invites us to meet him, to see what he's doing, and to join him in the healing and feeding, the teaching and forgiving, the liberating and loving of God's realm.

I can't help wondering how many of you, how many of us came here this morning looking for a resurrected Jesus and an invitation to join up with him in his ongoing work on God's behalf. I'm more than willing to think there's some of that in all of us; heaven knows we need to believe God's active somewhere in the midst of this pandemic-laced, violence-soaked, hostility-based climate we're trying to survive. But I can't help suspecting that some part of us also came here this morning in the hope that we'd find a piece of normal waiting for us. That we'd begin to claim one more piece of the life we've been missing, and put it in place alongside whatever other ones we've been able to collect.

I'll admit that I've struggled with that longing every time I've heard it, and Martin Copenhaver put some of what I'm feeling into words. He wrote: "...my hope is that we will hold out for something more than normal. Getting back to normal, or even trying to, itself may be a kind of denial. Instead, I hope our lives, and even our experience of Easter, will be transformed by what we have gone through. Obviously, Easter is not a return to normal; it is an upending of normal. Easter is not a return to life as we knew it; it is an invitation to a life beyond anything we have yet experienced. Even if there is a normal to go back to, the promise of Easter is that we don't have to settle for normal, because God has so much more in store for us." (Journal for Preachers, Easter 2021, "Preaching on Easter in a Good Friday Season")

I don't think of Jesus as focused on normal, and I'm pretty sure he doesn't plan on going back to anything. The message he left with the messenger is that he's going ahead of us; he's moving forward, continuing the work that he started. The work of healing and feeding, welcoming and forgiving, teaching and transforming, defining neighbor and expanding the notion of what love looks like, of making the presence and vision, will and work of God visible and vital in the world and in the lives of all people. Jesus wasn't raised from the dead in order to reinstate a flawed and frayed sense of normal, but to invite us to join him in a life unlike anything we've yet to experience. He's gone ahead of us to Galilee – and Wallace – and hopes we'll join him there. May it be so. Amen.

HYMN (insert) *"In the Bulb There Is a Flower"*

In the bulb there is a flower; in the seed, an apple tree;
in cocoons, a hidden promise: butterflies will soon be free!
In the cold and snow of winter there's a spring that waits to be,
unrevealed until its season, something God alone can see.

There's a song in every silence, seeking word and melody;
there's a dawn for every darkness, bringing hope to you and me.
From the past will the future; what it holds, a mystery,
unrevealed until its season, something God alone can see.

In our end is our beginning; in our time, infinity;
in our doubt there is believing; in our life, eternity.
In our death, a resurrection; at the last, a victory,
unrevealed until its season, something God alone can see.

PRAYER REQUESTS

PASTORAL PRAYER

Holy and Beloved God, we give you thanks for this long-awaited day, for the joy of returning home to our building, of greeting dear friends, seeing familiar faces – or at least what we can see of them. We give you thanks and praise for the ways in which you have accompanied us through the pandemic, offering comfort and care and the gift of your sustaining Spirit. We thank you for all of the ways in which we have known your presence and felt your love, and ask you to stay by our side as we continue to navigate the challenges and cautions before us. We pray for the health and safety of all, for those who continue to battle COVID or deal with the lingering after-effects of the virus, for the vulnerable and exposed, for medical personnel and teachers, first responders and essential workers, and for all whose lives have been turned upside down and inside out by the tentacles of the pandemic. Continue to watch over, guide, bless and protect all of your children, in this community and far beyond.

On this day, as we celebrate the miracle of the resurrection, we're tempted to point toward bulbs and flowers, caterpillars and butterflies, and yet recognize that there is nothing natural or predictable in the grave-shattering gift of Jesus' rising from the dead. Fill us with awe and wonder, maybe even terror and amazement as we seek to comprehend your power over death and defeat, hatred and evil. A power that refuses to take no for an answer, but carries on until it gets to yes; that lives and breathes in every shade of love, extending welcome, offering forgiveness, planting hope, breathing peace, singing joy, cradling loss, ending oppression. Thank you for your patient willingness to go back to Galilee, back to the beginning in order to start again; take us with you, continue to teach and equip us, lead and empower us, until your love and your light shine through our lives and for all to see.

Holy One, our world and our country are deeply in need of your healing touch and loving presence. As we listen to the horrifying recordings from George Floyd's death last May, we pray for all those whose lives have been cut short because of racism and police violence. As we watch a car ram into barricades in front of the US Capitol, we pray for the safety of all who serve, for police officers and members of the military, for all those who live each day wondering if their loved one will make it home again. Show us how to bring an end to violence. To build bridges of cooperation and kindness while tearing down walls of hostility and division. To tend the needs of the vulnerable and build a table big enough for all to gather and dine. Wrap us in your wisdom and courage, patience and humility, strength and mercy, commitment to the truth and belief in the power of love.

Hear our prayers, spoken and unspoken. And hear us as we pray together with the words that Jesus taught: Our Father...

PRAYER OF OUR SAVIOR (debts)

OFFERING

This is that time in the service when we traditionally pass offering plates. Because of cautions against passing things from hand to hand, we've put the plates in the narthex and invite you to leave your gift as you depart. I also want to take this opportunity to thank you for your amazing support of the church and our ministries during the weeks when we met separately. Week after week, month after month, you not only met the church's financial needs, but you also contributed to the Emergency Aid Fund, Food

Bank, N-Sid-Sen, Wallace Christmas Fund, One Great Hour of Sharing, the UCC Christmas Fund and the church's boiler fund. And I'm sure I don't begin to know the ways you shared yourself and your spiritual gifts with those who are a part of our community. God is honored when we share what we have received with others, and the church is strengthened. Thank you for your generosity and your ongoing support.

PRAYER OF DEDICATION (in unison)

Wonderful, amazing God, we thank you that you have raised Jesus Christ from the dead, bringing us the promise of new life. With the dawning of this new day, may we awake to new opportunities to love and serve you and witness to Christ whom you have raised. Use us, and our gifts, to your glory. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

HYMN No. 226 *"The Day of Resurrection"*

The day of resurrection! Earth, tell it out abroad,
The Passover of gladness, The Passover of God.
From death to life eternal, From earth unto the sky,
Our Christ hath brought us over With hymns of victory.

Now let the heavens be joyful! Let earth her song begin!
The world resound in triumph, And all that is therein;
Let all things seen and unseen Their notes of gladness blend;
For Christ the Lord hath risen, Our Joy that hath no end.

BENEDICTION

May the God who shakes heaven and earth,
whom death could not contain,
who lives to disturb and heal us,
bless you with power to go forth
and proclaim the gospel. Amen.