



First Congregational Church of Ashfield ❖ United Church of Christ
Creating Community, Welcoming All

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Rev. David Jones, Minister

Sunday, April 17, 2022 Easter Sunday Sermon “From a stick came light” Rev. David Jones

I rushed out yesterday morning so caught up in worry about this sermon, that I barely looked up to notice my neighbor and his best friend, who were getting ready to do a hard, physical task that obviously could have used another pair of hands.

But thankfully my neighbor broke this spell. Before he and his friend could lift and move his heavy and tricky-to-handle truck cap, they needed to move the parked cars to make some space. Well aware of my Saturday sermon routine, my neighbor gently asked if I didn't mind moving our car that was in the way before I left, so that they could carry on. “Of course I could,” no trouble at all. And then after I did, beginning to walk away all over again, my neighbor's wife came out and waved, and asked if I could maybe help her husband and his friend with the truck cap.

She never should have had to ask. I should note that though my neighbor and his friend have a little more gray in their hair than I do, they're always up to something, one project or another. They were fully capable of doing this work on their own. But why should they have to when they have neighbors? Embarrassed that it didn't occur to me on my own, I stopped for all of 5 minutes it took to make this heavy task much lighter.

Then just as I was about to leave to manage their next project on their own, they told me about how just the previous night they had been discussing this whole resurrection thing at some length. They weren't sure it would be appropriate to tell me what they discussed. I urged them to; maybe it would help me. Both of them have some background in churches, but my neighbor is more a Buddhist than a Christian I think. Well, they explained that in their discussion they weren't puzzled by the facts of the case, they weren't wondering how Jesus came back to life or in what form or in what sense he was alive again, they weren't detectives out to solve the mystery of how a heavy boulder—much heavier than a truck cap—could be moved, or why Jesus' side was still pierced when he would visit Thomas and the others.

Rather, with a mischievous glint in his eye, my neighbor was only hung up on the ‘why’ of it. Not why did Jesus die. Not why he somehow both knew this would come, the cross and the resurrection, yet still anguished over it. Instead, my neighbor and his friend wondered why would the Son of God, his place in heaven assured, eternal rest and everlasting peace awaiting him—after everything he had been through, all that he suffered, all that seemed to come to ruin in his life and mission—why on earth would he come back at all?

This is a very good question. In the weeks ahead, the gospel accounts may help us explore it. But for now, on Easter Sunday, with the promises of Spring sprawling out before us, I want to just focus on what Matthew and Luke have told us this morning, on how Mary Magdalene went and found the tomb emptied like the Israelites once found the sea parted.

There is a big difference between a closed tomb with nothing in it and an open one that has been found empty. Sometimes I think this is a difference we rush past. It is so easy to get caught up in the mystery or worry, to become enamored of the discovery itself, the purported facts...It is a shocking and wonderful and confounding discovery.

But we make this discovery every Spring, do we not? That a fruit should fall and pass away, becoming a seed and a tree, is beautiful and staggering and inspiring, but it is hardly remarkable. It may never become mundane or rote to us here in New England, not after long, cold winters. The splendor of new life, new warmth, never diminishes against the long odds of snow and ice. We cannot wait for the hills to turn green, to suddenly pop like neon. It will be like a miracle again, one we longed for without really understanding the depth of our longing. Often we don't realize how drained we have become until suddenly our body has been reacquainted with sleep, or until it experiences the very same grace of warm light that the hills do.

But Spring happens every year. It does not teach us that beauty is unique, that we should dwell on the idea of it; it teaches us the opposite, that beauty is all around us and inevitable—that every body is beautiful, that every season is beautiful, that every day is glorious; and that far from an idea, beauty must be beheld as reality, as self-evident. We should dwell not in the idea of trees but actually under them and in their shade. So this can not be what captivates us about the Day of Resurrection. This can not explain why this Christian story persists, how it whispers to us even now.

The facts of resurrection, however beautiful, must be secondary. What is primary in this ancient story is how, through the story, we can come to see so clearly that we each of us have an active role to play in resurrection, that merely beholding nature or history is not all we are made for. Life is constantly dying into new life, but the special thing happening today is the choice being made to witness what happens when the Creator's beautiful reality is combined with the creature's beautiful faith.

The Jewish philosopher Walter Benjamin, who perhaps disagrees with some of us about the meaning of this resurrection story, once described this combination of beauty and faith as a "weak Messianic power". He wrote,

"There is a secret agreement between past generations and the present one. Our coming was expected on earth. Like every generation that preceded us, we have been endowed with a weak Messianic power, a power to which the past has a claim. That claim cannot be settled cheaply."

The events of Palm Sunday cannot be settled cheaply. That triumphant scene at the city gates, where the great mass of humanity is stirred to shout hosannas alongside the stones, celebrating the past achievements of the mission to make justice and peace a reality on earth as in heaven. But we saw last week that these shouts are also in anticipation. They are also for what Jesus and teachers and leaders like him will help bring about next, including the end of their hunger and suffering, the end of their oppression and slights against their dignity.

You see, the people have caught a fresh glimpse, have seen a new fragment of the vision of the peaceful moment that has long been proclaimed by the prophets and sought out through the wilderness. We get ever closer to this peaceful moment when we, as Jesus and John and other teachers were doing at this time, are willing to attend to and confront the not-peaceful present. Benjamin says, we the people are sharing in a very old dream of liberation, and those who come before us live vicariously in us.

When Jesus is then arrested, tortured, humiliated, finally killed on the cross, the powerful had the meager hope that this would be the end of the vision; that this would be proof the peaceful moment would not come. That the lesson of the cross would be resignation, defeat, the end of the people's big hope. That after all, the people of Jerusalem and Galilee—urban poor and servants, rural farmers and fishermen, tax collectors and sinners—would never raise their hosannas again. Jesus was put to death to kill forever what Jesus and the descendants of Moses were all about.

But there is a problem for Rome. That same vision of peace Jesus arrived in Jerusalem with, it turns out it wasn't different from nature's resurrection every Spring. It too stretches back to Moses and a parted sea; it too stretches back to Abraham, to Sarah and Hagar, and their unlikely descendants. And it stretches forward, to New England abolitionists like Emerson, to Howard Thurman and Dr. King and rabbi Abraham Heschel, to Harriet and Rosa; it stretches to the millions of young people in our country who resurrected George Floyd by also saying, "We can't breathe!" It stretches to a small town called Ashfield, that refuses to let the fall of Kabul foreclose on the future of the Ahmadi family; to Pat Thayer

and the Food Pantry volunteers who take the Lord's Prayer for daily bread seriously as an unbreakable promise; to Christian Smalls at Amazon who won't give up on his co-workers; to our own lay leaders and choir members who consecrate and re-consecrate this church, who give time and talent and treasure to fight for all Creation. Rome has a big problem, emperors and governors have a problem: the vision of peace survived and it left the tomb, and it is as alive today in each of us as our ancestors are.

This story, the Day of Resurrection that we have woken up to, is about seeing and remembering and repeating the decision to roll away the boulder, or choosing, having found it replaced already, to recognize that a divine will is at work, that beauty is not an accident of particles but the vestments of truth and the undying presence of the loving Parental God, drawing us ever on toward the peaceful moment.

So Easter Sunday is not a matter or not only a matter of believing in this Christian story; it is a matter of hitching ourselves to the unbeaten, undefeated, unstoppable faith in the coming victory of life; it is a matter of choosing faith in the way of peace over the way of violence, justice over injustice, and housing for the unhoused, food for the hungry, humility for the proud; faith even in the toppling of the powerful to make space for the rising up of the powerless. Easter Sunday is a matter of faith in freedom for all who are imprisoned, and self-determination for all who are invaded or conquered, regardless of whether that is in Palestine, in Ukraine, or in Afghanistan. Resurrection is all around us in nature every day, in every season; the seed and the water harbor the same Eden God first placed us in. Easter Sunday is about faith that one day we will belong there again.

A priest named Ernesto Cardenal once wrote, "Evolution has a frightening velocity; from a stick came light." The resurrection story draws us into an understanding not merely of how particles relate and react to one another, but draws us into our very own cosmic place; it shows us that we are not doomed to be bystanders to history, nor even only discoverers and surveyors of the present. It shows that we can become active participants and even co-authors of resurrection. That we are co-creators of the future. 'From a stick came light,' but this story shows us that it is we who can make fire, that fire resides in our own hands.

And if we can make fire, I think we can end the people's suffering, we can end poverty, we can end racism; if we can make fire, I think we can see gay and bi and trans people set free. And we can end all needless suffering and loneliness in a country of immense wealth, on a planet of incredible abundance. The choice of resurrection—regardless of religion—is ours to make, for God also gave *us* the power to retrieve the light from any cross.

So today let us remember that it is our ancestors whose faith has given us resurrection. Their teacher and Lord was taken from them. Their God was taken. But they went and found his tomb was empty. So why did Jesus come back? Because his disciples' faith brought him back. Because his disciples could still hear the shouts and the cries of the people. Let each of us hear the cries today. For it is today that Christ is Risen.

Alleluia and amen.