



First Congregational Church (UCC) of Ashfield
429 Main Street – Ashfield MA 01330
Creating Community, Welcoming All

Sermon April 25, 2021 “Practice Resurrection” Rev. Leslie Fraser

Last week, our pastor, David, walked us through some of the thorns and brambles of God’s revelations and Jesus’s undying love that Eastertide—the season between Easter and Pentecost—brings. His sermon spoke to the questioners and questioning believers that will grace these pews again, when we gather together, and who pop up now in our Zoom rectangles.

Did Jesus die and rise from the dead? Did he invite wondering Thomas to touch the scar that Roman soldiers made in his side? Did Jesus show up again, hungry, and ask the disciples for something to eat? Did he come back to tell the disciples to heal and teach as he had done?

David led us into worship with this quote from Lydia Wylie-Kellerman, and I bring it to us again for another journey into scripture with questioners, believers, and questioning believers.

Do I actually believe in the true reality of the resurrection? Did Jesus come back to life? I don’t know. Does it matter?

What I do know is that I would stake my life on it. I believe in mystery and wonder. I believe that systems of murder and oppression do not have the final word. I believe in life, in compost, in the seedling lingering under the snow. I believe in the provocative and dangerous power of resurrection. I believe that resurrection is something we practice with our lives. I believe it looks like justice. I believe it is born of struggle.

In his marvelous “Manifesto: The Mad Farmer Liberation Front,” after naming a myriad of ways to love into the next millennium, Wendell Berry implores us to ask the questions that have no answers, and to lose our minds: *Leave it as a sign to mark the false trail, the way you didn’t go. Be like the fox who makes more tracks than necessary, some in the wrong direction. Practice resurrection.*

Both of these writers help us lift the veil on the liminality of letting go—evolution is a struggle, especially if we don’t lose or leave our minds and embrace the truth that love never dies. But if we practice resurrection, in losing one form of life, we give birth to another.

This is the season we are in—resurrection—and it will always be a mystery. We will always be offered its possibility, and the simple (not easy) options of love: eat, pray, feed, house, nurture, help, serve. That’s the purpose of life, that’s our purpose, why we’re here, why God’s here.

But let’s dip into today’s mad farmer’s compost and see what the earthworms have to offer.

We’ll start with the First Letter/Epistle of John. We don’t know who “John” is, though the three Johanne letters, Revelations, and the Gospel of John seem to be from the same “school” of writers. They are among the last writings added to the canon of the New Testament. The first letter was probably written in Ephesus between 95-110 CE. It was addressed to several Johannine groups, a mix of Jews, pagans, and gentiles, who were seen as “false prophets” and denounced as Antichrist, because they denied the divine incarnation of Jesus, causing a large secession of followers.

I mention this history not to bore you, but because if we’re exploring scripture, it’s important to know who wrote it, when it was written, to what audience, and for what purpose. If we don’t know the story behind the text, the story of the text, and where and why it traveled through time and place, how will we be able to contextualize it in our lives now?

“The tools and stories of the past are only as useful as they are adaptable for the present times,” writes Grace Aheron, another questioning believer, in *Geez* magazine. “If reading the Bible is a cross-cultural exercise, so then too, for most of us, is reading theology. Liberation theology taught me to whisper, *for you, for you, for you* after claims made by men about God or life.” {Try this with today’s epistle: “And this is his commandment, that we should believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ” *for you, for you, for you.*} Grace Aheron says that liberation theology “taught me to answer, *for me? for me? for me?*, weighing these claims as questions against my own life, itself a source of legitimate knowledge and power.”

Let’s bring that question, *for me?*, into today’s scriptures. John’s lessons on love and the necessity of linking the commandments with the divinity of Jesus as the Son of God is addressed to people who had been believers but were now questioners and questioning believers. Does his letter resonate with questioning believers today, speaking truth *for me? for me? for me?* Can we lay down our lives for love, so that God’s love may abide in us? Can we love, “not in word or speech, but in truth and action,” as evidence that God lives in our hearts? Is belief in Jesus’s incarnation, resurrection, and the Jewish commandments he taught necessary for God’s love to abide in us? Is it true *for me? for me? for me?*

Today’s reading from the Gospel of John—a different John, written around the same time—is directed to nonbelievers, probably written within a community of Jews who believed Jesus to be the Messiah. It’s the mystical gospel—identifying Jesus as the Logos, as Word, as Wisdom. John’s words about Jesus as the good shepherd are layered with meaning, helping us ponder how to lay down and then take up life.

If God is a verb, and love is what we do rather than what we say, then what does that mean for Jesus as a shepherd? In the act of shepherding, what is he offering? John tells us that “the good shepherd lays down his life for his sheep.” But what is this “laying down” and “taking up” of life in the context of a people expecting Jesus to show up any moment and save them?

After waiting, many generations, for Christ’s return, some Johannine questioning believers were restless and on the verge of unbelieving, anxious for their Messiah to bring God’s kingdom/kingdom to Earth. John offers them a story about the good shepherd, laying his life down for the sheep in and outside of his fold. “I lay down my life in order to take it up again.” And the shepherd does this of their own accord—self-actualized and empowered to lay it down and take it up again. Is this a new way to understand Christ’s death and the Second Coming?

Now we wonder, nearly 2000 years later, are these words, this logos, this wisdom *for me? for me? for me?* Do I lay down my life, my ego, my privilege, and what do I take up? What do we, made in the image and kinship of God, lay down our lives for? For love? For justice? For good? Is Jesus, the shepherd, laying down the incarnation—the gift and challenge of a lifetime of teaching and reflecting the God within him? Is he laying down the privilege that incarnation gave him?

“When Jesus asks us to lay down our lives, could he be asking us to examine our places of privilege and lay them down as well?” The Rev. Dr. Cheryl Lindsay explores these questions in the UCC’s *Sermon Seeds* and asks: “Could the sacrifice asked of us be to give up or transform a way of life that depends upon the oppression and marginalization of others?”

Laying down his life was a choice the good shepherd made, but so was the choice to take it back up again: spiritually, expansively, transformationally. Circling back to where we began this sermon, *Do I actually believe in the true reality of the resurrection? Did Jesus come back to life? I don’t know. Does it matter?*

Here’s what does matter: The Good Shepherd lives among us.

The Good Shepherd lives when love becomes more than what we feel but is manifested in what we do and how we live.

The Good Shepherd lives when we reach for justice.

The Good Shepherd lives when Black Lives Matter.

The Good Shepherd lives when our Transgender siblings enjoy full rights of citizenship and valued personhood.

The Good Shepherd lives when love is a verb.

--Rev. Cheryl Lindsay