



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

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Rev. David Jones, Minister

Sunday, April 24, 2022

Sermon “Holy Hikes”

Rev. David Jones

On Friday afternoon, members and friends of our church and St. John’s joined together to take a ‘holy hike’ to mark Earth Day. At first our walk on the Bullitt Pebble Trail felt like any walk in the woods. Surrounded by nature on a beautiful day, each of us seemed to walk on our own, each at our own pace, each studying the trees, then the mayflowers, and the spring beauty. But then we stopped, and Judy shared a poem written by Mary Priscilla Howes. I don’t have the poem in front of me to share—another day I’ll ask Judy to read it during worship. But the poem did something to our group. Many of those walking had long histories in Ashfield; many of us were new to town. But this poem had such a strong sense of place, and it connected our walk to a long line of lovers of nature and those who have loved this rural community. When we got to the pebble from which the trail takes its name (which for those who don’t know, is not really a pebble but a massive stone that looks like it was wedged between the trees) we were led to look closely and carefully. And we found initials carved from a time long ago; these seemed to mimic the poetry we had just heard, giving nature a place in a person’s life—in their past and future—transforming even a lifeless stone into a beating heart in the life of Ashfield.

The poem and the stone bonded our little group of hikers. And suddenly stories could long be contained and leapt into the air. Stories of the Howes family, of Ambassador Bullitt, of people on our walk like Susan Todd who had helped make hiking trails and sidewalks in Ashfield a reality. And there was also lament for lost trees, and wonder for those that had survived being struck by lightning; and there was appreciation for strong and sturdy maples perched on a rocky hillside. Our hike was taken in the name and honor of the earth, and was a call to care for Creation. But it also became and was unmistakably a walk in the name of Ashfield, where a common history, we found, was not past but present, and not finished but underway.

In our gospel reading today, in the evening on the first day of the week, Jesus visits the disciples. He appears as himself, and stands among them. But something is also different; he comes and stands among them despite locked doors. He is at once the same and new, not only the Son but the embodiment of the Spirit. He greets his siblings with peace and he commissions them. He draws so close to breathe on them, giving them the Holy Spirit. Reflecting his transformation, Jesus focuses his teaching on how the Spirit works, how it works through us and with us, how it enlists us in the process of forgiveness, how we can choose to spread forgiveness or block it.

This is a pastoral moment. Here the disciples are gathered, huddled, behind locked doors, trembling in fear. And into this uneasy moment, Jesus arrives in the name of peace, and comforts and teaches them—and calls them into a new and greater power than they imagined they had. They are not only followers, Jesus has come to say, but co-creators, co-workers in the Spirit. Sadly Thomas is not there with them when this moment happens. It is only after Jesus has left that the disciples have the opportunity to get together with Thomas and tell him what they have seen and experienced.

After they’ve shared this good news, it seems Thomas is wary. For Thomas, it will simply not do for Jesus to have become like the Holy Spirit. For Thomas, this is only truly good news if the Jesus who has come back to them still has the wounds of his killing and death. Thomas has no interest in a resurrection that erases or denies or obscures what Jesus was made to endure. His faith depends on the marks of his all too human life. It is the wounds of Jesus that are the evidence of who and what he was.

In his life Jesus stood up for the poor and oppressed. It was Jesus' complete solidarity with the poor and oppressed that proved to Thomas he was the long prophesied suffering servant or messiah. If the resurrected Jesus is also the God who is love, he must still stand in solidarity with the wounded. And solidarity with the wounded means still being wounded himself.

So it is not that Thomas does not believe Jesus could be alive again in some manner. He does not disbelieve what the other disciples have seen and shared. It is rather that, for Thomas, this resurrected Jesus is only worthy of his belief if he is truly the one who followed love all the way to the cross. If the Holy Spirit and how it works has anything to do with us now in a world that has not been reconciled, that is not yet fair and just, then the Jesus of our faith cannot be a wishful thought, not an ideal, not unblemished or unwounded. Jesus must still tell the truth even in his resurrection. Thomas is not doubting the man who he followed; he is drawing a line or establishing a criteria, a litmus test, to determine if the teachings of a resurrected Jesus are as truthful as that man who was crucified.

When Jesus returns to visit again, Thomas is there. And Jesus shows Thomas and all the disciples what is most important about the reality of his resurrection: indeed, the wound at his side remains. He is showing Thomas that, yes, he was risen but he was not falsified. He is still the Prince of Peace of those people who shouted in joy at the gates of what will become a new kind of city. He is still the suffering servant, still the man in black, whose work is not finished—whose wound must remain—until all the wounds of the world are treated and healed. Jesus is not ashamed to show his wound; Thomas is not ashamed to touch it. It is this—this fearless and indelible communion—that prompts Thomas to address the resurrected Jesus as his “Lord and God.”

Like these disciples, we are commissioned by the Spirit to care for all God's Creation. But to do this, to believe like Thomas, we must be brave enough to witness the scars and wounds that the powerful have made. We must insist on seeing that even the new life of spring is wounded, and that this woundedness is not superficial, it is not vanity, it is not a trick. It is the decisive evidence that Creation exists in solidarity with all of us who are wounded; or as Jesus said, we must see that “even the stones would shout” if the people did not. The resurrected Jesus is worthy of our witness because the resurrected Jesus is also the man who lived and died for those who are denied freedom and dignity, for all who are made to suffer in this life; the resurrected Jesus is worthy of our witness because he is also the one who was crucified beside the poor and hungry people of this earth. And Creation is likewise worthy of witness—of protection and renewal and resurrection, of our adoration and reverence—because it too bears the marks of this world's violence and greed. Resurrection and the Spring may bring a new day and new possibility for Creation, but they can only be trusted because they have not forgotten what came before; they bear its wounds.

So it is fitting that yesterday morning, the day after the hike, a small group of us spent the morning breathing on the earth at Bug Hill Farm. We dug holes for the fence posts that will protect and help to grow a new, organic and sustainable community garden. This is our concern and Creation's. Like people of faith and goodwill, Creation does not understand how in all this earthly abundance, God's own children are going hungry. All Creation does is love us and provide for us, like Jesus did in his ministry; yet some of us are not provided for. It is not Creation that has decided some should go hungry while others go full. Creation agrees with Jesus' teachings on the Plain, when he said blessed are those who hunger now, and woe to those who are full now. We and Creation are commissioned for the work of forgiveness, for the work of making justice and peace and equality for all real; for healing the wounds of those who have lived, those who live now, those who will live.

I learned on Friday that a holy hike is different from another kind of hike. And the vision of the resurrected Jesus is different from some ideal. A holy hike connects God's Creation to the life of a community. A holy hike marvels at a massive stone and then searches it for hidden and faded initials. A holy hike sees how Creation both serves us and is served by us. A holy hike tells stories, makes history and meaning, looks around and ahead to a new way of living that cherishes God in the same way God cherishes us. A holy hike transmutes nature into a home, makes the trees poignant and peaceful; a holy hike listens and speaks, and commissions us all into the powerful work of the Spirit, of life and good food

and dignity for all creatures. And the resurrected Jesus is not an ideal, not a vision of someone who never really suffered after all, not a vision of someone who only appeared to be real, who only appeared to eat and drink and laugh, who only seemed to bless the hungry and bring down woe on the rich. No, the resurrected Jesus is the same as the man who lived and died because he loved so much. The resurrected Jesus is the same as the God who is love, who has come to commission each of us, until the good news he taught is as real on earth as it is in heaven.

Alleluia and amen.