



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

Easter Sermon April 4, 2021 “We Will Win” Rev. David Jones

In Lent I heard a story, one of those stories I will never unhear. It was the story of a young black woman living here in Franklin County. First she described having been born here, being raised here, attending schools here as a child, and living here now as an adult. She described painful experiences, and she described joyful and affirming ones. What she wasn't describing was making a home of this place, because she was describing this place *as her home*. This was an important point to emphasize. This is where she is from and where she lives now, it is, and always has been, her home. But then she described how often, despite this being her home, that she is asked by others--by well-meaning white residents of Franklin County, including those who are not originally from here--what *they* can do to make *her* feel more welcome here.

I know on the surface this sounds like a small thing, maybe even an innocent thing. But if we listen very closely to this story, we have a testimony of a woman of color being denied the right, by her white neighbors, to call her own home her home.

As a faith community and as a community of good will, which strives to lift up and celebrate as divine gestures things like hospitality and extravagant welcomes, this story should really trouble us. If practices like hospitality are signposts on the way to the promised land--if they are really the things we do to stand in the presence of God on earth--then we have to be very concerned about denying the practice of these things to anyone. If it is not permissible for a black woman to welcome others--if being gracious and welcoming and hospitable can only flow from white residents to residents of color and never in the other direction--than we ourselves (those of us who are white)--despite our intentions--become like a stumbling block, like a dam blocking the flow of justice and peace.

I share this story today, the first Sunday of Easter, because I think it cuts to the heart of the ministry of Jesus Christ, whose rising on the third day we celebrate this morning. Now we noted last Sunday that Jesus, until his demonstration at the gates of Jerusalem, never rode above the people but walked alongside them. At every step and in every moment, he is trying to show what the real power of God is; trying to show what true love is, what it does in our midst, and how it heralds the coming of a new kind of kin-dom that we were created for. Jesus even says, in John, that he washes the feet of his disciples on Maundy Thursday as an example to them of true righteousness, that we will know in our own lives how to do for each other what Jesus does for us. The righteousness in feet washing does not consist in being the one to do the washing, nor in being the one washed; it is in giving and receiving as a way of life, it is in no longer making distinctions of value or importance between these. If my feet are dirty, they can receive washing; if my hands are clean, they can give washing--everything in balance, the need and the gift, serving one another. Jesus is a teacher of how we are to live our lives, that whether we are teacher or student, we each have the same right to receive and to give, the same right to participate in service. This is life in the kin-dom of God, and this kin-dom of God--already among us--may yet be realized on earth as it is in heaven if we can come to live in this way.

The story I heard in Lent troubles me, because I actually want to get there, I actually want to go and reside in this kin-dom in my lifetime. But I know I can't get there if, in the current way of this world, some people are not being allowed to participate. Or they are participating, but it isn't recognized as such because it is being denied and hidden from view. If a young black woman from this place is constantly being told she is not from here, then when I get up here and say 'we should all be welcoming of others,' I am putting the cart before the horse. Because you can not welcome someone into your home and into your community if you are being made to feel you do not have one. Our message becomes only for some, only for those who are afforded the right to a home, to a community. Until we've made sure everyone has a home, we are preaching a message to some and not to others.

I heard this young woman's story at the beginning of Lent, but it has taken Easter Sunday to figure out what I want to give up. I want to give up preaching good news for some and no news for others. I want to give up saying 'be welcoming' when I know we live in a world that denies a home to so many. I want to give up saying 'share your meals' when I know we live in a world that denies people enough of a share in God's abundance. I want to give up saying 'be charitable' when I know we live in a world that denies so many living wages. (A single mother of two, earning the federal minimum wage, would have to work 136 hours every week--equal to nearly every single of the 24 hours in a day, six days a week--to afford to live in peace in this country today). I want to give up saying 'rest,' when I know we live in a world that is working people this hard. God's children are creative and they will find ways to be welcoming, to share, to be generous, to rest and worship, regardless of the powers that be, and regardless of what I have to say. But I want to give up being the kind of person who puts down stumbling blocks. I want to give up preaching good news to those of us who have the means to do this or that to set our souls at ease, while at the very same time preaching bad news--news that adds yet another thing to worry about, another thing to give, another thing to sacrifice or forgo--to those of us who are just trying to keep our heads above water, or just trying to breathe with a knee on our neck.

If I am going to do this--and if churches are going to do this--we will need Easter Sunday. Because Easter Sunday is about a new beginning, a new creation, and that's what we will need. The same woman who told that heartbreaking story in Lent also posed a prophetic question: is it possible for us to divest from our identities of privilege (like whiteness), and invest instead in identities of solidarity? I understand the importance of reckoning with the reality of power today, and therefore with the privileges ascribed to some of us and not to others, which we cannot help but carry with us. But the discourse around privilege is a way to describe life as it is now; we also need to begin to find ways to describe life in the new creation that is to come. Because in the new creation, there will be no such thing as 'white privilege.' At some point we need to realize that if all our spiritual and physical energy is being spent on confessing our own place in the current situation--sitting there in the shadow of the cross--then we will never discover our own place in the *next* situation. The tomb will never appear to us empty, because we will never take the walk with Mary to see it; we will never meet the one in white and hear the voice that says 'do not be alarmed for he is risen;' we will never go and tell of our hope at the dawn of a new beginning. We have to have more faith than that. We have to have more faith in each other. And if we do, if we gain *that faith*--the faith that the racist age we live in *will* die and an age of siblinghood between people of all colors will rise in its place--then we will one day gain the kin-dom of God.

This is Easter Sunday. When is it okay to have this kind of faith in solidarity--in our churches, in communities, and in ourselves--if not today? Easter Sunday, like all Sundays for Christians, marks the beginning of a new week, a new creative period, a time when Jesus rises again; a time when the will of God rises again. But not everything needs to be transformed. Not everything because in the beginning God did not make us and this earth the way it is thought of in the popular imagination. God is not some human-like man in the clouds at a workbench or forge. God's creative act is far gentler than a craftsman's or a blacksmith's.

In Genesis God does not make the light; God simply lets the light *be*. God does not make the waters, God simply lets the waters be. God does not make the heavens and the earth, God simply lets these be where a formless void once was. And it is all these things, being allowed to be, that together with God bring

forth the vegetation and the creatures, that finally bring forth humankind. We say that God is love, because what is love but the creative power that lets things *be*, that lets them move about and take on their own form, that lets them grow and develop and be witnessed and recognized. God possesses this ability to bring to life something from nothing because God is love. You see, the light, the waters and the land that bring forth vegetation and animals and *us*, it all already, in some mysterious way, had an identity, a character or quality--but it needed love (God) to let it be. Another way of thinking about this is that all of Creation and even each of us had some kind of potential, like a home, in God's love *before Creation*; then God's love ushered us forth. God's love made us a reality, an actually existing thing, not empty, passive voids, but bodies-as-parcels of God's eternal love. God's love introduced us all to one another--and invited us all to *welcome* one another.

And now, if we do dust ourselves off, if we do have the faith and the courage and the goodwill to follow Mary to the empty tomb, we may at first see the formless void again in the tomb's quiet darkness. But then the young person dressed in white lets there be light on Mary's grief, and a new week is suddenly ready to begin; a new creation is being let into the earth. The creative power of love there in the beginning, that let all things and all people *be, that love*, which lifts us in hope like a new sun that breaks the darkness following the old sun's demise, is *risen again*.

He once walked among us, he shared his food and wine with us, to show us what is truly divine. To show us that we should live daring lives in solidarity with others, that we should be humble enough to give and gracious enough to receive, that only these things together are righteousness, only these together are the beloved community. We will know the light of the new day is full when all people are allowed to welcome others as God's love has long hoped.

And this resurrection story shows us that no matter how many defeats we suffer in living in this divine way, in the end, we will win. In the end we will defeat those who deny God's children their rightful place at the abundant table; we will defeat those who deny God's children a home to call their own; and we will defeat those who deny them the just wages that would allow us *all* to do the charity the Church preaches. Because today, the Lord is risen.

Alleluia and amen.