

# “Running Through the Thistles”

Acts 3:12-19, I John 3:1-7, Luke 24:36b-48

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From the Pulpit

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## **“Running Through the Thistles”**

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A sermon delivered by the Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens, Senior Minister, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, Easter 3, April 14, 2024, dedicated to Susan Sitler, Rev. Dr. Emlyn Ott, Rev. Sarah Reed, Douglas Argue, Shani Topolosky, Amy Wagner, Pat Patterson, Melissa Kulwicki, Rev. Joanna Samuelson, Martha Wilson, Annette McCormick, Jen Provenzano, Tom Kiesel, and Lynn Wallich, to my granddaughter Emryn Renee Ahrens on her fourth birthday, to and always to the glory of God!

Last Sunday, as I was listening to Rev. Samuelson’s sermon, “The Wounded Healer,” something struck me. As she spoke about transitions and how we prepare for and embrace them here in this season of Resurrection, it dawned on me that we are dealing with the stages of resurrection, similar to the five stages of grief which Elizabeth Kubler-Ross first she chronicled in her book *On Death and Dying* published in 1969. Her stages were: Denial, Anger, Bargaining, Depression and Acceptance.

You may wonder, How could stages of death relate at all to resurrection?

I would like to share some thoughts on this with you today. Let’s explore how death and resurrection are closely related. Please join me in prayer...

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

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For the last three Sundays, our Resurrection texts have presented some real twists and turns in his disciples’ denial, bargaining, acceptance and realization that Jesus Christ is truly Risen from the dead. On Easter, we found the three women going to Jesus’ grave to anoint his dead body and finding a ”young man” directing them somewhere else with the news that “Jesus is Risen.” Fear struck silent – according to Mark’s Gospel. Last Sunday, John’s Gospel told us the story of Thomas who is doubting and denying the resurrection of Jesus – even as Jesus comes and stands with him and the others. Today, the Risen Christ comes among them, appearing like a ghost and they are startled and terrified.

We will see more stages in the coming weeks as Peter and Jesus struggle to reconcile after Peter’s betrayal and denial in the hours leading up to Jesus’ death and their reunion at the Sea of Galilee. We will see texts of sheep and shepherds, vines and the fruit of the vine – all pointing to resurrected life. We will encounter Jesus with a few and with hundreds of believers who meet him as the risen Savior.

Like dealing with death and accepting death, I believe dealing with and accepting Resurrection is also developmental. The two are connected. We often use the phrase death and resurrection and resurrection from the dead. There can be no resurrection without death. And death is simply dismal when there is no hope of eternity and resurrection.

Working through death and resurrection can be like running through a field of thistles. No one knows this better than Roy Oswald. He has done it. In

his little book working with clergy on how to healthfully end a ministerial relationship in a parish, Roy Oswald tells a story from his childhood:

*When I was a young boy, age six, growing up in rural Saskatchewan, my two older brothers and I would often choose to walk home from school through a field, rather than along the road. It was shorter, to be sure but occasionally we would come upon enormous thistle patches. I cannot remember seeing anything like it since. But those thistle patches would be 50 feet to 100 feet wide – in other places 10-20 feet. The rest of the field, lying fallow in the summer, was tilled soil. We rarely wore shoes to school in the summer – hence our dilemma: how do you cross these thistle patches in bare feet. We did have the choice of walking around them but since it was end of the day, we are hungry and tired. We were anxious to get home. Mother usually had a snack treat waiting to tide us over until dinner. To walk around the patch would take us way out of the way. The other option was to back up and run through the narrowest part at full speed. Being the youngest – with the least speed and smallest legs – I always objected. I was usually overruled by my two brothers, who then would each take one of my hands and run me through the thistle patch.*

*I can still vividly remember the experience – running at full speed in bare feet across 20 feet of prickly thistles, yelping in pain all the way through. When the three of us reached the black soil on the other side, we would immediately sit down and start pulling out the thistles that stuck in our feet. With blood in the dirt, we would each report how many thistles got us, “I had four thistles get me – how many did you have?” The count of thistles was our post agony conversation.*

*“For me,” Roy Oswald continues, “this story illustrates how some pastors approach their ending period. They rightly assume there will be pain involved, so they run through it as fast as possible.”*

*Roy continues, “(I deal with pastors leaving their churches. I see) This kind of manic behavior at the close of ministry has its advantages – but there is a price to pay as well. Beyond this, it is clearly a death denying approach to closing out one’s*

*life in one place* (Roy Oswald, *Running Through the Thistles*, Alban Institute, Washington, DC, 1978, reprinted in 1986, p.2).

The advantage of running full speed through the close of a ministry is giving short shrift to the most painful parts of that experience. In ministry, as in the briar patches of life with others, I have heard about endings that look like this. The problem is this approach usually backfires. As with running through the thistles, we end up with briars in our feet on the other side. Those briars are the emotional feelings that we have not dealt with. It is impossible to stuff powerful emotions deep inside, paint a smile on our face and come out the other side “okay” and feeling good about ourselves or others (Ibid).

But, this is where dealing with the end of a ministry and our experiences with death differ. Closing out a ministry is an experience we keep living through. When it is done, something else comes next. Leaving is hard work. But, it can and must be done – from both a pastor’s perspective and the perspective of members.

Oswald goes on to explain that through research he and others have discovered that when congregations, as total entities, have not had healthy endings with a minister, they carry this unresolved stuff with them which gets worked through when the new pastoral leadership arrives (or not). Unresolved grief – including denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance – get short-circuited and things left unresolved, get worked out – in unhealthy ways – in the time that follows.

Do you see how these illustrations for ministry apply to your life, your relationships, and your work?

This brings us back to the Risen Christ. When he rises from the dead, Jesus spends a lot of time working through the unresolved issues related to his disciples’ betrayal, desertion, denial and standing aside and hiding at the time of his death – during the time of his resurrection. There are unresolved issues between all of them and Jesus. You don’t betray, desert, deny and crucify someone without some hard feelings being created. The Risen Christ

is working through the hard feelings in these 11 Resurrection stories and texts. He cannot and will not ascend to heaven without working through the unresolved issues with his closest companions on the journey. Like working through death, working through resurrection is complicated.

The last four years have been hard in so many of our lives. Yesterday, I with my granddaughter Emryn to celebrate her fourth birthday. Because of COVID, Susan and I could not be with Emme on the day of her birth in April 2020. When she finally came home, Susan and I drove up at night, after her big brothers were asleep we were able to look at her through a sliding glass door. We knew we couldn't hold her. We knew they couldn't see us, or they would lose it. They would need to hug us – and there was no touching... We didn't hold Emryn in our arms for the first three months of her life.

Yesterday, as the five of us sat on the deck outside that sliding glass door, laughing, listening to the birds, eating and sharing stories, I thought back to the time of running through the thistles of COVID. It hurt and left lots of scars on all of our souls. It caused us pain and reactions which we are still paying the price for.

Then, as I was drifting back, my grandson Rylan, stood at the window – on the inside and blew us both a kiss and put his hand on the window with his 7 year old fingerprints – four years after we looked through that double-paned glass – doubling in pain and joy. And there was healing – and the continued joy of resurrection.

As she looked at death all those years ago, Dr. Kubler-Ross shined resurrection light on death. She said, when we face our fears and anxieties, and try to hang in there with honesty and candor, and are honest about what is really going on with us – something good and life giving comes out of these experiences.

This is where she made her most profound point. She said, *“The soul in torment is a person tortured from attachment to life, a torture which surges*

*through our whole being, chilling us to our heart one minute, and breaking us out in a flushing sweat the next minute. This is our frantic struggle to clutch at life while slipping over the brink of death. This is the self in battle with the non-self.”*

How we leave a place – a party, a family, a job, a church – may be a precursor of how we leave this world. If we take our time, seek out moments, days, weeks, months to say “goodbye” and “thank you;” if we take time to laugh, to love, to reconcile, to rejoice, to love again – all will go well – All will be well.

If we own our resurrection faith, as God’s Easter People, to let go of whatever we have been carrying and allow grace to carry us through, we will be whole. In other words, when we hear and play Grace Notes, our resurrection music will be heavenly. Grace will guide our steps.

Paul Tillich describes Grace so eloquently: *“Grace strikes us when we are in great pain and restlessness. It strikes us when we walk through the dark valley of a meaningless and empty life. (Grace) strikes us when we feel that our separation is deeper than usual, because we have violated another life, a life which we loved, or from which we were estranged. It strikes us when our disgust for our own being, our indifference, our weakness, our hostility, our lack of direction, and composure have become intolerable to us.*

*Grace strikes us when year after year, the longed for perfection of life does not appear, when our old compulsions reign within us as they have for decades, when despair destroys all joy and courage.*

*Sometimes at the moment a wave of light breaks into our darkness, and it is as though a voice were saying: ‘You are accepted You are accepted. You are accepted by that which is greater than you, and the name of which you do not know. Do not ask for the name now, perhaps you will find it later. Do not try to do anything now; perhaps later you will do much. Do not seek for anything; do not perform anything; do not intend anything. Simply accept the fact that you are accepted’”* (Paul Tillich, *The Shaking of the Foundations*, New York, NY, Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1948, p.162).

So, my friends, I invite you to allow Grace to strike you. I invite you to take your time to move through the challenges and changes here and in your daily life with grace. I invite you to take the path of life, light, and love – and don't run through the thistles – if you can absolutely avoid it. In the words of Jesus today, *“Don't be frightened, don't allow doubts to arise in your hearts. Look at my hands and my feet; see that it is I myself. Touch me and see; for a ghost does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have.”* Do you see how Resurrection heals us as our Wounded Healer invites us closer?

Thanks be to God for the Risen and Rising Christ! Amen.



