

UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST CONGREGATIONAL  
Wallace, Idaho

Alice M.C. Ling, Pastor

Second Sunday of Easter

April 19, 2020

ANNOUNCEMENTS

Welcome to a celebration of the second Sunday of Easter with the United Church of Christ Congregational in Wallace. Welcome together in the uniting Spirit of our loving God, who collects us from our various houses and family configurations and draws us close as a community of Christ. I miss you, and miss standing in front of you, doing what I can to move us from the playful banter that often accompanies us when we gather into a spirit of worship and an awareness of the awesome presence of God. I'd much rather be with you in Wallace this morning than in our guest room, looking into a camera; but from here, I give thanks for the ways in which technology allows us to gather when we're not able to be in the same place at the same time, and for the confidence that even now God continues to stir among us and knit us together as one. I draw comfort and confidence from the promise that whether we are gathered or scattered, we are still the Body of Christ.

As with other weeks, I've sent along a PDF that I invite you to refer to, in the hope that we can join together in the responsive and unison pieces of this worship and share in singing the songs. Let us worship God.

CALL TO WORSHIP

Sing a new song!

**A springtime shout-out to life!**

Sing praise to our joyful Easter God

**Whose power brings new life out of death!**

Immerse doubt and despair in the fountain of new birth

**Find refreshment and strength for a future of hope!**

For God has taken ordinary things

**And made them extraordinary: Sing a New Song!**

(Rev. Susan A. Blain, United Church of Christ Worship Ways)

SONG *"Halle, halle, halle-lu-ja"*

Halle, halle, halleluja. Halle, halle, halleluja.

Halle, halle, halleluja. Halleluja, halleluja.

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OPENING PRAYER (in unison)

**Holy God, nothing is beyond your power to transform!**

**In a gray dawn, you coax songs of Alleluia!**

**From the tombs of despair we take refuge in,**

**You call us to wake up and work.**

**We praise you for this amazing day!**

**Come, Risen Christ, in newness and hope in this Easter Season. Amen.**

(Rev. Susan A. Blain, United Church of Christ Worship Ways)

SCRIPTURE READING John 20:19-31 (NRSV)

When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace

be with you.” After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, “Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.” When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.”  
Jesus and Thomas

But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, “We have seen the Lord.” But he said to them, “Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe.”

A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you.” Then he said to Thomas, “Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe.” Thomas answered him, “My Lord and my God!” Jesus said to him, “Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.”

Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.

May God make a home in your heart for these holy words. Amen.

#### SERMON

It has been a week. Or ten days, if you count back to the heart stopping horror of an angry crowd, a brutally senseless death and the hasty burial of the one they'd given up everything to follow, believe in and love. The first couple of days were lost in the fog of it all, and now for a week, they'd shuttled back and forth, hiding in one room or another, unsure if the murder had been the end of something or the beginning. They didn't know if the target for the religious leaders' rage was only Jesus or if they were in danger too. They were still trying to wrap their heads around the fact that the traitor had been one of them, and trying not to think about the truth that in the end, all of them had failed him. They were scrambling to make sense of what had really happened to his body in the middle of lots of guesses, hopes, and horror. They'd listened to Mary's story, and even seen for themselves; or at least, most of them had. But play it over again, forward, backward or anything in between, they just couldn't tell if they were looking at death or life, if it was over and done or shifting back into gear and getting ready to move on. Anything resembling certainty was in short supply. There was no going back and the way forward was very unclear.

And here we all are in mid-April. It has been a week, or a season, maybe even an eternity; sometimes it's hard to tell the difference. We're still keeping our social distance and hanging out at home, wondering whether to wear masks when we go out, even as orders and reports shift and change and dates keep getting pushed out. We hear the curve is flattening and the pace is slowing, but the counts and casualties continue to climb and take our breath away. Encouraged by talk of being released from our captivity and reopening the economy while cautioned by concerns of ongoing infection and a recurrence of the unimaginable, frustrated by how long this is taking and trying to practice patience with limited success, we struggle to stay afloat and in limbo, eager to get on with our lives, desperate to do it right so we can put this all behind us. We scramble to sort through the barrage of information coming at us and how to weigh this piece of information or that, who to listen to and what to trust. Anything resembling certainty seems to be in short supply. There is no going back and the way forward is very unclear.

Then as now, death appears to be in charge, yet here we are a week after Easter, hearing echoes of resurrection talk and scratching our heads, trying not to ask, so what? Wondering what it all means,

what difference it makes or what light, if any, it sheds on the darkness of where we sit.

One of the messages I find most helpful in this morning's gospel lesson is the simple fact that Jesus appeared to the disciples in the midst of all their questions and hesitations, fear and uncertainty. In a very real and tangible way, he stood among them and assured them that he was still with them, not dead and gone but also not floating thousands of sanitized feet above their agonizing reality. He was still present, dwelling with them in the hot, messy heart of things. They weren't nearly as alone or rudderless as they may have felt. He was still there, and every time they began to question that, he appeared again. He wasn't all cleaned up and unblemished, but still sporting the wounds of war, the cost of his discipleship. Still present to them and with them, to us and with us.

I don't know if it was clear to him before he arrived on the scene or not, but it wasn't rocket science to figure out just how frightened the disciples were. He knew them, and he knew the climate they lived in, the trauma they'd just endured. He also knew the door was locked. So when he came and stood among them, the first thing he said was, peace be with you. He showed them his wounds, and they rejoiced to welcome him back into their circle, and then he said it again: peace be with you. And that second time, he also began to give them their instructions: as God has sent me, so I send you. He breathed on them and invited them to receive the Holy Spirit, to replace their shallow, scared breathing with the deeper, more sustaining breath of God's Spirit. A week later he was back: they were still huddled close in a darkened room behind a locked door, when he appeared and again said to them, peace be with you. Relax. Breathe. Trust. Hope. Breathe. Live.

Peace be with you. It's something we long to feel, but I wonder how far away it seems, how out of reach, how much of a fantasy. I understand and share those feelings, but I also believe deeply that the gift of peace is as surely a gift to us as it was to those first flailing disciples. Jesus still comes into our midst, in the midst of terror and fear, pandemics and panic, and speaks peace; still encourages us to relax, to breathe, to trust and hope, to live and love.

I deeply appreciate a quote I heard from William Sloane Coffin, who once said: "As I see it, the primary religious task these days is to try to think straight....You can't think straight with a heart full of fear, for fear seeks safety, not truth." And then he continued, "If your heart's a stone, you can't have decent thoughts--either about personal relations or about international ones. A heart full of love, on the other hand, has a limbering effect on the mind" (*A Passion for the Possible: A Message to the U.S. Churches*) When Jesus breathed on the disciples, and when he breathes on us, gifting us with the precious gift of his peace, he's offering us all we need to replace the fear that terrorizes our hearts with the limber grace of love.

I don't know how real or elusive that gift of peace feels to you. We may sometime have a mystical experience of having it given to us, a peace that allows us to relax and trust, or we may have to work at it, but either way, peace is a gift that comes to us from the love and presence of God. Krista Tippett talks about the importance of exercising our hope muscles, not just assuming they'll always be there for us and ready to go to work when we need them. In an *On Being* reflection, I heard her comment on living in a tumultuous time, and working intentionally to balance the information we take in. It's important to be informed, to stay current with what's happening and how it impacts us, but that doesn't mean we need to sit on the news and get updates every 20 minutes. None of us can keep our heads if we're drowning them with a constant dose of despair. Instead, we need to explore the full scope of what's happening, the death and destruction, as well as the life and beauty, and do what we can to keep our hearts oriented toward what we want to build, what we're walking toward, what we believe with God's help is possible. Even in the midst of a world stopping nightmare of a pandemic, it's not only okay to feel joy, but it's important: to see the beautiful, to feel gratitude for all of the generosity and

kindness that are alive and well among us. We can get through the worst that life has to offer us if we exercise our joy muscle and keep it intact.

As I've walked through this past week, I've been overwhelmed by the variety of voices and reports I've heard, the ones that offer encouragement and hope as well as the ones that call for caution and a long and slow response to our situation, the voices that are growing increasingly agitated and impatient alongside that ones that threaten the possibilities of whole new tsunamis of suffering if we move too fast. I worry that we will let our fear and impatience drive the day, rather than exercising hope and love, trusting God to stay with us and bring us safely through. Yet even as my anxiety grows, I hear more and more stories of the good and the generous, the loving and kind. One of the most dramatic ones for me was the news report of a North Carolina nurse who recently came down with a case of empathy and felt compelled to get up off her couch to go help relieve the stress of some of her colleagues in New York. She's now working at Mt. Sinai Hospital in Queens, the epicenter of the outbreak in New York City. She is legally required to be paid, but she's clear that once her expenses have been covered, she'll donate all of her salary to the Mt. Sinai support staff – even though she has student loans and is the single mother of 16 year old twins. She's clear that we all should be compelled to do something when we can and one of her sons backed her up saying, this life is not just to serve yourself, but to serve others.

When I hear her story, I exercise my hope muscles, and I nurture the trust that is in me and I receive again Jesus' gift of peace. He still comes to us, still speaks peace, still offers the gift of the Holy Spirit, still sends us out. I pray we'll have the wisdom and the courage, the peace and the love to go when and where we're called. Amen.

SONG    *“When Peace, Like a River”*

When peace like a river, upholds me each day, when sorrows like sea billows roll,  
Whatever my lot, you have taught me to say, “It is well, it is well with my soul.”  
It is well with my soul, it is well, it is well with my soul.

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#### PRAYER REQUESTS

Prayers for world leaders and state governors to have the wisdom to lead us forward and the public to have the wisdom to discern how to follow

Joyce's son-in-law Dave (Robin's husband) has been hospitalized for cellulitis, then had surgery this week for an abscess on his ankle and up his leg

Christi's cousin Gary Etchemendy in California will be having shoulder surgery on Thursday

Prayers of thanksgiving for all the helpers to others in this time

Prayers for the unemployed and those struggling to feed their families and themselves

#### PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE

Holy One, you came and spoke peace to your followers as they sat together behind a locked door, nursing the wounds of how they had failed you in your hour of need, jumping at every unexpected sound, frightened that the killing might not yet be finished. True, Mary had told them of your resurrection, but fear held fast to their hearts, and the lock remained in place. A week later, and still they sat, still the door was barred, still they trembled, and yet again, you came and spoke peace to their wounded, cowering souls. Speak peace to our hearts as well. The immensity of the suffering throughout the world and around our country takes our breath away and leaves us in shock. Hospitals full to overflowing, ventilators in short supply and medical personnel working long hours and unable to go home to their families, as hot spots move from Seattle to New York to New Orleans to Chicago to Los Angeles to a pork plant in South Dakota. Unemployment numbers sky rocket and lines of those waiting

for a morsel of food stretch further than the eye can see. We sit in our homes and look toward the door, longing to cut and run, while others scurry to stay out of arm's reach of the abuser who shares their home, while others had their homes picked up and shattered by a tornado's violence while others simply have no home in which to seek shelter. We worry about how to pay bills and where to get help and who will heal our wounds and what will come of our dreams. Come among us yet again and speak your peace. Help us to release our fears into your loving care, and to replace them with your love, a love that never gives up and never gives in, a love that knows no limits and has no expiration date, but that promises to stay by our side – always. A love that has defeated death and refuses to take no for an answer.

We ask your love for all those who suffer, who put themselves at risk in order to care for others, and yes, even for those who inflict pain without giving it a second thought. You alone know the needs of our hearts and lives, and so we look to you for healing and holding, for feeding and protecting, for rest and shelter, for wisdom and guidance. Guide us through this pandemic, and through all of the other trials and temptations that travel with us in these days. By your mercy, help us to be your faithful people, living your love, reflecting your light, walking in your ways, seeking your peace.

Hear our prayers, spoken and unspoken... And hear us as we pray together the prayer that Jesus taught, saying: Our Father...

PRAYER OF OUR SAVIOR (debts)

#### OFFERING

Easter teaches us that generous love is at the heart of God's work. Joyfully we are able to give knowing that our gifts will help others see the blessed miracle of God's creative joy. Even though we worship at a distance from each other, our church ministries and expenses continue. I invite your support for our on-going ministry, and your gifts can be mailed to the church at 408 Cedar Street or left in the mail slot to the left of the door. We also celebrate the ways you share yourself and your gifts with this community, through donations of food for the Food Bank, phone calls to the lonely, meals for the hungry, exploring and expanding your understanding of what it means to be a neighbor to those who share this community with you. God has richly blessed us; may we be a blessing to others through the ways that we give and share what we have and who we are.

#### OFFERING PRAYER (in unison)

**Loving God, can a generous prayer be lifted up to you this Eastertide? Can our gifts, given with love, be further transformed like echoes of grace, delighting all who receive their blessings? May it be so, through the surprising power of your Holy Spirit, and may our lives speak of a loving God, full of Easter surprises. Amen.**

(Rev. Susan A. Blain, United Church of Christ Worship Ways)

#### SONG *"In the Bulb There Is a Flower"*

In the bulb there is a flower; in the seed, an apple tree;  
in cocoons, a hidden promise: butterflies will soon be free!  
In the cold and snow of winter there's a spring that waits to be,  
unrevealed until its season, something God alone can see.

There's a song in every silence, seeking word and melody;  
there's a dawn for every darkness, bringing hope to you and me.  
From the past will come the future; what it holds, a mystery,  
unrevealed until its season, something God alone can see.

In our end is our beginning; in our time, infinity;  
in our doubt there is believing; in our life, eternity.  
In our death, a resurrection; at the last, a victory,  
unrevealed until its season, something God alone can see.

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#### BENEDICTION

May the God who shakes heaven and earth,  
whom death could not contain,  
who lives to disturb and heal us,  
bless you with power to go forth  
and proclaim the gospel. Amen.