

“What Do You Do When the World Turns Upside Down?”

Acts 2:14a, 36-41, I Peter 1:17-23, Luke 24:13-35

Part I of IV Sermon Series

*"THE First Church Family and
OUR First Church Family"*

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From the Pulpit

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A Sermon delivered by The Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens, Sr. Minister, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, April 26, 2020, dedicated to my brother Paul Conrad Ahrens on his 65th Birthday and to my first granddaughter Emryn Renee Ahrens born, April 18, 2020, to her parents, Kirsten and Luke, and to her brothers Benton and Rylan and always to the glory of God!

“What Do You Do When the World Turns Upside Down?”

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen.

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The world is turned upside down. It’s not the first time. In England they have been singing about it for close to 380 years. In the 1640s The Parliament banned traditional Christmas celebrations in England because the people were having too much fun at Christmas and Parliament believed Christmas should be a solemn occasion. In response a ballad was written and sung everywhere with the refrain:

Old Christmas is kicket out of Town.

*Yet let's be content, and the times we'll lament,
you see the world turn'd upside down.*

Fast forward to Yorktown, Virginia - October 19, 1781. The American Revolutionaries have just defeated British regulars in their greatest and final victory of the Revolutionary War. As the Brits surrender and board the ships for home, legend has it that the fife and drums of the Cornwallis' troops march out of LIBERATED Virginia leaving their rifles on the ground to the music of "The World Turned Upside Down."

Move forward again to 2015. Lin-Manuel Miranda revives the underlying beat and tune of the British ballad in his blockbuster musical "Hamilton" as he turns the world upside down at Yorktown all over again on a Broadway stage.

The beat goes on today. Beyond the 17th Century banning of Christmas frivolity, the 18th Century success of Revolution under George Washington's heroic leadership at Yorktown or Lin-Manuel's 21st Century musical which turned American history upside-down (in a magnificent way), we have never encountered the world turned upside-down like the one we are presently living in.

Every corner of the globe is facing the airborne Coronavirus for which close to 3 million people have tested positive and which has claimed over 200,000 lives worldwide. Our ways of life as we have known them to be have shut-down or been severely

altered. We wince at stay-at-home orders but we take risks with our lives and the lives of others when we go out where the COVID-19 is literally everywhere in the world today. We all need to remember, the “Stay at Home” order is not really for all our members and friends as they are going out each day to serve others. For all who are going out to work, we are ALL forever grateful for you as you care for others in this pandemic time. We also remember the growing numbers of our friends and family for whom this order brings growing and devastating economic hardship. I ask that you be in touch with us.

We will continue to do all the right things until we know there is a cure and/or a vaccine. We will trust medical and scientific leaders to inform us of this and not let flim flam men and quacks influence us with crazy and unverifiable fake cures.

I liken life today to living in an upside-down snow globe. We know all the “snow” has settled on the glass below, but we also know if we turn it right-side-up, it will cover us once again.

What do you do when the world turns upside down? We can learn some key lessons from the Gospel of Luke and The Acts of the Apostles (both authored by Luke). In Luke 24:13-35, the earliest followers of Jesus have had their world turned upside down. They have faced Jesus’ crucifixion and are trying to sort out the meaning of his resurrection as they walk on a road leaving Jerusalem – called the Road to Emmaus.

Resurrection is a complicated thing. On the road, they discover that Resurrection always finds its seedbed in disappointment,

death, and sadness. The Road to Emmaus is the road of deep disappointment and walking it is the living definition of sad.

Have you walked this road in your life? It is the road you walk when you lose your job or you lose your loved one to death. You have walked it when you have lost large in many ways. It is the long road of loss. It is often a road of loneliness. It is the long road back to an empty house, an empty seat at the table, an empty place in bed next to you, piles of unopened mail, calls on your answering machine from creditors demanding you call them back instead of friends or family offering you a cup of water in your misery. The Road to Emmaus is real. It is the road we are on when our world has been turned upside-down (Barbara Brown Taylor, Gospel Medicine, Cowley Publications, Boston, Mass, p. 20).

The sad realness of the Road to Emmaus is one in which hope is in the past. Peter says, “*We had hoped he was the one to redeem Israel.*” Hope in the past tense is one of the saddest sounds we make as human beings. We had hoped he was the one. We believed things could change but we were wrong. He died. It is over. No more fairy tales. No more illusions. Back to business as usual (Ibid. 21).

Hope, and love itself, feels dead to us when we say things that begin with: “*I had hoped . . .*” I had hoped . . . this relationship would be the one. I had hoped . . . we could climb out of debt this time. I had hoped . . . I could have had more time to love my wife, my husband. I had hoped . . . that my children and I

were closer. I had hoped . . . I would end up with a better relationship with my brother, my sister. I had hoped . . . I had hoped . . .

The revelation of the Risen One comes streaming out of the Mystery Man on the road to Emmaus when he hears, *“We had hoped . . .”* He yells at them. *“You idiots! If you had read your Bibles, none of this would surprise you. Christ, the Messiah, is not an undefeated champion. He is the suffering servant. He is not the one who wins the power struggle. He loses it. He is the broken one. He is the one who comes to his glory through suffering and pain.”* (By the way, I don't recommend that become your first response to loved ones who are saddened in the past tense of hope.)

What always amazes me in this story is that they don't know him when he calls them idiots. Seriously? The relationship between Jesus and his disciples is one in which he often chastises them for not seeing, not hearing, not knowing, and certainly not believing! They don't get it when he is alive. Why should they get it now? To which I say, *“Watch out Jesus, I resemble that statement!”*

How many of you don't get it? Be honest. How many of you can put defeat behind you and hear good news of resurrected hope? Be mindful that it is the revelation of scripture which reveals hope to the wounded ones. It is the good news of God's glory in the five books of Torah, the prophetic teachings, and the whole of Hebraic Scripture as revealed by Jesus which grabs hold of the grieving ones and grounds them in hope. Maybe, they begin

to think, we are not losers after all. Maybe, there is a reason to resurrect crucified hope.

The questions are swirling around in their gloomy minds when he comes to the dinner table in Emmaus - upon their invitation. As a guest, he acts like the host of the meal. This is one strange stranger! For these men who may not have “gotten” the movement of brokenness to glory when revealed through words on the highway, the Risen Christ shows them the blessings of brokenness in the bread, once again. Now, they get it! And they are opened wide. And their minds are opened wide. And their hearts are opened wide. And the Holy Spirit flows into that place and into those men and they know who this stranger is. And once he is known, he disappears. Mystery or rumor? Reality or make believe? You decide.

I will tell you this - if you have never been broken, if you have never felt pain, if you have never known hope in the past tense, then I truly believe that the Risen Christ is not the right Spiritual Presence for your life. If you are a person who only know glory through victory, then the defeat of Jesus will mean nothing to you. And I encourage you to seek glory from glory. But, I guarantee, someday, the music will stop. Someday, the applause will stop. Someday, you will wake up and realize hope is a past tense reality and mystery isn't just the last the novel you read.

However, for those who have experienced brokenness and loss, I give you Jesus. Here is Jesus, who is, in the words of the United Church of Christ's statement of faith, *“our crucified and*

risen Lord, who has come to us and shared our common lot, conquering sin and death” and reconciling the world to God. Here is Jesus, who meets people on the roadway of disappointment, sadness and distress and teaches them about the powerful prophetic words of brokenness in the Bible. Here is Jesus, who seems to prefer working with people whose hearts are broken, whose dreams are broken, whose lives are broken, whose world is broken. Here is Jesus, who in his brokenness, takes whole bread and breaks it - as a way to help us feel his solidarity.

Count the ways he does it in this story alone! First, he meets the broken disciples where they are and establishes **FELLOWSHIP AND RELATIONSHIP** with them. Second, after giving them an opportunity to weep and mourn, he **TEACHES** and thus reveals the Word of God to them - you know - the story of God’s identification with a broken world and a broken humanity. Third, he accepts their **HOSPITALITY** and then becomes the host at their table by breaking bread. Fourth, he reveals in this action, the **SACRAMENT OF LIFE** - taking, blessing, breaking, sharing! Finally, he **DISAPPEARS**. That’s right. He goes away so they can rekindle the gift of God within them and become the church he intends them to be - a church of brokenness, which identifies with people and a world broken.

In a world turned upside down, Jesus shows us how to live. It may strike you that it is not much different than how he shows you how to live in a Right Side Up World. But consider this – the radical nature of Jesus’ love turns the world upside down. In an upside-down world, his way makes everything upright again.

Here are the ground rules. You need to figure out the specifics according to how you live and work. Here is the pathway - Be in Fellowship (at safe distances) and grow in relationships (six feet apart). Teach and practice hospitality with neighbors and strangers. Approach everyone and every day as if every person and every act were sacramental in nature – taking what you are given, blessing it with God’s love, breaking it and sharing it with others. I call this God’s Real Presence.

The Book of Acts takes us further down the road. Acts 2 and continuing tells one story after another of disciples being changed by the Holy Spirit in their world turned upside down. Not one of them is ever the same again because their teacher and friend rose from the dead. Once someone has risen from the dead, their life story takes on new meaning. And if you are close to them, your life story takes on a whole new meaning. That is a fact!

Last week I was able to talk with our own member, Dr. Karl Danneberger. After two weeks in an induced coma with COVID-19 in the ICU at OSU Wexner Medical Center, Karl came back to life. The depth of his gratitude for all the men and women who cared for him, the men, women and children who prayed for him and his wife and sons was touching – to say the least. As one doctor said, “You have been to hell and back and lived to tell the story.” He has clearly changed in all of this – and yet – he is the same as well.

In our world turned upside-down, you and I are all called to carry on with the light of Christ still burning within us. We are all being changed by this. But, at some deep, spiritual level, we are all the same, as well.

For all of you, I have rewritten the words of the 17th Century English Ballad. Hear the new twist and dance with hope!

“Old COVID- let’s kick you out of Town.

Then let’s be content, and turn from lament,

For the world once turned upside down.