



“The Journey Back to Love”

A Ten Part Sermon Series for the 2021 Lenten Season

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February 17 through April 4, 2021

From the Pulpit

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“The Journey Back to Love”

The Rev. Dr. Timothy Ahrens

“The Wilderness of Love”

The Rev. Dr. Timothy Ahrens

“For Love’s Sake”

The Rev. Emily Krause Corzine

“Love and Justice”

The Rev. Dr. Timothy Ahrens

“God’s Love is Deep and Broad”

The Rev. Dr. Timothy Ahrens

“Love Eternal”

The Rev. Emily Krause Corzine

“Love Caught Between Joy and Pain”*

The Rev. Dr. Timothy Ahrens

“Love at the Table of Our Lord”

The Rev. Dr. Timothy Ahrens

“Love unto Death”

The Rev. Dr. Timothy Ahrens

“Love Rising”

The Rev. Dr. Timothy Ahrens

“The Journey Back to Love”

Joel 2:1-2, 12-17, II Corinthians 5:20-6:10, Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21
Part I of X in the Sermon Series “The Journey Back to Love”

The Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens, Sr., Senior Minister
February 17, 2021

A sermon dedicated to mother, Lorene K. Ahrens whom I love and who has guided me on my journey for 63 years, to my wife Susan E. Sitler, who has been my greatest teacher and friend on the journey of love, and to MK Beall Carter and John Carter and all who bring music and poetry to life in worship and always to the glory of God!

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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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In “*The Things They Carried*,” Tim O’Brien begins his novel with a list of all the things he carried as an infantryman in Viet Nam. It is a complete list of every item in his pack – all 60 pounds of the things he and his fellow soldiers carried. As he ends his list, he writes, “*they carried all they could bear – and then some – including a terrible awe of the silent power of the things they carried.*”

His story is so much more than the Things they carried. They also carried all the realities of war and the world into which they were dropped to fight. *“They carried the sky. The whole atmosphere, they carried it, the humidity, the monsoons, the stink of fungus and decay, all of it, they carried gravity.”*

Today is our day to inventory our list of the things that we carry – all of the things we carry – including the terrible awe of the silent power of things we carry.

Today, we lay them all out and take a good look at them. We examine them. We wonder how these things – good and bad – have become part of the things we carry. Some of them are all too familiar. We have carried them for a lifetime.

Some of the things we carry are delightful. They amaze us. As we look at them, we see the depth of our compassion and joy; our caring and our love.

Some of things we carry are troubling. Some of them are vexing. They have hitched a ride in our life and we want to find ways to face them and then encourage them to leave us alone or take on healthier forms if they are going to stick with us.

Delightful or troubling, good or bad, we have to learn to embrace the things we carry and integrate them into our lives or we have to learn to drop them somewhere where they will do no harm. We have to learn to embrace ourselves and our imperfections and see them change from difficult disturbances which create difficult emotions and sometimes physical pain to be healed and helpful parts for our journey ahead.

The things that we carry can help us or hinder us. They can heal us or hurt us. They can be our lifelong friends or our former enemies transformed into friendships. They expose us to ourselves and sometimes to others. They reveal us as true or false; real or fake. They may prey on us one day and we pray for them to leave us alone the next day. The things we carry are all our parts put together in us for better and worse.

On this day of confession and contrition, you and I are called by God to do the hard work of acknowledging and looking at all the things we carry – the ways we have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. Today, we take a deep breath and we take time to stop, reflect, repent, and begin 40 days of turning and returning to God.

Today, we begin the journey back to love.

I always think of John Builder on Ash Wednesday. John, a blessed memory, was a member of my first congregation Bethany UCC in Cleveland, Ohio. He would regularly come up to me in the greeting line on Sunday morning and tell me he refused to pray our prayer of confession that day. He would say, *“I didn’t do any of these things. Why would I ask God to forgive me for things I haven’t done?”* I would explain that this was a “community prayer” a “corporate prayer.” We prayed together so that we can move forward together receiving God’s assurance of pardon and grace.

There was no convincing John to pray the prayer of confession – although one day he told me he did his confession to God during the silent prayer time.

Finally, one day when I was alone with John, I asked him what he prayed in the time of silence. He said, *“that’s between me and God and it is none of your business.”* I said, *“You are right and you are wrong. Your personal confessions to God are really none of my business. That is truly between you and God. But how it is with your soul and how you are healing from whatever you prayed in silence is my business because I am your pastor and I love you and care about you. Not only that John, everyone at Bethany loves you and cares about you.”* He said, *“It’s nice you care about my heart and soul.”*

In our scripture passages today, Joel and Jesus are concerned about each one of our hearts and souls.

The prophet Joel writes that God is calling us to return to God with all our heart. Through fasting, weeping, mourning, God is calling us to rend our hearts or to “open our hearts” to God’s gracious and merciful love. The journey back to love begins in confession and contrition. For us, our Lenten journey begins in this winter of discontent and moves to the Springtime of Resurrection joy. While the earth appears as a winter frozen tundra today, it is hard to imagine the crocuses, the flowering buds on the tulip tree and green grass that lay buried in the snow. But they are there - waiting for their season. They are waiting to rise and shine.

What begins in winter fasting today will end in Spring feasting by Easter. We can’t run through this journey with our heavy boots and snowshoes on today. But we can trudge forward. Ash Wednesday is perfectly suited for trudging. Like my dog Charlie and the children in our lives – we put our paws and our heads down in the snow and leap up high – in spite of the bitter cold.

While Joel takes us into the fasting, weeping, and mourning of first steps into Lent, Jesus chooses a slightly different path on this opening day of our Lenten journey. Jesus warns us not to wave our gifts of giving in front of people, not to be hoarders of our money and resources, or to pray out loud on the street corners like obnoxious pietistic pilgrims (maybe John Builder was right!), and not to look dismal looking while fasting (or tell other people all day long how hungry we are while fasting).

Twice he uses the phrase, “don’t be like the hypocrites.” The word “hypocrites” has its roots in Greek theatre. The “Hypokrites” were stage actors who wore large masks to identify their characters on stage. The Greek word took on an extended meaning to refer to any person who was wearing a figurative mask and pretending to be someone or something they were not. The French and English picked-up the word in 13th Century religious texts to refer to someone who pretends to be morally good or pious in order to deceive others. Today, we know hypocrites as those who act in contradiction to their stated beliefs or feelings – the people we should not be like according to Jesus.

Jesus seems to be more like the French and English in this interpretation as he calls us to be honest and forthright in our living and loving. He wants transparency, honesty and clarity in our care for the poor, in our praying, in our fasting, in our stewardship of our resources. Like the Nike ad, Jesus wants us to “just do it.”

And so, we begin today our journey back to love. I implore you to take this journey to heart. Figure out the things you are carrying on the journey back to love. Look closely at the things that weigh you down and bring out the worst in you. Name them. Claim their

existence. Then, let go of them as they weigh you down and bring out the worst in you. Hang on to the things that you carry which are beautiful and healing and hopeful.

Let us step forward in our journey back to love. Keep your eyes wide open. Keep your heart wide open. Keep all your senses open for the steps ahead. In the spirit of John Builder, be grateful for everyone who cares about your heart and soul and your love.

Come, let us start our journey back to love. Amen.

“The Wilderness of Love”

Genesis 9:8-17, I Peter 3:18-22, Mark 1:9-15

Part II of X in the Sermon Series “The Journey Back to Love”

The Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens, Sr., Senior Minister

February 21, 2021

A sermon dedicated to friend and brother Richard Murch, to my colleague Rev. Jess Peacock in celebration of his ordination into Christian Ministry, and always to the glory of God!

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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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Gary Charles tells the story of a young woman interviewing him for a paper she was writing on world religions. After going through questions like, “How does your denomination understand God?” “Who is Jesus for you?” and “Does your church believe in a heaven and hell?”, the young student came to her final question, **“What is the central message of your faith?”**

Gary answered each question as best he could but found the final question stuck with him long after she left. In fact, it never left him. He couldn't shake it. It held on to him. (Found in *Preaching Mark in Two Voices*, Brian Blount and Gary Charles, Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, KY, 2002, pp. 36-37.)

“What is the central message of our faith?” Think about that. What is the central message of your faith?

Perhaps the best answer to this question can be found in our text from Mark 1:9-15 today. Still dripping wet from his baptism in the Jordan River with John, Jesus is still holding on to the loving word of God from heaven, Jesus is driven into the wilderness by the same Spirit who was present at his baptism. There for 40 days, he is tempted by Satan, protected by wild beasts and attended to by angels.

Now wet with sweat, now exhausted from his fasting, he exits his wilderness encounter and speaks his first words of public ministry. Jesus says, ***“Repent and believe in the good news.”*** God has been unleashed and is now on the loose in the person of Jesus. In these words of Jesus, there is no distant hope, no other worldly predictions and proclamations of things to come. Things are going to change NOW. We must brace ourselves for what is coming NOW.

What is coming now is **Metanoia!**

And Metanoia or “Repentance” – is everything.

Metanoia is a word that is shouted not whispered – although what happens in its path can come from the whisper of God into your ear and into your heart. It is a word full of meaning. It has two primary

meanings. It is a word that will take us to the central meaning of our faith.

In the Hebrew scriptures, Metanoia means “to turn or return.” It directly relates to ancient Israel’s exile in Babylon and their return home. It literally means, “*to embark on a journey of return to the ‘homeland’*,” to the Holy Land where God is found. But you are not only traveling to the place where God is found, you are traveling with God on the return. The entire journey is embraced by God, leads back to God and the experience is Metanoia.

There is a second meaning which comes alive in the Christian scriptures beginning with Mark 1:14-15. It means, “*to go beyond the mind we have*.” This phrase is both evocative and provocative. “The mind we have” is acquired from our socialization experiences of time, of people, of place. We are all enculturated in ways that shape us, by people and places which shape our thinking and our actions. “To go beyond the mind we have” means to see and act in a new way – a new way shaped by God known decisively in Jesus. **This is repentance.**

Although the Bible speaks of repenting of our sins, the emphasis throughout scripture is not so much on contrition and sorrow and guilt, it is on turning from them and returning to God. Repentance is about change. It is not primarily a prerequisite for forgiveness, though that may come. It is about change. (Drawn from *Speaking Christian*, Marcus Borg, Harper One, NY, NY, 2011, pp. 157-159.)

While that may shock some of you, it is the truth. Repentance is about returning. It is about turning around. It about making the turn WITH God, not just TO God. It is about a new mindset. It is about everything shifting. Repentance is about change.

And what is the new way that “the gospel” is calling us to? What do we see when we turn around?

We see Love. We see the face of God and the face of God is Love.

It was Love that called Jesus to the waters of baptism in the Jordan River with John. It is Love that comes from the voice of God – “*You are my son whom I LOVE!*” It is Love that pushes the Holy Spirit to push Jesus out of the water and into the wilderness. It is Love that battles evil and the presence of Satan. It is Love that gathers the wild beasts to stand by Jesus’ side during the trying times in the wilderness and it is Love that gathers the angels and their Love offers protection for Jesus. It is Love that Jesus is calling us to turn around and see and feel and experience and share. It is Love that fuels the good news of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

LOVE is the central message of our faith.

We get to love through Metanoia – through “turning around,” through “returning to God,” through “going beyond the mind that we have.”

I believe Love is everywhere – if we only have the perception to see and feel it. For example, in Genesis 9:8-17, God places “a bow in the sky” as a reminder of the Covenant of God with God’s people. The Rainbow sign is a sign of God’s love for humanity. Walter Brueggemann writes:

“The ‘bow’ is likely not understood in romantic ways, nor with an accent of political pluralism. Rather, it likely refers to God’s bow (and arrows) as a weapon of war, hostility and destructiveness. God suspends the ‘bow’ in the heavens as a gesture of disarmament and as a promise not to be the aggressor or the adversary of humanity.... It is God’s gesture of love and peace and

reconciliation. God intends to be at 'peace' with God's world, recalcitrant though it has been. The 'bow' is not a message for humanity, it is a reminder to God to be faithful and everlasting as God has promised to be" (Texts for Preaching, Westminster, John Knox Press, Louisville, Ky, 1993, p. 193).

The Rainbow is like God's tab-it note in the sky – *"Note to Self: Remember to Love them today in spite of all the evidence not to."* The bow constantly reminds God to remember to be loving to people who are always remembering to be loving.

In I Peter 3:18-22, Peter reminds us as followers of Christ to love as completely as He first loved us. Against the opposition of a hostile culture, Jesus walked into Jerusalem armed with gentleness, kindness, reverence and love and laid down his life for the life of the world. In total and complete sacrificial love – a love which overcame principalities and powers – he died, was laid in the tomb, rose from the dead, ascended into heaven and lives with the angels and the power of God to love eternally. Peter reminds us in his letter to always maintain a hopeful view of the world in spite of all the evidence to give up. Isn't that essentially what true love looks like? Love perseveres when other evidence points to giving up and simply laying down and dying. Love lifts us up when there is no logical reason to be raised up.

Returning to Mark, we are reminded of Love in the wilderness.

While Matthew and Luke's Gospels love telling complicated stories of Satan temptations of Jesus in the wilderness, Mark is more interested in talking about the wilderness than temptations. Mark is focused on the wild work of Jesus and the wild beasts and angels that attend to him there.

If you were in the wilderness and you knew that the wolves were your protectors and the bears were your friends, if you knew that wildebeests and the scorpions were watching out for you, and the rattlesnake and coyote had your back, you could face all the heat and cold, you could take on any spiritual and physical hardship knowing “these wild beasts were ministering to you.”

And then, when the beasts were resting from the scorching noonday sun, if you knew the spiritual heavy artillery of angels were on your shoulders giving you cover from the oppression and temptations of the wilderness heat, you could muster all the courage and strength in the whole world to face the devil and anything he puts in your path to trip you up and hurt you. Just like Jesus, “Be gone Satan” would roll from your lips with ease and sureness with such love.

The God of Love who sends the bow as a reminder to Godself to keep the peace with people who destroy life with a callous disregard, the God of Love who sends wild beasts and angels to protect and defend his beloved son in the wilderness, the God of Love who gives us a Savior who is gentle, kind, compassionate and one who lays down his life for us out of his complete and absolute love for us, is a God we can trust and follow.

My friends, **LOVE is the central message of our faith.**

As we learned today, and we get to Love through Metanoia – through “turning around,” through “returning to God,” through “returning with God,” through “going beyond the mind that we have” we can face all things together in love.

May the Wild beasts minister to you this week. May the angels on your shoulders knocking down all the lovelessness that comes at you from behind or straight on. May our God of Love care for you in ways you never saw before or ever imagined possible. Amen.

“For Love’s Sake”

Mark 8:31-38

Part III of X in the Sermon Series “The Journey Back to Love”

The Rev. Emily Krause Corzine, Associate Minister

February 28, 2021

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Prayer for Illumination: Holy God, by the power of the Holy Spirit, illumine these words read and proclaimed. Silence in us any voice but your own. May we hear with joy what you have for us this day. Amen.

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I don’t know about you, but I wonder how the disciples might have reminisced about the events in today’s text. A few years after Jesus’ death and resurrection, when the disciples are all together, around the campfire. What do they would say about this day? Maybe they are talking about the good old days, laughing, teasing, reliving the moments the way friends who have share a life changing experience often do.

One of them looks over at Peter and says, “Hey Satan, tell us about the day you rebuked Jesus! Remember that day?”

Another responds, “Yeah, how’d that work out for you?”

Another, “What were you thinking, Peter?”

Peter responds, “You know I just didn’t like where he was going with that. When I signed up to fish for women and men, this is **not** what I had in mind. Great suffering, rejection, death; that’s not what I signed up for. That’s not who I thought the Messiah would be. Plus – even if he was thinking it – did he actually have to say it outloud!”

The others got quiet, reflecting on that day, like it was yesterday.

What do you think Peter really said to Jesus that day?

- “Hey Jesus, what you said right there in front of everyone – your message is a little strong.
- I am going to have to disagree with you on that suffering and death talk you had out there.
- That message just isn’t going to fly.

It’s like Peter is a campaign manager.

Peter pulls Jesus out of line before he says something he’ll regret. “You know, Jesus – you may want soften your tone and not repeat what you said right there.”

Peter wasn’t saying anything that the others weren’t thinking too. Jesus’ message cuts too deep, right to the core.

Jesus has a very different understanding of discipleship than what most of them probably wanted.

When Jesus' reality and vision begins to conflict with and take over our own, we do what Peter did....we rebuke. We take someone aside to enlighten her, to help her understand, to show him the error of his ways. That's all Peter did. Right?

If we are really honest haven't we, at some point, disagreed with Jesus, asking why he doesn't do what we want? Why won't he see the world our way? It all seems so clear to us.

- If he can cast out demons and silence the man in the synagogue, surely he could silence the voices that drive us crazy.
- He can heal Peter's mother-in-law, why not those we love?
- If he can calm the sea surely he can calm the storms in our world, we have lots of them raging concurrently right now.
- If he can feed 5000 with a few fish and a few pieces of bread why does so much of the world go to bed hungry?

Those are our rebukes.

Have you asked any questions like that recently?

When Jesus does not act the way we want, we rebuke.

Rebuke seems appropriate when you are hearing something you don't want to hear, perhaps you've never heard, and likely never want to hear again.

Rebuke is perhaps necessary when you have not been adequately prepared for that which is to come.

Rebuke is often the only response when faced with the impossible. The incomprehensible.

Just a few verses before today's gospel reading, Jesus asks his disciples, "Who do you say that I am?" Peter's response is really a public confession, "You are the Christ (the Messiah)." Peter's confession sets up our text this morning.

Jesus is the one for whom the prophets spoke, the one for whom Israel has waited, the one who was supposed to restore God's people. Peter is right, and yet he also does not understand.

Later, as Jesus begins to teach about all that is ahead for him, and after Peter's rebuke, Jesus rebukes Peter in public. There is no softer way to say what is to come. Sometimes his words challenge us and shock us. Maybe we are not so different from Peter.

Jesus invites people to engage in something bigger than themselves. To take on the powers of the empire and define oneself in the name of Christ. It's a call to discipleship. A life following him is the best way. This life may be hard and full of uncomfortable moments, but this way leads to resurrection – to new life.

Jesus' words are hard and his way extreme. Surely God didn't covenant with God's people to bring them out of Egypt into the promised land only to say, "Now let it all go." The Messiah is supposed to offer security, protection, and put Israel back on top. Peter is learning, faith in Jesus is not about the elimination of risks, the preservation of life and the ability to control.

Just as Jesus asks his disciples to risk it all, so to he is asking this of us. Risk. Abandon. The ways that lead to separation from God, relinquish the control.

That's what Jesus is doing and he's inviting those who follow him to do nothing less.

How is your Lenten Journey coming along two weeks in? I am struggling on all three points. Risking. Separation from God. Relinquishing control.

In recent weeks, through the various images of our divisive climate, in a community that struggles with trust of people in perceived authority, I have been thinking a lot about integrity. We've seen recent examples of leaders who make us question integrity.

What does integrity look like right now?

What does it mean to lead with integrity?

How are people checking themselves on this?

It's complicated. In the time of pandemic.

People are finding their way. People inevitably make decisions about mutually shared interests or what is based on self-preservation.

Families are making decisions on what is best. Schools are weighing the science and the emotional toll of children and families and trying to figure it out. Churches are making difficult decisions about what is best for the worshipping community.

It's incredibly complicated.

But it's Jesus who invites us into something bigger than ourselves.

Jesus is reminding us that our whole life belongs to God. That we are not in control, God is. Our life is not about us. There is great freedom in knowing that at the end of the day, the role of the Savior of the world has already been cast.

Jesus is pointing the disciples (and us) to the larger story of God's work in the world. Along the way we can see how –

- Jesus chose to give in a world that takes,
- to love in a world that hates,
- to heal in a world that injures,
- to give life in a world that kills.

He offers mercy when others seek vengeance,
forgiveness when others condemn,
and compassion when others are indifferent.

He trusts God's abundance when others say there is not enough.
With each choice he denies himself and shows how God is present.

At some point those kind of choices will catch the attention of and offend those who live and profit by power and control. It will all lead to betrayal, arrest, crucifixion and death. And yet, God acts and death doesn't have the final word, the political powers of the day are overthrown.

The late Rachel Held Evans, offers a most hopeful, inspired answer out of the conviction that our lives find their meaning in the biggest stories we can imagine. To me this speaks about integrity.

She says, "If the biggest story we can imagine, is about God's loving and redemptive work in the world, then our lives will be shaped by that epic. If the biggest story is something else, like nationalism, or 'follow your bliss' or 'he who dies with most toys wins,' then our lives will be shaped by those narratives instead."

God's loving and redemptive work in the world rests with us, as we take our place in the most wonderful, mysterious, important story we can imagine. As we walk in the stories this Lenten season may we uncover again the pattern of our lives that lead us back to love. If we follow this amazing story, our story together, we might leave this place as witnesses and instruments of God's love, **for love's sake.**

Thanks be to God.

“Love and Justice”

Exodus 20:1-17, I Corinthians 1:18-25, John 2:13-22

Part IV of IX in the Sermon Series “The Journey Back to Love”

The Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens, Sr. , Senior Minister

March 7, 2021

A communion meditation dedicated to the memories of Nancy Truax, mother of Jim Truax and my friend, Tom Murrell, to Annette and Richard Murch for 27 years of loving marriage, to the memory of John Lewis and all who crossed the bridge in Selma, Alabama on “Blood Sunday,” 56 years ago this morning, to the 524,000+ Americans who have died from COVID-19 since March 2020 and always to the glory of God!

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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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Jesus is not only a healer of individuals; he is also a prophet to the nations. While he walked the earth, Jesus delivered people from paralysis, mental illness, leprosy, open seeping wounds, deformities, blindness and the inability to speak – or muteness. But, again and

again, in word and in deed he returned to the plight of the poor, whose poverty, in true prophetic fashion, he knew was no historical accident, but the fruit of social injustice.

In John's gospel today, Jesus walks into the temple of Jerusalem and is confronted with social injustice inflicted by the religious elites and their money-making minions who are busy extracting the last ounce of blood money from the poor people of Judaism. In the game of sacrificing animals to cleanse people's sins, vendors are making money selling cattle, sheep and doves to be turned into burnt offerings to God. Money changers – like the payday lenders of our time – are ripping off the poor by charging exorbitant rates as the poor get poorer to purchase the sacrificial animals.

The rich will buy the cattle, the middle class the sheep, and the poor – if they go deep enough in debt - will buy doves in the economy of sacrifice – which packs the passageways in the temple's Holy of Holies. Jesus' stomach is turning as vendors, money changers, and crowds of customers are doing the business of sacrifice everywhere around him as Passover is beginning to come to Jerusalem to be celebrated while the odor of gouging the poor fills his nostrils and all of the air along with the rising smoke of burnt animal flesh.

Jesus has smelled enough. He has seen enough. He sits down. He focuses his anger. He weaves a whip of chords. Then he stands up and uses his whip to drive the cattle and the sheep, the vendors and the money changers out of the temple. Tables are crashing. Coins are flying. Doves are flying around the temple grounds. And speaking of the doves, Jesus yells, *“Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father's house a marketplace!”*

This is not easy listening Jesus. This is not healing hands Jesus. This is not preaching peace Jesus. This is righteous anger Jesus. This is table turning Jesus. This is powerful and purposeful Jesus. This is Just Jesus.

This **Just Jesus** has just sealed his own fate. You see, you don't mess with the economy of the religious elite and simply walk away. You become the sacrificial lamb of God. You pay with your life. So we are witnessing THE lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world – setting up his own sacrifice for the life of the world. He is preparing – if you will – to lay down his life to save the sacrificial animals in Jerusalem's temple.

At this point, there is a major shift in the tone, the pace, even the purpose of the passage in John's gospel. Everything changes in a single moment. The noise of the busy temple, the raucous righteous anger of Jesus all become still. All of the sudden, the Gospel writer, John, takes over. He shifts his style, his language and his tone to focus on what he believes this all means.

Quite frankly, the church has spent 2000 years calming good church people by piling up interpretations of the text that follows. We want the whipping, waving Jesus to simply go away. He is not good for our publicity! John helps us do that.

First, we hear from the disciples who try to make sense of Just Jesus by turning to an ancient text from Psalm 69:9 to reveal that there is zeal in Jesus in this temple scene.

Then the Jewish leaders try to make sense of the incident by questioning Jesus' actions and his radical closing words, which will

later be used to charge him with crimes punishable by death on the cross. *“Destroy this temple,”* he says, *“and in three days I will raise it up”* (v. 19).

Then as the crowd responds in understandable confusion — almost with absence of meaning, John steps into the scene. Remember, John is the “Beloved Disciple,” so called by himself. More fully present than he has been up to this point, John offers the final interpretation in the text. From his unique interpretive posture, he looks backward from the crucifixion and the resurrection that have yet to come, he offers a strange new interpretation in strangely matter-of-fact terms: *“But he was speaking of the temple of his body.”*

To me, this feels like a scene from a movie where everything freezes. You know what I mean. You see feathers flying, money flying, cattle stampeding, sheep running every direction, vendors chasing their animals and money changers trying to pick-up all the coins they can. All is frozen. Even Jesus is frozen with a whip raised over his head about to strike again. Everything is frozen – but looks like pandemonium in this frozen scene.

Only John, the beloved disciple is moving and speaking. It all feels so weird. It feels to me like John doesn’t know what to do with Jesus’ righteous anger. He acknowledges what happened. But, to give it “real meaning,” he wants to spiritualize it. Much has been and should be said about this interpretive moment, about the shift from the temple to Christ’s body, about the surety that distinguishes John’s words from the interpretations that precede this.

The radical thrower of tables, the whipper of all that is wrong, the righteous and angry “Word Made Flesh” dwelling among us “full of grace and truth” becomes - before our eyes - the sacrificial lamb

of God. Maybe we need to spend some more time listening to other people interpret this passage. Maybe our interpreters need to stretch from disciples, Jewish leaders in the temple fray and John spiritualized interpretation to our sisters and brothers who – like the poor and forsaken of Jesus’ time – have a few things to teach us about righteous anger and justice.

Let’s not just spiritualize this story. Instead, let us contextualize this story. Let’s make it our own. Let’s freeze our frame our own story – left in the rubble of temple led by our Raucous and Righteous Savior and allow our sisters and brothers time to speak in our context – to speak to us about what righteous anger facing social injustice looks like.

So John, if you are listening, we want to move you out of the freeze frame and move the “Black woman warrior poet” Audre Lorde in place of you. Audre shares her context and connects with Jesus’ anger in the temple. 40 years ago, in a lecture about Women responding to Racism, Audre Lorde said,

“My response to racism is anger. I have lived with that anger, ignoring it, feeding upon it, learning to use it before it laid my visions to waste, for most of my life. Once I did it in silence, afraid of the weight. My fear of anger taught me nothing. Your fear of that anger will teach you nothing, so face it and use it fearlessly.” from *“The Uses of Anger: Women Responding to Racism,”* a 1981 lecture by Audre Lorde.

Now, let’s move Audra out of the freeze frame and bring in Brittany Cooper to speak out of the Freeze Frame, too. In 2018 in her powerful book, *“Eloquent Rage: A Black Feminist Discovers Her Superpower,”* Brittany Cooper wrote: *“Black women have the right to be mad as hell. We have been dreaming of freedom and carving out spaces*

for liberation since we arrived on these shores. There is no other group, save Indigenous women, that knows and understands more fully the soul of the American body politic than Black women, whose reproductive and social labor have made the world what it is today.” WOW!

One more time, insert Cole Arthur Riley of Cornell University into the freeze frame – delivering her reflection on our table-flipping Savior last summer during the heat of the protests following the murder of George Floyd: *“We fear that to allow for anger is to become less like you. Let us meet the God of the prophets. For you tell the truth. You hold fury at injustice. You, in embodied anger, flipped the temple tables. Would you help us to become faithful discerners of when to calm and when to rouse? Rejecting that anger which leads to bitterness or hatred of another, yet tapping into a righteous rage when that which you’ve created is under abuse and neglect. The dignity of creation demands our emotions. Make ours a beautiful rage.”* Cole Arthur Riley, @blackliturgies, on July 29, 2020.

Make ours a beautiful rage.

Listening to my African American sisters, I hear and feel the power of rage and righteousness coming together in this moment in Jerusalem’s temple – and this moment in our land. It is as though they were on Jesus’ shoulders as he was whipping his way through the temple and unleashing the spirit of God with Holy Passover power.

I believe Jesus could no longer abide in the separation of love and justice. In the spirit of justice, he was figuring out what belonged to whom and was seeking to return it to them. He was seeking to give back to the poor – their money, their dignity, their real faith and their love for God. In the spirit of love, he was defending and

protecting those with whom he had been ministering and healing and teaching and preaching. He couldn't watch them lose any more. He couldn't bear to witness his Father's House or his beloved brothers and sisters being used and abused by thieves and charlatans who were operating in the safe shelter of an abusive religious leadership structure.

It was out of love and protection; from a heart of justice for all – that Jesus righteously raged in the temple that morning. Love and justice always need to stand side-by-side as people are empowered to make change in this world.

Enter one last picture in this freeze frame of the temple – The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. spoke of love and justice inseparably bound together when he said: *‘Power without love is reckless and abusive, and love without power is sentimental and anemic. Power at its best is love implementing the demands of justice, and justice at its best is power correcting everything that stands against love.’* Amen.

So here we are – the Raging, Righteous, whip-snapping Son of a Carpenter, Son of God, Savior of the World. I want to take one last look at him. I want us to look in his eyes. I want us to see the eyes of Jesus. Then, I want us to see what he saw that day. With the eyes of love and justice, I want us see – through the eyes of Jesus – what hurts and harms people. I want us to see – through the eyes of Jesus in the Temple that morning – why he was raging. Because he saw that poverty needed to come to end. He saw that abuse needs to stop. He sees today that racism and sexism and heterosexism and homophobia and misogyny and mistreatment of people is tearing us apart and it needs to end.

So, with the frame frozen, I want us to see his eyes. I want us to see his hands. I want us to be his hands – through his eyes and through the power in his hands, I want us to become table turners too.

Let's really turn the tables. Through the eyes and the hands of Jesus in this world – let us love the people who others call loveless and whom they treat terribly. Let us confront what is wrong and do what is right. Let us protect and serve those who are not protected and served by policing policies, procedures and behaviors that hurt and kill our Black and Brown sisters and brothers. Let us defend every American's basic right to food, decent housing, medical care and education.

While charity is always needed to alleviate the effects of injustice, let us – as table turners – work for justice which eliminates the causes of injustice. As we do the work of love and justice, we need to know, justice will make unpopular. It will make us uncomfortable because justice leads to confrontation while charity never really affects the status quo.

While we are grateful for food pantries, we need to create a world where no one goes hungry because folks have a just and livable wage. They have good jobs. They have housing. They don't need food pantries and free lunches at homeless shelters because they have a place to call home.

I pray this day that our righteous anger turns to action for justice. I pray this day, we come to Christ's table – to set it back up – so it's not turned over. Then, to sit at Christ's table of love and grace and see truly the eyes and hands of Jesus. And that we become his eyes and hands for love and justice – Now. Amen.

“God’s Love is Deep and Broad”

Numbers 21:4-9, Ephesians 2: 1-10, John 3:14-21

Part V of IX in the Sermon Series “The Journey Back to Love”

The Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens, Sr., Senior Minister

March 14, 2021

A sermon dedicated to Graham Michael Bukach who born to Caitlin Graham and Michael Bukach this past Tuesday, to my grandson Rylan Antonio Ahrens who turns 4 on March 18th, to John Bachman and Thomas Kuhn and all our members who have not been to worship for the past year, for all our members and friends who have joined us virtually for the past 52 weeks and always to the glory of God!

Today is the fourth Sunday of Lent. It is the day that the penitential mourning of the season gives way to God’s love and joy. This Sunday has a name in the Christian tradition. Its name, *Laetare* (pronounced – La-tar-a) Sunday, derives from the opening words of the text for the Catholic Mass, “Laetare Jerusalem” (“Rejoice, O Jerusalem”).

This theme of joy came to be celebrated in the ancient church in various ways, for example, a rose on the altar, connects the beauty of spring and the thorns of suffering. As early as the 11th Century, this custom of flowers symbolized a celebration of reaching the

midpoint of Lent. Today, we continue our sermon series, *“The Journey Back to Love”* as we rejoice in the beauty of Spring and the halfway point of Lent.

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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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We are all on a journey back to love. Who would have imagined our love for one another would most fully be demonstrated by wearing masks, gloves and gowns and washing our hands? Who would have thought 366 days ago that expressions of true love would be all about isolating, staying apart, not embracing and then getting a shot in our shoulder when our number came up? And would have thought that we, the United States of America, would lead the world in unnecessary and untimely deaths largely because we politicized a battle with a virus – actually a viral hitchhiker who hitched a ride on our love and good intentions and wreaked havoc when it arrived at its destination?

Yesterday, as the first anniversary of COVID-19 in our world came around First Congregational Church, UCC, Columbus, Ohio was in the news again. Because of Mr. Mark Williams’ and our teenagers’ vision and courage, this church has become a beacon of light on Broad Street and a silent witness to our year-long vigil in the pandemic battle against SARS- CoV-2 mostly commonly known as COVID-19.

On our behalf and on behalf of every person in our nation and the world, they planted white flags on our west lawn in late November 2020 to symbolize the horrible loss of life we have all witnessed from COVID-19. Each flag represents 1,000 souls. In Ohio, we have lost 17,871 lives to COVID-19. In our church and our extended family of faith alone, we have lost close to 30 of our loved ones.

These flags and our lawn have become a place where people come to pray. It has become a place where news stations do live shots at all hours of the day and night to speak about loss, about grief and pain. These tiny white flags have become a symbolic gathering place for our collective grief and loss.

One year ago, today, March 14, 2020, 10 Americans had died of COVID-19. One year later, more than 29 million Americans have tested positive with COVID-19 and more than 527,000 have died. As of this morning, the world has lost 2,634,370 souls – and we know there are unreported or misreported deaths as well.

Last Wednesday night, we held a service of Remembrance and Hope. About 45 people were there in simultaneous viewing. As of this morning, 110 people have viewed the service. It was a service of Word and Music, of prayers and candlelight and Spirit. It was a service of love. At the end, masked and here with Emily, Mark, Kevin, Melissa and Peter, I lost it. I broke down. I began sobbing uncontrollably. I just kept whispering, *“I am so sorry you are gone. I am so sorry you all died too soon. I wish you were all here.”*

Today, as we reach the midpoint of Lent and on our way to the cross, there is a respite from the rigors of penitence. In the midst of the often-trivial moralizing which happens in this season, the

Gospel of John opens to the third chapter and refreshes us with the essence of our faith:

“God so loved the world that he gave his only Son . . . for God sent the son into the world not to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him” (John 3:16,17).

*“Rejoice, O people! God loves you! God gave God’s son for you! Christ came into **the world** (not the church, not Columbus, not America, but **the entire world**). He came not to condemn the world, but to save the world!”*

Right in the middle of Lent and right at the one-year mark of our physical separation from one another, this day gives us pause. Somewhere, between the beginning of Lent and its midpoint; somewhere between the beginning of each of our lives and this point, somewhere between the outbreak of this horrific pandemic and this moment, we have forgotten or too often lost track of what an absolutely amazing gift we have in the love of God for us through our savior, Jesus Christ.

It’s good to be reminded of this, today. It is also good to remember and rejoice in the truth that God is not in the business of condemning us, or the rest of the world. While others may want to play God and manipulate the words of God for judgment, not grace, God is about the business of loving and saving us and the rest of the world!

But, what does God’s loving and saving business look like?

John 3:14-15 tells us that life in God’s love – through Christ – is uplifting and eternal. Like Moses’ serpent in the wilderness, Jesus is lifted up – both on the cross and in the ascension into glory – and

in this lifting, belief in God's sacrifice and glory are given shape and form and eternal life is offered.

Uplifting and eternal – are central elements of God's saving love.

I have seen the uplifting and eternal nature of God's love so often become manifest in the love, through suffering and pain, that people share in difficult and tumultuous times. While I sometimes wish that I could wave a magic wand over the pain I see embodied in suffering love, I am also aware that so much of the immensity of love would be diminished and even unrecognizable without it. To suffer in love for the one whom you love, in the midst of their suffering, is to live life to its holiest. You have told me this. You have shown me this.

I believe we actually come to see eternal life in the face of such suffering. We see grace, twisted by pain, but embraced by love. We see a peace which passes human understanding, growing forth from the depth of suffering.

I think of love coming from pain in the paintings of Vincent Van Gogh. To imagine that one man could see such beauty and color in this world of ours while feeling such pain and inmost torture is almost inconceivable. While he suffered emotionally and mentally, Vincent Van Gogh portrayed such vivid beauty outside himself.

One painting named "The Disposition," has always moved me deeply. The Disposition depicts the scene at the foot of the cross following the death of Jesus. His body has been disposed from the cross to the earth below. As the dead body of Jesus lies at the foot of the cross, John, the author of today's Gospel text is beside him, having just washed his body of blood. Jesus' mother, Mary is

looking on, but close at hand. Her face is terribly twisted in pain. Her body is turned half way toward him, half way from him. In the distance, you see several people including the shadowy figure of Peter, who had denied and abandoned Jesus in his time of crucifying death.

For those who have stood by the cross – stood by him in his suffering – there is intense pain, but their pain is holy pain. For those who have tortured him or abandoned him, the pain is different. It is the pain of guilt. It is the pain of dispossession.

Uplifting and eternal are elements of God’s saving love. Such love is often experienced in the pain of dispossession. And honestly, it is what we do in the face of the cross and at the foot of the cross which matters most. To experience God’s uplifting and eternal love, we must go there.

We must abide there.

The ones who teach us about the saving love of God, are the ones in our lives who show us in their suffering how to love God, how to praise God and how to be of service to others.

Stephen Shoemaker tells the story of such a woman in *GodStories*. Jean Stout was a woman who had been disabled all her life. As a young person, Jean had been too embarrassed about how she looked to be baptized. So, later in life, Stephen baptized her in her nursing home bed. When she was close to death, taking massive doses of medicine to reduce her pain, Stephen was visiting with Jean. She smiled at Stephen and said, *“The only thing that helps me in my pain is liquid morphine. This may sound silly to you pastor, but that morphine is the most beautiful color of blue I have ever seen.”*

Her improbable praise brought tears to Stephen.

Jean, like so many I have come to know in my ministry, reached a point in her battle for life, in which they have said something like this:

“God you’ve been in my actions, you’ve guided my life, and walked with me through all I have encountered. Now be in my dying, lift me up and carry me in your arms into the heavenly dwelling place that you call home. I can no longer care for my family, Lord. I hate that worse than anything. So, I leave them in your hands in the hands of those whom you send as angels of mercy and love. Help them accept your presence in their lives, however you choose to make your love manifest.”

Sadly, in this past year, many of our loved ones and those whose names we do not even know, have died alone – except for the love of God and the care and love of doctors, nurses and nursing aids by their sides.

When such words as those spoken by our loved ones and neighbors come into the hearts and minds of people – a healing happens. It is a healing deeper and broader than the body which is destined for death, a healing that is a final union with God. From such as these, I have learned not only how to die, but how to live. I have learned to offer my passion to God as well as my well-intended actions.

At the heart of today’s gospel is GOD’S LOVE.

Mother Teresa of Calcutta once wrote of John 3:16 - *“The Good News is that God **still loves the world** through you. You are God’s Good News. You are God’s love in action. Each time anyone comes in contact with us, they must become different and better people because of having met us. We must radiate God’s love.”*

God is still loving the world and by many accounts, it is not a world that is easy to love. Terror, war, hunger, ecological devastation, political divides, hate crimes and crazy online conspiratorial groups, poverty beyond imagination, racial and economic injustice are among those elements of the inhumanity of humans to other humans that make this world hard to love. **Nevertheless**, (and remember – our God is always found in the Nevertheless), God continues to love the world.

God loves the unlovable and the unlovely. God loves the lonely who have no one else to love them. God loves the man who never thinks of God. God loves the woman who lives in God's presence continually. God loves the graceless and the graceful. God loves the one who has never given a thought to God and has no clue how to lift a prayer and the one who seeks God and prays without ceasing. God loves the one who is angry at God and God loves the one who is content in God. God loves the one who spits at God and the one who smiles at God. God loves you just the same as God loves me.

As St. Augustine has written, *“God loves each of us as if there was only one of us to love.”*

As we head into the last half of Lent, having been filled with the grace of Laetare Sunday, may we remember that there will always be misunderstandings. Words will be always be spoken that do not reflect the love of God. There will always be someone to spread tales about you to others. There will always be unkindness and there will always viruses and there be wars and rumors of wars.

But remember this even more – God's deep and broad love is uplifting and eternal and will always be with us. And Jesus – will also – will always be with us to show us how to love. Amen.

“Love Eternal”

Jeremiah 31:31-34, John 12:20-33

Part VI of X in the Sermon Series “The Journey Back to Love”

The Rev. Emily Krause Corzine, Associate Minister

March 21, 2021

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Prayer for Illumination: Holy God, by the power of the Holy Spirit, illumine these words read and proclaimed. Silence in us any voice but your own. May we hear with joy what you have for us this day. Amen.

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One year ago in March, I remember standing here on the First Sunday we offered a livestream worship service and gathered to give thanks to God. We offered prayers for the uncertainty of what was ahead of all of us. We lifted our voices, trusting that you were lifting your voices, too. Even though in person worship was cancelled, Love wasn't cancelled, Mercy wasn't cancelled, Prayer wasn't cancelled, Hope wasn't cancelled and especially, the command to love our neighbors as Christ loved us was not cancelled either.

Through the year, we have been “apart together” and finding ways to connect and be the church in new ways.

In our Series, *Journey Back to Love* we find ourselves ever so close to Holy Week. I wonder sometimes if we ever really left the Lent of 2020. The year has proven to be a lengthy journey of discovery, exploration, fatigue, heartache, lament, sorrow and unimaginable loss.

There has also been challenge and growth; awareness and surprise; support and understanding.

Lent is our season of honesty. It is a reality check on our lives. It is a time when we have an opportunity to break out of our illusions to face the reality of our life in preparation for Easter, when we welcome a radical new beginning.

What is the stark reality that you face? What hardship has knocked on your door this year? What challenge is present now that you never saw coming?

Our text from the prophet Jeremiah is situated in a season of failure in ancient Israel. The city of Jerusalem has been conquered and burned by the Babylonian army, the temple has been destroyed, the monarchy has been terminated, and the leading citizens deported into exile. Over a long period of time Israel refused the commandments of Sinai. Israel did not take justice seriously and did not ground its life in the God of the Exodus, thus turning away from God. And so, in covenantal perspective, came the judgment of God¹.

Jeremiah tells the people that this is not the end of the story: even now, God is making the first move to restore their relationship. God promises to make a new and even better covenant with them—to forge an even more honest, open, and intimate connection with

God's people. The people have sinned, yes; but God's forgiveness flows from an even deeper generosity, from the depth of God's longing to know and be known by God's people.

This is the new Covenant with God that was read earlier. The poet writes,

“But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, ‘Know the Lord’, for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the Lord; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.” (Jeremiah 31: 33-34).

This covenant restores the relationship between God and Israel. It offers new hope, new possibility, and life that all will know God. To know God in a new way means a readiness to treasure this relationship with God.

God's assertion of the new covenant is one that overrides a painful truth of the previous broken covenant. The new covenant is an act of God's inexplicable mercy and graciousness².

What we learn the covenant God makes with Israel is that it is God's initiative. It is God who makes the first move. The renewal of the covenant is entirely God's action. There is no initiative from humanity. Sins are forgiven and forgotten as a way to make all things new.

God is saying I love you as my people and I will be with you forever. How deep must this love be for God to come so far for the ones God loves?

For those of us who wonder what it means to maintain a relationship with God, we have been tested over the last year. How do I maintain my spiritual practice, my routine, my worshipful spirit when I cannot do what I usually do. Does what I do right now, in my life keep the covenant that God makes with me?

If you have concerns about your own covenantal keeping, know that God is persistent. God is relentlessly persistent to figure out how to be in relationship with us. This is a promising and hopeful word that will carry us through.

Time and time again, we falter and fail. We fall short of the support our neighbors need. When we become complacent in our practices or complicit in our silence — God will always seek us out to renew in us the covenant of love.

As Lent is our season of honesty, let's for a moment address the concerns that threaten the command to love our neighbor as Christ loves us. The threat that our Asian siblings face each and every day.

Since this time last year, 3,795 incidents were reported from all 50 states and the District of Columbia to the group Stop Asian and Pacific Islander Hate³. A Pew Research study reported 3 in 10 Asian Americans have experienced racial slurs or racist jokes since the beginning of the pandemic⁴. Hateful rhetoric and physical violence, mean Tweets and internet threats have continued to fracture relationships, in our own families, in our communities, targeting people's lives.

Five days ago, on March 16, 2021, outside of Atlanta, Georgia, Robert Aaron Long, killed eight people. Eight neighbors lost to this senseless act of gun violence. Six of those souls were Asian American women. Four of them were of Korean heritage. We name them here to honor their lives and hold up their memory so that their families are not silenced and the voices of others Asian Americans are not silenced. We remember,

Soon Chung Park 박순정, Hyun Jung Grant [김]현정, Sun Cha Kim 김선자, Yong Ae Yue 유영애, Yong A Yu-eh, XiaoxiaTan 谭小洁, Daoyou Feng 冯道友, Delaina Ashley Yaun and Paul Andre Michels. All beloved children of God. Taken from families and friends too soon.

While it's been reported that the motive is unclear, it is hard to disentangle race from these killings. If we are being honest, we've seen this kind of hate before.

- We saw it in 2018, in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania at the Tree of Life synagogue, killing 11 people.
- We saw it again in 2016 in Orlando, Florida, at the Pulse Nightclub, killing 49 people.
- We saw it again in 2015, in Charleston South Carolina, at Mother Emmanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church, killing 9 people.

In his letter from the Birmingham Jail, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Junior recalls the times he would drive by the large white prominent churches in the south, asking himself “What kind of people worship here? Who is their God?”

What kind of people worship here?

I hope over time you'll help me answer this question more fully.

The kind of people to speak up and speak out against the xenophobic rhetoric, white supremacy, mysogeny and hate that fractures our communities and our country.

The kind of people who are willing to march for justice and work with local leaders to make real change for our neighbors here in this city. The type of people who will continue to work for the ways we can do better. How we can see each other more clearly? How we can honor each other more deeply? The kind of people who lead with our humanity and our hurts, our brokenness and our broken heartedness.

The kind of people who worship here, are those who stand with and stand for, and stand beside anyone who is judged, hated and even killed because of the color of their skin, their sexuality and gender identity, beliefs or background.

At the very least, that is the kind of people we hope to be. The kind of people we feel called to be.

But more pressing, is the question "Who is our God?"

Ours is a God who loves each and every one of us, just as we are. Full stop. Ours is a God who does not stand for racism or bigotry or sexism or mysogeny or hatred in any of its varied forms. Our God is a good and gracious and a Just God⁵.

To our Asian siblings out there who are terrified right now, to those of you who the world has given now another reason to be more scared and more alienated — you, Beloved, are not alone.

This church stands with you, we stand beside you. We see you and we love you. But most of all, God sees you and God loves you.

The Covenant that God places on our hearts is to be a God who loves beyond human understanding and yet became human, that we might come to know just how deep and how wide and all-consuming that love really is.

May we seek all the ways we can to be in relationship to God and with one another, for the sake of the world. Amen.

¹ Walter Brueggemann, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/ferguson-and-forgiveness-jeremiah-3131-34_b_6877392.

² Walter Brueggemann, *Texts for Preaching, Year B*, p. 231.

³ <https://a1w.90d.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/210312-Stop-AAPI-Hate-National-Report-.pdf>.

⁴ Experienced racial slurs or racist jokes since the beginning of the pandemic. <https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2020/07/01/many-black-and-asian-americans-say-they-have-experienced-discrimination-amid-the-covid-19-outbreak/>.

⁵ The Rev. Dr. Charlene Han Powell, First Presbyterian Church, Berkeley, CA.

“Love Caught Between Joy and Pain”*

Matthew 21:1-11, Philippians 2:5-11, Mark 14:43-15:47

Part VII of X in the Sermon Series “The Journey Back to Love”

The Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens, Sr., Senior Minister

March 28, 2021

A meditation dedicated to Dawn George for her faithfulness across the years and all the silent witnesses, and all the faithful women and men who anoint the living and the dead, who serve quietly, whose names we do not know, whose humility in loving and giving is reflected in their quiet love and always to the glory of God!

Between the Palms of this Sunday and the Passion of Good Friday, there are people and stories in Mark’s Gospel that call our attention to the fullness of Jesus’ love for us. One such passage is Mark 14:3: *While he was at Bethany in the house of Simon the leper, as he sat at the table, a woman came with an alabaster jar of very costly ointment of nard, and she broke open the jar and poured the ointment on his head.*

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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 story of Holy Week is epic. The movement from Palms and Hosannas, to Jesus' table turning time in the temple, to his final parables, to the Last Supper, to the agony He experienced in prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane, to the time of trial and finally to the crucifixion of Jesus on the cross of Calvary is an epic story. It is our 2000-year-old story with a cast of thousands and epoch-shaping new beginning in the Resurrection of our Savior on Easter morning.

In the midst of all of this — there is one woman who embodies the essence of this story like none other. She is nameless. She appears on the fourth day of Holy Week with a jar of anointing oil and a heart of compassion for Jesus. She is there to focus on Jesus. She is there to care for him and to share extravagant love for him. This no-name woman is the one person pointing to his presence as God's Chosen Messiah. This no-name woman is there FOR JESUS.

In spite of her anonymity, there is absolutely nothing subtle or secret about the scene in which she appears in Mark's Gospel. The woman approaches Jesus carrying the type of fragile stone jar used to preserve precious, imported perfume. Everyone can see that she is bearing a luxurious gift — the jar itself speaks of extravagance.

Most of the witnesses are astounded when she breaks the jar rather than dispense just the amount needed for a simple gesture. Destroying it indicates that rather than hold anything back, she intends to allow the entire content of fragrant oil to flow over Jesus' head. The aroma of the oil saturates Jesus and the room where it happens. The fragrance fills the air with a bouquet of splendor which most of the disciples and close followers of Jesus have rarely experienced. The oil drips from his head to beard to shoulders and down his body to his feet.

This anonymous anointing woman comes to Jesus during the last week of his life. She has probably witnessed his entrance into Jerusalem like a pauper king acclaimed with cries of “Hosanna!” Like everyone else in Jerusalem, she has seen his public display of anger and action in the temple. She knows his “cleansing” of the temple has infuriated the authorities. She has heard his retorts in the parable of the wicked tenants and his critique of the pretentious scribes.

By the time he is reclining at the table with Simon and friends, the air around Jesus is permeated with an aura of danger and death. All who have heard him and seen him this week, have understood that the murderous tenants of Jesus’ parable have their real-life counterparts among Jerusalem’s power elite who are plotting his death. She, like the others, can sense the sharpening of swords. She like the others, can hear the nails pounding outside the city gates as his cross on Calvary is being constructed for his execution.

At least three times, Jesus has told his disciples that he would suffer and die, only to see how they avoided facing that reality. During the final week of his life, Judas sells him out for 30 pieces of silver, and except for John who comes to the cross with him, the other 10 run and hide and Peter openly denies even knowing who he is. But during these last days of his life, when danger is in the air and the powerful are planning his demise, this one anonymous woman gives her all in an extravagant gesture of faith and love.

Often the telling of this story focuses on the complaint about waste and Jesus’ response that she is preparing him for death. Rarely do we emphasize that her anointing is a symbolic statement that Jesus is the Christ, a title which literally means “the anointed one.”

She does not make this gesture while Jesus is at the height of his power, when crowds are flocking to his side, or even as part of the cheering crowd as he entered Jerusalem. She anoints him as his fate is becoming ever more obvious, when fickle crowds are starting to blow with the winds, as people are trending toward the crucifixion and jealous jeers will soon be crying, “Crucify him!”

Jesus looks at her and says what is obvious to at least the two of them. He acknowledges she is preparing him for death.

The anonymous anointing woman is the counterpoint to all the other disciples and to all who refuse to believe in Jesus’ message. With one extravagant gesture, she professed her belief that he, the vulnerable prophet who was surely about to die, is indeed God’s anointed one. He is the Messiah.

By pouring oil over him, she demonstrates her faith in action. She shows everyone that God is working through this man who has consistently taught that LOVE is the only law of life. Jesus is caught between joy and pain. And this woman simply and meaningfully loves him. He has given all his love to his brothers and sisters. He has shown nothing but love to all God’s children.

She gets it. As she pours her riches all over Jesus, she demonstrates that love poured out BY the Son of God needs to be reciprocated in love poured out FOR Him. She shows that wealth is worthless unless it is given away. She shows us that God is not revealed through human power, but through the Spirit of Love Given to others.

The anointing woman is the first among all the women who stand by Jesus through his crucifixion and his resurrection as she

expresses her faith and faithfulness in a gesture of love that goes far beyond every verbal proclamation. She shares Jesus' own faith in humanity. She shows us that *"God is love in a passion which stands infinitely beyond any insult from us"* (a quote from Jesuit priest, Fr. Silvano Fausti).

Do you know a follower of Jesus with such gentle and tender love as this? Are you a follower like this? Do you follow Jesus and care for him as she does?

In our journey back to love, I implore each of us to be like the anonymous anointing woman. On our journey back to love — act as she acted.

Rather than focus on how we too often mirror the betrayers, the deniers, the untrustworthy, the fallen and the fearful, I pray that this anonymous anointing woman teaches us how to love and live our faith in ways that go beyond human understanding.

To be like her could cost us everything.

But isn't that the message and the meaning of this holy week?

*Drawn from Sr. Mary M. McGlone's article, "Palm Sunday: Be the Anointing Woman," *National Catholic Reporter* online, March 27, 2021.

“Love at the Table of Our Lord”

Exodus 12:1-14, 1 Corinthians 11:23-26, John 13:1-15

Part VIII of X in the Sermon Series “The Journey Back to Love”

The Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens, Sr., Senior Minister

April 1, 2021

A Communion meditation dedicated to the memory of Katie Schoener and Zack Daniels and to their beloved family Ed and Ruth Schoener and Jeff and Teresa Daniels and always to the glory of God!

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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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It was strange that Judas chose to come to dinner that night. After all, everyone knew he had been “hanging out with the enemy” and that he was up to something. Then he allowed Jesus to wash his feet. After that, no one really expected him to stay for the Passover Seder. But, he did. It turned out to be the last supper they would all share together.

Through the years, Judas had been disconsolate at best. He was like your “Crazy Uncle at Thanksgiving.” He had conspiracy theories and ideas about revolution, fears of who was coming for them, how they must join the Zealot movement and much, much more – ideas which his “band of brothers” could not abide.

Although he had served as treasurer for the Jesus movement, they didn’t have much money to speak of – so it’s not like he had manage the funds. But he always made a big deal about how they spent their money – commenting on what was right and wrong about every expenditure. And that was Judas at his “at best.”

At his worst, Judas was a betrayer. He was a deceiver. He was deceptive. He was a “turncoat.” In the end, he would turn Jesus over to the Roman guard and the leaders of the Temple establishment for certain execution. He did this for “blood money” – for 30 pieces of silver. He seemed certain when he started the venture. Then, in the end, he was overwhelmed with grief and shame.

Scripture tells us that Judas was afflicted by emotional and spiritual conflicts. I believe Judas suffered some form of mental illness. He was haunted by his visions of what Jesus *should say* and *should do* and where the money *should go*, and on the night of betrayal, he tried to force Jesus’ hand. But Jesus held tight. He never followed Judas’ plan and that brought about the unraveling of Judas.

Within 24 hours of the Seder dinner ending, Jesus and Judas would be dead. Jesus would be executed by crucifixion and Judas would be dead by suicide. Each one would die on a tree – one tied and nailed to a tree in the form of a cross and the other on a limb in a noose at the end of a rope.

But on this night like no other night (as the words of the Passover Seder say), on this night the shadow of death would not pass over them. On this night, the shadow of death hung over the table where Jesus and Judas and 11 of their closest friends gathered. Remembering the Exodus Story, breaking the unleavened bread, drinking wine and soaking in the last measure of time and space together, they were laughing and singing, eating and drinking, praying and remembering.

Before the night was through, Judas would betray Jesus with a kiss. I have often wondered about that kiss. It must have broken Jesus' heart. When he looked Judas in the eye he said, "you have betrayed me with a kiss." He must have had tears in his eyes. He must have had a quiver in his voice. He must have had a question in the tone of his delivery cause Jesus loved Judas. Jesus died twice on Good Friday – first from a broken heart from betrayal and desertion and then from crucifixion.

But just as Jesus forgives Judas in his own way, we must forgive those who forsake us and turn against us. Moreover, when they then die by suicide, we need to remember them. We need to still speak their names. Their suffering unto death by their own hands doesn't need the additional pain inflicted by our struggles to understand them. We may not understand Judas in this story tonight but we understand that Jesus loved him. Jesus loves all, in spite of the pain and trauma of betrayal, and denial and rejection, and we must love everyone in spite of it, too.

In the end, Jesus asked for his disciples to remember one thing. He asked them to remember that the Bread was his body, and that the wine was his blood. He asked them to remember him, when they

were gathered somewhere down the road to break bread and drink wine. He wasn't asking very much at all. In reality, he was asking for everything.

Tonight, I want you to remember. Remember the Bread and the Wine are the body and blood of Christ. Remember that last suppers often become resurrection feasts. Remember those beautiful moments that you have treasured at dinner tables and picnic tables with loved ones that sometimes precede what becomes a dreadful dawn of a day that comes next. Remember what happened, remember what they said there, and remember what it means to you.

In the aftermath of this night, two of the 13 soon would be dead. All of the remaining company of believers, all of their friends and family and all those who followed Jesus to the cross would be changed forever. Everything changed on this night. Our faith was formed in a new way as a sacrament of life came into being on this night through the institution of the Lord's Supper.

On this night, Jesus gave us this gift, this gift of remembrance.

He offers us the sacrament of life as we are initiated into the sacrament of Holy Communion. And we must remember, this sacrament is never, never private property of the sacred hierarchy. This sacrament is foundational for all of human life. The love and the grace we experience in this Eucharistic celebration is basic to human life.

Daily life is full of sacraments. In the archeology of everyday life, the sacraments thrive. They are known in simple things, in a cup of coffee, in a drink of water, in a beautiful moment shared with family

or friends. They're sacraments. They are signs that contain, and exhibit, and recall, and visualize and communicate a whole another reality – a reality different from ourselves, different from themselves as they present themselves to us.

Let us remember – the sacrament of life that is given tonight never tears us away from this world. Not at all. Rather, the sacrament always calls us to look more closely and more deeply into the very heart of the world.

Tonight, as we come to Christ's table of grace, I want us to breathe deeply the meaning of this night.

Tonight, Jesus *takes, and blesses, and breaks, and shares* himself as a sacrament for the life of the world.

Tonight, he offers the sacraments to Judas and Peter; to John and Thomas because the Bread of Life and the Cup of Blessing are for betrayers and deniers; they're for beloved disciples and the doubting disciples.

Tonight, despite everything we have said and we have done, he wants to wash our feet. He wants to be for us a presence of love. He wants us to come join him at the table. He wants us to receive the bread and the wine. He wants us to receive his body and his blood. He just wants us to join him. Amen.

“Love unto Death”

Psalm 22, Isaiah 52:13-53:12; John 18:1-19:42; Luke 23:34
Part IX of X in the Sermon Series “The Journey Back to Love”

The Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens, Sr., Senior Minister
April 2, 2021

A meditation dedicated to all the men, women and children at our Borders who seeking to find home in our country and always to the glory of God!

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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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He committed no crimes. He did nothing wrong. He was without sin. He never should have been executed – just as no one should ever be executed. He came to deliver and save all people. His method was teaching and healing. His way was justice with peace.

He message was Pure Love.

When soldiers and betrayers and the fearful religious establishment came for him, he told his followers to put down their swords.

When they beat him and tore his back with whips of nails, he prayed for them. When they mocked him, he absorbed the hatred and derision. When they nailed him to the cross, he cried to his Father in the midst of his pain. And out of his loneliness and agony, he asked for God to forgive.

Then, as he was stretched out on the crucifying tree, he said to God, ***“Father forgive them for they know not what they are doing.”***

Who were “they?” Who was “them?”

Was it Caiaphas and the Jewish leaders?

Was it Herod and Pilate?

Was it Peter and Judas?

Was it all of the other disciples and followers who abandoned him?

Was it the Roman soldiers and centurion who executed him on the lynching tree?

Was it all of the world who did not know him and did not care about his pure love?

Was it you?

Was it me?

“Father forgive them for they do not know what they are doing.”

Who was the **“them”** that needed forgiveness for their lack of knowing? For their lack of compassion? For their judgment unto death? For their untold abuse and neglect of their own?

Who were they that lacked love?

I believe – It was everyone. Everyone needed forgiveness for what they had done and for what they had left undone.

Then, as now, we hear his cry to US.

“Father forgive them for they do not know what they are doing.”

Whenever we act like Black lives really don't matter;
or ignore children and families separated and imprisoned,
and caged at our southern border inside our nation;
or when we turn away from neighbors who are Asian-
American and ask as though “no one said anything here;”
or when we abandon our elderly;
or when we turn a blind eye to the execution of yet
another sister or brother in our nation;
or when we forget our single friends living in isolation and
facing tremendous loneliness in the midst of separation
from family and other friends;
or when we fail to hear the weeping of our teens as they
cry out of their emotional or spiritual pain;
or when we fail to hear the real tears and lamentations of
our children who cry themselves to sleep;
or when we miss the anguish of our unemployed or
severely underemployed neighbors and friends;
or when we fail to hear the cries of our poor, or see and
serve hungry and homeless men, women and children on
the front steps of our church and on our streets;

or when we turn a blind eye when police wound and kill rather than protect and serve;

or when we adopt dogs and cats but leave children orphaned and abandoned without home and family;

or when we deny the existence of a killer virus and its deadly effects and side effects on tens of millions;

or when we call an insurrection a peaceful demonstration and murder an accident;

or when we forget hard working parents who are working to raise their kids and teach them as their “students” under the stress and trauma of pandemic times;

or when we blame everyone else for what is ours, and our behavior;

or when we lack human decency and love...

... I can hear him cry,

“Father forgive them for they do not know what they are doing.”

Every one of us still needs forgiveness for all that we have done and for all that we have not done.

As our Savior hangs dying on the cross tonight, I ask you to remember him.

And remember this:

Every word, every step,

every just action, every prayer,

every song, every dance,

every healing, every teaching,

every sigh, every breath,

– even his very last breath –
Was offered in love.

Jesus loved us unto death. Amen.

“Love Rising”

Isaiah 25:6-9; Acts 10:34-43, John 20:1-18

Part X of X in the Sermon Series “The Journey Back to Love”

The Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens, Sr., Senior Minister

April 4, 2021

An Easter Meditation dedicated to Deborah M. Anderson for her transformational Easter banner dedicated this holy day, to the memories of Dr. Paul Minus and Janet Younger, to Brian and Abby Cave on their 12th anniversary, in thanksgiving for Dr. Karl and Sallie Danneberger and Thom Smith and Dr. Cami Curren, to the memory of The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. who was martyred this day in 1968, and always to the glory of God!

We have taken a journey through Lent and Holy Week. Emily and I have delivered nine sermons along the road of this journey. You can find them all on our website and they are also all on YouTube.

It has been a long journey back to love.

I thank you for taking this trip with us.

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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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It is a miracle that she is even alive. Now she is on a journey back to love.

Jesus saved her from certain death and now as Mary Magdalene makes her way through the dark city streets headed for the tomb of her friend and savior in the predawn hours of this day, memories of him flood her mind. *“The way my life was headed, it could have been me in a tomb instead of my Lord,”* she ponders as she replays her life story turned around and saved by Jesus.

Jesus had loved Mary back to life as he ministered to her and healed her of torment, mental anguish and emotional trauma. It is a miracle she is still standing. Thanks to Jesus, she didn’t die young. He cleansed her heart and cleared her mind and made her eternally grateful.

As she turns the final corner to enter the garden tomb her heart is filled with sadness mixed with deep appreciation for all Jesus has meant to her. Then she sees it. The huge stone covering the entrance to the tomb is gone. Panic sets in as she pivots and runs back to tell Peter and the other disciples. Once they hear this stunning news, they take off and she follows. They arrive first to discover the missing body and the linens just lying there (like the one draped on the cross this morning).

Strangely, by the time Mary returns to the tomb the disciples have headed home. Alone in the garden again, she steps into the tomb and sees two angels sitting there (two angels that the disciples apparently missed seeing). Weeping, she repeats to angels what she said to the disciples – with one word changed. This time she calls Jesus “MY” Lord. “*They have taken My Lord and I do not know where they have laid him.*”

Apparently, he hasn’t gone far. He is right there. He speaks to her and she doesn’t know him until he says her name, “**Mary.**” She recognizes his voice. That kindness. That respect. That love. “**Mary.**” She hears him before she truly sees him. It is real. He is risen! “**Rabbouni...Teacher,**” Mary cries.

Jesus Christ, the one who loves Mary back to life and the one who always loved the world and embraced the world **in spite of** all the evil and discord, the craziness and distain, the hate and inhumanity, he lived in love and he died in love is now fully risen in Love! And Mary is the first first to meet Love Rising!

This story gets better with age. Like a good wine, its vintage improves each year. Perhaps this is true because we need Love Rising more now than ever before. Love Rising is a Real thing. It is not just a metaphor for preachers.

Fr. Richard Rohr, which I am going to share with you because he has given us a mind-blowing insight into the Love of Christ Rising. Fr. Rohr is a Franciscan priest who is a gifted spiritual writer and teacher. In a piece he authored this week, entitled, “Once we were stardust, and what we will be is the good surprise” (*National Catholic Reporter*, Mar 31, 2021) he wrote of our real and cosmic connections to resurrection.

Fr. Rohr points out that most preachers on the resurrection are drawn to the dramatic line of Paul's *"If Christ has not been raised, our preaching is in vain and your believing is useless"* (1 Corinthians 15:14b). But Fr. Rohr points out they always start the verse at the end. They have to go to the beginning, and there at the beginning of that same verse you will find this, *"If there is no resurrection of the dead, Christ himself cannot have been raised."*

Isn't that extraordinary?! The universal principle comes first, and then and only then is it illustrated and "guaranteed" in the risen Christ. SO... Jesus Christ is the universal example and promise representing the resurrection of all creation.

Let me say this again. Resurrection from the dead precedes Jesus' rising and Easter glory. It has been with us since the beginning of time. The mystery of resurrection is first of all the constant and universal pattern, which is then made dramatic, daring and trustful in the personal body of Jesus!

Thank God for Science which is helping us to think this way. For example, did you know that the same number of atoms in the universe that there were five seconds after the Big Bang happened approximately 13.8 billion years ago are still with us? They just keep playing musical chairs and by all evidence — at an even higher level of complexity and consciousness.

Fr. Rohr writes: *"It is not poetry to say that we were all once stardust, and what we are yet to be — is the good surprise, gift and pure grace of God....it no longer seems like a huge act of faith in a onetime miracle that no one can prove.*

It is right always-already-now, breaking through all kinds of suffering, tragedy and pain. I have seen it in my lifetime, and the lifetimes of my family and friends

in a thousand forms. Admittedly, often shrouded by grief and sadness, and that is why we need an example (like the Risen Christ) to lead us and help us across “the tragic gap” that human existence always is.”

Science keeps teaching us. Nothing is the same forever.

Ninety-eight percent of our bodies’ atoms are replaced every year. Geologists with good evidence over millennia can prove that no landscape is permanent. Water, fog, steam and ice are all the same thing, but at different stages and temperatures.

“Life is not ended. It is merely changed” (from the preface to the Funeral Mass in the Catholic Liturgy). Science is now giving us helpful language for what we have rightly intuited and imaged all along. Essentially, we are blessed with language that predates science but is supported by science.

Apparently, God could not wait for modern science to give history hope. People just needed to believe that Jesus “was raised from the dead” so that the hope and possibility of resurrection could be planted in our deepest unconscious.

Jesus’ first eternal life, his “necessary” death, and his resurrection into the ongoing Christ-life is actually the archetypal model for the entire pattern of creation from the beginning of time till now. He is the microcosm for the whole cosmos, he is the map of the journey. If you need one look Jesus, follow the map.

Our Christian narrative is saying that reality’s true story from the very beginning has always been Incarnation, that God’s hiding place and the place of God’s epiphany in the world is physical. Resurrection is, therefore, not a one-time anomaly in the body

of Jesus, rather that Jesus is the pattern revealing the pattern everywhere that God has created in the cosmos.

Easter is not one day, but Easter is apparently every day and everywhere and always. (Fr. Richard Rohr, OFM, “Once we were stardust, and what we will be is the good surprise” *National Catholic Reporter*, March 31, 2021).

Thanks be to God for Richard Rohr for revealing this mystery of resurrection! He has shown us all how Easter is everyday and Love brought to life in the resurrection of Jesus since the Big Bang – not just a theory my friends. We are cosmic stardust in the mind and heart of God!

From the Stardust back to 444 East Broad St. in Columbus, let me bring it home and close for today.... the Incarnation we know together.

Maybe I am just speaking for myself. But I know I need Resurrection to be real more today than ever before! I need Love Rising in my life right now! How about you? I believe, we need to know that Love Wins over Hate and defeats death. We need to know that our Savior saves us when our backs are against the wall. We need to know that love conquers death and destruction – the little deaths that tear our hearts and our lives one paper cut at a time and the big death itself looms over us and mocks us but Jesus mocks death and says go away, leave them alone, let them live..

We need to feel the heartbeat of love. We need to taste the victory of love. We need to hear our names spoken in such a loving way, that our hearts delight and we throw our arms around Love and say, ***“Rabbouni...Teacher.”***

There have been too many days in the past year, that I have been in this sanctuary alone and wondered how you were, where you were. I have sat alone here and looked at the pews you once weekly occupied and I have prayed for you. The hymnals haven't been opened for 55 Sundays. The Bibles that haven't been opened for 55 Sundays. No notes have been written in the pew pads. Your hugs, your smiles, your laughter, your singing, your love – all missing in here.

Like Mary, I have come to the empty tomb and found the stone rolled away and I have wondered, *“Where have they taken my congregation? Where are my friends? Where is my church family?”*

Last evening, I came down to church to be alone, to sit alone with God and pray for you.

I started in Parish Hall. I sat on the stage and looked out to see you all laughing and enjoying one another – with children darting here and there. I listened to Tom, Nancy and Marti on the piano as we join in singing morning prayer. The tables are full of children and morning treats. I carried kids back from Nursery while trying to keep the boys from running into Parish Hall and making lots of noise. I saw the little ones serving communion – and offering the Body of Christ and the Blood of Christ to the adults in bread and grape juice, while taking a few extra pieces of the delicious loaf along the way – delighting in the saving grace of the bread and the cup. I am filled with joy.

Then I walked upstairs into the sanctuary. The sun was setting to the west as I took a seat in the southeast corner of the sanctuary. In my mind's eye, I saw you all here. I sat next to you. I held your hands. I hugged you. I heard your voices. I saw your smiles. I kissed

the babies! I blew kisses to the little ones. I held my hand to my heart.

I gave Leslie Boltz a hug. I waved to Larry and Diane Dixon as they walk in the westside doors. I exchanged handshakes and some greeting words with Tom Kuhn. I welcomed John Bachman as he waited to talk about the final four and who he was picking for the champion this year. I waved to Emma Dean. I reached out and touched Twink Starr's arm as I processed to the chancel. I passed the peace of Christ with you. I sat beside you in the pew as we listened in awe of Kevin's postlude and the room filled with amens.

You were all here with me last night on Easter Eve. We were all together again. There were even new people who had come to be part of us who had never stepped foot in our building before – except through YouTube and Facebook Live and Zoom.

As the last of Saturday's sunlight burst through the stained-glass windows to the west, the window with the single candle was lit up like fire. I heard Jesus say this, *"Tim, everything will be alright. All their lights are shining tonight. They are a glow with my light. Tim, believe the good news. I am shining in all the members and friends of First Church. I am shining on them and in them and through them to others."*

With that, the window darkened and twilight peace descended in our sanctuary. As twilight gave way to darkness, the one thing stood out in the darkness. It was the white linen cloth hanging from the cross, and then my eye caught the bright white flowing movement through the new creation banner by Deb Anderson.

My brothers and sisters in Christ, we are a Resurrection People. We are Rising with Christ's Love. We're designed to Rise. We have been

created from the moment the universe started to be Love in this world. Just as Jesus Christ has shown us in his Rising to Love.

I close with words I offered when we started “our Journey back to love” on Ash Wednesday:

I implore you to take this journey of the heart. Figure out the things you are carrying on the journey back to love. Look closely at the things that weigh you down and bring out the worst in you. Name them. Claim their existence. Then, let go of them because they weigh you down and bring out the worst in you. Hang on to the things that you carry which are beautiful and healing and hopeful. Keep your eyes wide open. Keep your heart wide open. Keep all your senses wide open for the steps ahead and be grateful for everyone who cares about you, heart and soul.

Jesus Christ is Risen Today!

Hallelujah. Amen.

