

UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST CONGREGATIONAL
Wallace, Idaho

Alice M.C. Ling, Pastor

May 8, 2022

Fourth Sunday of Easter

PRELUDE “Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing”

WELCOME AND ANNOUNCEMENTS

CALL TO WORSHIP (based on Psalm 23)

In the darkest valley,

at the banquet table;

in the hard work of life,

at the moments of ease;

in our day-to-day reality,

at times set aside—

like this time, now—

for worship, for listening, for paying attention;

with every step we take:

goodness and mercy follow us;

All: **our cups overflow.**

(Joanna Harader, <https://spaciousfaith.com/>)

HYMN No. 61 “Lavish Love, Abundant Beauty”

Lavish love, abundant beauty, Gracious gifts for heart and hand,

Life that fills the soul and senses – All burst forth at Your command.

Lord, our Lord, Eternal Father, Great Creator, God and Friend,

Boundless power gave full expression To Your love which knows no end.

Who am I that You should love me, Meet my every need from birth?

Why invest Yourself so fully In a creature made of earth?

In Your living heart You planned me, Fashioned me with greatest care;

Through my soul You breathed Your Spirit, Planted You own image there.

PRAYER OF INVOCATION (in unison) (based on Psalm 23)

God, our shepherd — Restorer of our souls — The one who calls us to nap in green pastures —

We enter into this moment of worshipful gathering trusting that you will guide us along the paths

of righteousness. Wherever we may be in this world, let us know the comforting presence of your

rod and staff. We are expectant, O God, that our fears will fade, that our cups will overflow, and

that your goodness and mercy will accompany us in this hour and beyond. Now, let us worship

you in spirit and in truth. Amen.

(Rev. Mia M. McClain, *UCC Worship Ways*)

SCRIPTURE READING

Psalm 23

The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want.

He makes me lie down in green pastures;

he leads me beside still waters;

he restores my soul.

He leads me in right paths

for his name’s sake.

Even though I walk through the darkest valley,

I fear no evil,

for you are with me;
your rod and your staff,
they comfort me.

You prepare a table before me
in the presence of my enemies;
you anoint my head with oil;
my cup overflows.

Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me
all the days of my life,
and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD
my whole life long.

Acts 9:36-43

Now in Joppa there was a disciple whose name was Tabitha, which in Greek is Dorcas. She was devoted to good works and acts of charity. At that time she became ill and died. When they had washed her, they laid her in a room upstairs. Since Lydda was near Joppa, the disciples, who heard that Peter was there, sent two men to him with the request, "Please come to us without delay." So Peter got up and went with them, and when he arrived, they took him to the room upstairs. All the widows stood beside him, weeping and showing tunics and other clothing that Dorcas had made while she was with them. Peter put all of them outside, and then he knelt down and prayed. He turned to the body and said, "Tabitha, get up." Then she opened her eyes, and seeing Peter, she sat up. He gave her his hand and helped her up. Then calling the saints and widows, he showed her to be alive. This became known throughout Joppa, and many believed in the Lord. Meanwhile, he stayed in Joppa for some time with a certain Simon, a tanner.

SERMON

Do you know anybody who won't take no for an answer? I don't mean the scary kind who forces themselves or their will on you, the ones to whom we respond, What part of "no" don't you understand? Though if you do know one or more of those, we should talk. I also don't mean the kind-hearted, enthusiastic person who is so good at recruiting volunteers or signing people up for committee positions that they come away shaking their heads and saying, Who can say no to Archie? Of course, I'm in. No, I mean the kind of person who looks at an obstacle and sees a challenge; who looks at a mountain of a problem and dives in, breaking it down and taking it on, one piece at a time; who reaches the end of the road only to climb over the bank and head out across the field. Who grows up hearing that

Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall
Humpty Dumpty had a great fall
All the king's horses and all the king's men
Couldn't put Humpty together again

and in response says, give me those pieces, let me see what I can do. Do you know anybody like that?

The book of Acts is full of those kind of people, people whose whole world has been turned upside down by Jesus' resurrection; and now they've been set on fire and put to work by the Holy Spirit. They believe that the God who created the world and raised Jesus from the dead is still active in the world, bringing healing to the diseased, hope to those in despair, and life where death seems to reign. We've had more than 2,000 years to get all that hopeful enthusiasm under control, and thoroughly dampened with a serious dose of reality – if not extinguished altogether. Which makes the book of Acts a challenge for us. Presbyterian pastor Joseph Harvard says, "To enter into the world described in Acts, we do not need to leave our minds at the door, but it is necessary for us to accept the assumption that God is still working through God's Spirit in the lives of people and in human society to restore this

broken world.” (*Feasting on the Word, Year C, Volume 2*, page 428) Is that an assumption that works for you: that God is still active in the world, sending the Spirit to stir up people and work in, through and around us to help heal and restore this broken world? The people in the book of Acts believed that Humpty had a future, that he could be put back together again; not by any of them on their own, but together and with the help of the same God who raised Jesus from the dead. Throughout this book, we read stories of conversions, healings and life after death, about a community of people empowered by the Holy Spirit and no longer content with the status quo.

Take this morning's reading for example. There was a woman in Joppa whose name was Tabitha, or if you like her Greek name better, you can call her Dorcas; both names mean “Gazelle”. Luke tells us, “she was devoted to good works and acts of charity.” He also tells us she was a disciple, and this is the only time in the entire New Testament that the feminine form of the word “disciple” is used. Somebody forgot to tell her that women couldn't be leaders in the church, so without that knowledge, she got busy sewing up a storm, dressing the most vulnerable in tunics and other pieces of clothing, as well as serving Jesus throughout the community. As soon as Luke introduces us to her, he goes on to tell us that she served others, and then she became ill and died. We're not told that there was anything extraordinary or unusual about her death; just that she died.

Interestingly, some of the folks around her did what any of us do at the hour of death: they got busy tending to details. They washed her body and laid her out in an upstairs room as the first steps in funeral preparations. But there were others there who weren't as willing to accept things at face value, so they sent for Peter, with a word of urgency that said he should come as fast as possible. When he arrived, the house was filling with friends of Tabitha's, widows whose every day dress had come from the needle of this gracious woman. Each of them brought a treasured example of what she had made for them, and one by one, they showed off her handiwork and how comfortable and warm she made them feel. Peter asked them all to leave the room, and then he knelt down and prayed beside her lifeless body. We aren't told anything about what he said, only that when he was done praying, he turned to the body and said, Tabitha, get up – very much like when Jesus said to Jairus' daughter, Talitha, get up. At which point, she opened her eyes and sat up; Peter offered her his hand and helped her stand. And then he called to the widows and saints and showed them that she was alive again.

It's a strange turn of events according to our understanding of life and the way things work. And it's not like she won't die again, just like Lazarus did and Peter will and we all will. We're not even told what she did with the time that was given back to her, and for her to use in the community. What we are told is that the Spirit of God who raised Jesus to new life also raised this faithful woman – a woman who was deeply loved and who was the lynch pin of the church's ministry to the most vulnerable and needy among them. Her acts of compassion were central to the church's care for one another, and her death was a significant interruption in that ministry; and so the Spirit of God raised her up. We're reminded yet again of Mary's song about how God will lift up the lowly. And we hear words that Paul has yet to write to the fledgling church in Corinth, saying that there is a new distribution of power afoot, in which God uses what is lowly and despised in the world to bring about a new reality.

What we have in this story is a community that doesn't know how to take no for an answer, that is so firmly and deeply rooted in the conviction that the God who raised Jesus from the dead is still active in the world, bringing healing to the diseased, hope to those in despair, and life where death appears to reign. They lived a resurrection hope, which led them to reach out and seek healing and wholeness, not just for Tabitha, but for themselves as a community.

I've seen a similar conviction in African-American communities, in which men and women across the generations have refused to listen to words swirling around them about their place and their sufferings. Slaves created spirituals as a way to sing the truth of how profoundly God loved them and the freedom

that was waiting for them. They wove coded language through some of those songs and then sang them to each other, and sometimes right in front of their masters, and then later that very night escaped the chains of slavery. Sharecroppers risked home, work and life itself to learn how to read in order to register to vote. Rosa Parks refused to take her place at the back of the bus because she was sick and tired of being sick and tired – and because she'd heard that the God of Moses and of Jesus was at work creating a new reality. And these days, fathers of teenagers walk the halls of local high schools in order to interrupt the violence of school shootings, to encourage students to get themselves to class, and to return laughter to the halls and cafeteria. Police officers pair up with disadvantaged students and encourage them to learn and practice, try and grow their way out of the violence and death that surround them.

For the past couple of months, we've also been witnessing a similar mindset in Ukraine. They knew, we knew, Russia knew that they didn't stand a chance against Russia's power and force; and yet they said no to the threat of an invading army. They said, let us see what we can do with the pieces of what we have. We won't run, and we won't roll over, and we won't crumble; we'll stand fast for our homeland, for what we value and for what we believe. And then cooks started showing up to stir pots of food and distribute water. And doctors came to help with health care and injuries, and volunteers led convoys to safety and shelter. Children held bake sales and strangers opened the doors of their homes. Strollers and toys were left at the border to greet people who had left home with nothing. And musicians played and sang their protest in the middle of the rubble. Even in the midst of heart stopping destruction and death, we're witnessing the power of a community of people saying no to war and destruction, and yes to the heart of life and the power of hope.

I've done Tabitha – and us – a disservice by talking about war, racism and violence. That's the stuff I see on the news every night, and most of the time, I come away a combination of furious and heart broken – not empowered or fired up to stare death down. But Tabitha's work was smaller pieces than that; she sewed clothes for those who needed a tunic that wasn't falling apart at the seams. That's something I can do. If I can fill my grandson's request for a new fleece vest and daughter-in-law's request for oversize mittens, I can sew vests for cold bodies and mittens for cold hands; I can also make granola and bread, and a whole bunch of us know how to make chili, cornbread and cookies. We know how to send cards and plant flowers, deliver groceries and donate to the food bank, offer rides and pick up trash. That's all we're asked to do: one piece at a time, one step at a time, one no at a time, trusting all the while that God is still active in the world, sending the Spirit to stir up people and work in, through and around us to help heal and restore this broken world.

Let me close by quoting Harvard again, as he asks, "Have you ever met Tabitha? I have known her in every church I have ever served. She has no wealth or power except her deep and abiding commitment to give expression to God's compassion for those in need. She is tenacious about practicing her faith by serving others. She prays a simple prayer: 'Lord, help us to help those in need, and make us sensitive to what they really need.' Tabitha's work is too important to die, and I am grateful that the story records God's agreement as well, by empowering Peter to keep her alive. Tabitha is still alive in almost every church I know." (page 430) Even here. Even through us. Thanks be to God.

HYMN No. 468 *"The King of Love My Shepherd Is"*

The King of love my Shepherd is, Whose goodness faileth never,
I nothing lack if I am His And He is mine forever.

Where streams of living water flow My ransomed soul He leadeth,
And where the verdant pastures grow With food celestial feedeth.

In death's dark vale I fear no ill With Thee, dear Lord, beside me;
Thy rod and staff my comfort still, Thy cross before to guide me.

PRAYER REQUESTS

PASTORAL PRAYER

Holy God, Source of all Love and Giver of all Life, as we gather before you on this Mother's Day, we give you thanks for those beloved ones who have nurtured and taught us, encouraged and comforted us, believed in and blessed us, coached and cheered us until we blossomed into the people we had it in us to be. Many of those people were our mothers, some of them by birth, others by adoption or marriage; still others were teachers, coaches, neighbors, friends and friends' parents. Thank you for any and for all who have invested themselves in our health and wholeness, growth and gifts.

We also lift up before you the wounds and longing that are part of the fabric of this day: those who grieve the absence of a mother or the premature death of a child; those unable to conceive or give birth; those separated by broken or strained relations, by an abundance of miles or the violence of war. Pour out your healing love on each and on all. Where reconciliation is possible, open our hearts to give and receive of grace. Where change is required, turn us around and point us in the way we should walk. Where grief overwhelms, wrap us in the healing of time, the peace of your presence, the vision to see signs of new life and the emergence of hope.

We pray for all those in need of healing for body, mind or spirit; for those who continue to suffer from Covid, patients as well as medical personnel; for those who grieve and caregivers who grow weary; employers who struggle to fill vacancies and workers who look for work that will allow them to care for those they love; for the needs of the homeless and those who struggle to clear encampments and keep cities safe. As tornadoes continue to destroy and fires continue to consume, we pray for those in harms' way, and give thanks for all who assist and support throughout and in the aftermath of the disaster. For the war that continues to rage in Ukraine, for those who lead, those who fight, those who flee, those seeking shelter in basements, those putting themselves at risk while tending to the needs of others. We pray for our country, our democracy, and all that holds us together as one. Holy God, as that fabric frays and strains, help us to seek your wisdom and your way, to turn away from the hostilities that divide us, and instead work to build bridges of cooperation and community; help us to grow in respect for one another and, together, seek the common good. Infuse us with love, ground us in peace and lead us with your light.

Hear our prayers, spoken and unspoken. And hear us as we join our voices in the prayer that Jesus' taught his friends when they asked him how they should pray: Our Father...

PRAYER OF OUR SAVIOR (debts)

OFFERING

The offering is a time, week after week, when we are invited to bring our gifts before God, to strengthen the church's ministry in this time and place, to put a portion of what we have to work spreading the love and grace of God in our community and beyond. On the second Sunday of the month, that invitation includes gifts to our Emergency Aid Fund, through which we respond to those in need around us. Your gifts allow me to say yes when I receive requests for a tank of gas, a hot meal, a place to sleep, or some of the other needs in and around our community. And beyond that, beyond what you may choose to give to our church, the offering is also a time when all of us are encouraged to consider the ways in which we can share a portion of who we are and what we have with others: gifts of our time, our resources, our care and attention. All of these gifts and so many more work together to share the good news that God is indeed still at work among us, and the Spirit still moves in and through us to help heal and restore this broken world.

PRAYER OF DEDICATION (in unison)

We dedicate the gifts that are shared for the fortification of the beloved community. Let our gifts do justice in the world. Let them be a sign of our belief in the God who saves, heals, and sets free. Let these gifts, and the works of our hands and feet, be a blessing to all in need. Amen.

(Rev. Mia M. McClain, *UCC Worship Ways*)

HYMN No. 462 *“Savior, Like a Shepherd Lead Us”*

Savior, like a shepherd lead us, Much we need Thy tender care;
In Thy pleasant pastures feed us, For our use Thy folds prepare:
Blessed Jesus, blessed Jesus, Thou hast bought us, Thine we are;
Blessed Jesus, blessed Jesus, Thou hast bought us, Thine we are.

Early let us seek Thy favor; Early let us do Thy will;
Blessed Lord and only Savior, With Thy love our bosoms fill:
Blessed Jesus, blessed Jesus, Thou hast loved us, love us still;
Blessed Jesus, blessed Jesus, Thou hast loved us, love us still.

BENEDICTION

Let us go forth knowing that we are led by God, that we are sheltered by God, that God never leaves nor forsakes us even in the bleakest valley. In God, may we hunger and thirst no more, and may a peace that surpasses all understanding abide with us, now and forever more. Amen.

(Rev. Mia M. McClain, *UCC Worship Ways*)