

Welcome!

First Congregational Church of Webster Groves
United Church of Christ



Seek Christ in each. Serve God in all.

April 26, 2020
Third Sunday of Easter

YOU HAVE PURIFIED YOUR SOULS
BY OBEYING THE TRUTH IN ORDER TO
SHOW SINCERE MUTUAL LOVE

*So love one another
earnestly from
a pure heart*

1 PETER 1:22

*We respond to God's call by welcoming everyone
regardless of ability, age, ethnicity,
race, gender identity, sexual orientation or
socio-economic background.*

*To proclaim in word and deed the love of Christ,
we affirm that all may share in the full life, ministry, fellowship, responsibilities
and blessing of our congregation.*

*No matter who you are or where you are on life's journey,
you are welcome here.*

WELCOME AND ANNOUNCEMENTS

TOLLING OF THE BELL

LIGHTING OF THE CANDLES

OPENING WORDS

Luke 24:13-35

New Revised Standard Version

(Read by the Pastor and Student Ministers)

Now on [the day when Christ was resurrected] two [disciples] were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem, and talking with each other about all these things that had happened. While they were talking and discussing, Jesus himself came near and went with them, but their eyes were kept from recognizing him. And he said to them, "What are you discussing with each other while you walk along?"

They stood still, looking sad. Then one of them, whose name was Cleopas, answered him, "Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have taken place there in these days?"

He asked them, "What things?"

They replied, "The things about Jesus of Nazareth, who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people, and how our chief priests and leaders handed him over to be condemned to death and crucified him. But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel. Yes, and besides all this, it is now the third day since these things took place.

"Moreover, some women of our group astounded us. They were at the tomb early this morning, and when they did not find his body there, they came back and told us that they had indeed seen a vision of angels who said that he was alive. Some of those who were with us went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said; but they did not see him."

Then he said to them, "Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared! Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?" Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures.

As they came near the village to which they were going, he walked ahead as if he were going on. But they urged him strongly, saying, "Stay with us, because it is almost evening and the day is now nearly over." So he went in to stay with them.

When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them.

Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight.

They said to each other, "Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?" That same hour they got up and returned to Jerusalem; and they found the eleven and their companions gathered together. [These] were saying, "The Master has risen indeed, and he has appeared to Simon!"

Then they told what had happened on the road, and how he had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread.

PRELUDE

Abide with Me

arr. Diane Bish

CALL TO WORSHIP (Responsive)

from Psalm 116

Tracey Harris, DCE and Student Minister

I love the holy ONE, who has heard my voice and my supplications.

God has inclined an ear to me, therefore I will call on my Sovereign as long as I live.

I will pay my vows to the holy ONE in the presence of all the people.

Holy GOD, I am your servant; you have loosed my bonds. I will offer you thanksgiving and call upon your name.

I will pay my vows to you in the presence of all God's people, in the courts of your house, in your midst:

O people, hallelujah!

RAISING THE COVENANT

We who are called of God into this Christian community covenant together: to seek to know the will of God, to experience the joy and struggle of discipleship, to proclaim in word and deed the love of Christ, and to work for peace and justice among all people. We trust God's promise of grace and forgiveness and the presence of the Holy Spirit in our trials and rejoicing.

GATHERING HYMN

Abide with Me

Henry F. Lyte

Abide with me; fast falls the eventide;
The shadows deepen, Lord, with me abide;
When other helpers fail, and comforts flee,
Help of the helpless, O abide with me.

I need your presence every passing hour;
I need your grace to foil the tempter's power.
Give me your love my guide and stay to be.
Through cloud and sunshine, O abide with me.

*PRAYER OF APPROACH (Unison)

Merrimon Boyd, *Student Minister*

Everlasting God, Mother of our rebirth, you have sustained us through and beyond our despair by your continuing presence: Make new in us once more a faith that burns. Root us and ground us in your Word, so that we may live for ever with the one who died and rose again – Jesus Christ our Savior, who with you and the Holy Spirit lives and reigns, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

NOT FOR CHILDREN ONLY

Tracey Harris

THE WORD SHARED

Merrimon Boyd

From the Epistles

1 Peter 1:17-23

The Inclusive Bible

¹⁷ When you pray, you call on Abba God, who judges everyone impartially on the basis of their actions. Since this is so, conduct yourselves reverently during your sojourn in a foreign land. ¹⁸ Realize that you were delivered from the futile way of life your ancestors handed on to you, not by any diminishable sum of gold or silver ¹⁹ but by Christ's blood, which is beyond all price: the blood of a spotless, unblemished lamb ²⁰ foreknown before the world's foundation and revealed for your sake in these last days. ²¹ It is through Christ that you are believers in God, the God who raised Christ from the dead into glory. Your faith and hope, then, are centered in God.

²² By obedience to the truth you have purified yourselves for a genuine love of your sisters and brothers. Therefore love one another constantly, from the heart. ²³ Your rebirth has come not from a perishable seed but from an imperishable one – the living and enduring word of God. ²⁴ For, as Isaiah says,

“All people are grass,
and the glory of mortals is like the flower of the field.
The grass withers, the flower wilts,
but the word of our God endures forever.”

Now this “word” is the Good News which was proclaimed to you.

Response.

Reader: Hear what the Spirit is saying to the people.

People: Thanks be to God.

ANTHEM

Easter Evening

John S. Bell

As we walked home at the close of day,
a stranger joined us on our way.
He heard us speak of one who'd gone
and when we stopped, he carried on.

“Why wander further without light?
Please stay with us this troubled night,
We've shared the truth of how we feel
and now would like to share a meal.”

We sat to eat our simple spread,
then watched the stranger take the bread;
and, as he said the blessing prayer,

we knew that someone else was there.

No stranger he; it was our eyes
which failed to see, in stranger's guise,
the Lord who, risen from the dead,
met us when ready to be fed.

Alleluia! Alleluia!

Alleluia! Alleluia!

As Mary and our sisters said,
the Lord is risen from the dead!

MESSAGE OF THE DAY

“What Should Others Expect of Us?”

Rev. David Denoon, *Pastor*

Can I talk with you for a bit about something important? It's the stuff that works out hardest for me as a Christian; so I think you'll at least find it interesting.

Here it is.

I don't know if it's the same for you, but I find it hard not to be judgmental, oftentimes. This happens especially when I see or experience people doing things that go against what I think are appropriate and reasonable.

Lately, it's when people aren't practicing social distancing or following other guidelines to prevent the spread of this confounded virus. But that goes for people whether they're religious or not. I don't know what it is that makes people rebellious like that. Maybe it's that “It's a free country” thing I was ranting about, a few weeks ago. You know, maybe we just assume that disregarding rules is somehow being *more American* – free-spirited and all that.

But the thing that really gets me judging others is, when those others claim the same “Christian” label as I do and then flout authority – government, intellect, science, media – whatever one or all of these authorities might say is right for us as a group to do, as a society.

I saw where the televangelist/faith healer Kenneth Copeland, a few weeks ago, went a step further, assuming some sort of spiritual authority over the COVID-19 virus and blowing in its general direction (calling this, “the wind of God”). He then declared that he had cast it out so that it would no longer do any harm. He was wrong, of course, but that's what he said.

I find it very difficult not to pass judgment on him. I have to work really hard not to consider him either stupid or cynical or foolish. Because either

\$ he actually believes that he has some sort of divine power to prevent disease (stupid); or

\$ he knows he doesn't have the power and acts this way as some kind of a show to get unassuming and sincere people to give him money (cynical); or

\$ he isn't sure, one way or the other, but Kenneth presumes that, because the Bible depicts Jesus acting with similar boldness at times, if he acts thus boldly that should be all it would take to end this crisis (foolish). And whichever he is imagining, I consider his actions irresponsible and pretty offensive. Hence, I pass judgment against him.

I'll admit, it's not unusual for me to judge anybody who, as a religious person, flouts established and (what I consider to be) trustworthy authority. Government agencies, scientific communities, and the media who have done their research all know more about things like this virus than I do, and I think it's important for me to place my trust in them, and thus to do as they say I should.

For religious people to claim that their scriptures or their traditions or just their suspicions have greater authority than the experience and reason of others who have really worked at understanding such things, is to me more than a little pathetic... sad.

But here's a thing: It's probably not unusual for such others to pass judgment against me when I do my own flouting of non-religious authorities (and even some religious ones), like when I join civil rights and labor rights marches or demonstrate in favor of reasonable firearms regulation or represent against the death penalty – just to name a few, but all of which, by the way, I have done, at one time or another over the adult decades of my life. Other Christians will say, when I place myself in such situations, that I am in open defiance of a directive offered by Paul in Romans 13: *Be subject to earthly authorities*. And no matter how much I may

remind my co-religionists that Paul didn't live in a democracy, they assert that Paul further said, *for all earthly authority has been put there by God.*

I don't think so. I'm sorry if it sounds as though I am defying scriptural authority, but I really don't think so.

When religious people are passing judgment on other religious people for following what they consider to be their morally righteous obligations (as I do on those others and they do on me), then we ought to be given pause to wonder, *What are we about, if we can contradict one another like this? Furthermore, what should people be able to expect from us, or we from each other? What should anyone be able to expect of religious people?*

The author of First Peter has something to say about this. We find it right in the first chapter: "Be holy in everything you do," this person writes, in chapter one, verse fifteen. The writer professes that God is one who judges only according to a person's actions. So, what we do is important, more important to God (it would appear, in this writer's humble opinion) than what we believe.

This authority who is writing – probably not Peter but someone trying to emulate his historic, hope-filled message – also says that we should be "[obedient] to the truth so that [we may] have genuine love of [our] siblings." (1:22) And the writer defends all of this by noting how the cosmic Christ died when Jesus did. There was something about God which died with Jesus. Something cosmic, something eternal, something that would provide for our redemption.

Underlying Jesus' death was the death of the one "known before the world's foundation." Christ's innocent blood reminded the writer of the blood of a sacrificial animal. Jesus died, the author says, so that we, upon witnessing that act of self-giving, would see what is really possible for humanity, our potential...

So, we should live reverently (as Christ did, does... as God does), loving others as we ought to love, as Jesus did love, as God loves... a love that renews and lives and endures, just as (as Tracey said to the children) God's own word endures.

What should people be able to expect from us?

That we should be reasonable, should be ready to listen to reason, should be attentive (even obedient) to the warnings of people who know more than we do about things that may endanger us.

You know, there are a lot of folks out in the world now who claim that religion (especially Western religion – Judaism, Christianity, Islam), that the pietism and arrogant holiness by which we are so often caricatured are the reasons for the troubles in this world. We're holding our culture back, they say, from advances that ought to be possible. We are too often afraid of established facts. When we have had the power to do so, we have silenced knowledgeable voices.

And today, there are examples of our folly – premiere among them that Ark Encounter theme park in Williamsburg, Kentucky, which promotes Creationism and tries to disestablish Evolutionary science – but additionally people like Kenneth Copeland and others who don't so much encourage Christian values but superstition and outright lies. There are the Muslims who confuse war with jihad, a spiritual crisis in the life of an individual, not the assault of one religious culture upon another. There are Jews who have so interpreted the Bible's promise of Canaan to Abraham's and Sarah's descendants that they believe themselves to be unequivocally entitled to the same territory, even though their nationhood was only declared in 1947, when their British-occupied historic homeland was secured by force and by expelling those who had lived in that same space for centuries before.

Add to this the historic conflicts between Protestants and Catholics across Europe and the colonial occupations of Africa and Asia which were advanced through Christian missionaries who presumed that our religion would serve to civilize savages.

So, our detractors (and the detractors of religion generally) are not far from wrong when they say that religion has been a major cause of trouble in the world. They are wrong to say that it is THE major cause. There are plenty of other causes, of course: human ignorance, prejudice, arrogance, and greed.

But religion can be done right, too. Religion can be lived with a genuine effort to apply reverence for a gracious and humble God in everything we do. When religion is practiced as faith (not belief necessarily, but faith, fidelity, faithfulness), it is practiced as righteousness (not right-ness... righteousness), or (in another word) reverence.

Do you see?

I think we can do that.

I think we can do that.

I think, also, we are going to misstep and even sin, once in a while, by (in our hearts) passing judgment against others who claim the same God as we do, who study the same sacred texts as we do, but who refuse to follow the same informed authority as we do... and who do all of this in the name of their own faith.

And I don't know of any immediate solution, except to try and stay in conversation with them. Maybe, to understand the way-deep-down of them, or, if we can't understand them, simply to love them with love that shows reverence for One who loved us first.

The gospel of Luke, as you heard at the beginning of this service, includes a story in which a couple are walking home and meet a stranger whom they recognize later was the Messiah traveling with them. They went back to Jerusalem with the news that they had met Jesus on the road, just as Peter had met Jesus as well. They expressed wonder that the women who first reported the empty tomb had known whereof they'd spoken. Those to whom Mary and the others had reported had not received the news with the reverence it deserved, because they had not received the news with the reverence the more-informed women deserved.

And so, they considered again what they had thought at first.

This is what the world should be able to expect of religious people – respect, maybe even a bit of deference, when others tell us something about which they know more than we do... even if we don't like how what they're saying seems to contradict what we think we know. If we can approach with reverence... everyone, even those with whom we don't agree, the world is going to change. And we will love with that love that renews and lives and endures like the word of God.

So, I'm taking that as my challenge for this time... the hardest thing for me as a Christian, not to be judgmental but to love as God mysteriously has chosen to love me. And you, by the way.

Amen.

PRAYER HYMN

By Gracious Powers

Dietrich Bonhoeffer

By gracious powers so wonderfully sheltered
And confidently waiting, come what may,
We know, God, you are with us night and morning,
And never fail to greet us each new day.

And when this cup you give is filled to brimming,
Still evil days bring burdens hard to bear;
We take it thankfully and without trembling,
Out of so good and so beloved a hand.

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE

Rev. Denoon

We Lift Our Joys and Concerns to God

Please remember the following as you pray, today:

Joyce Berger, recovering from a fall

Marshall Brooks, in a senior residence in Arkansas

The Rev. Dr. Paul Davis, in rehab after a bout with poor health

Margaret Gustafson and her family

Carol McCoy in need of prayerful support

Bob Moody, undergoing chemotherapy treatment a positive prognosis

The Rev. Jack Newsome, isolated in assisted living

Ken Perry, undergoing radiation treatment with a positive prognosis

Becky Scott, with health challenges

Kathryn Lee, her spouse April Conlee, and their son Keegan Conlee

(Kathryn's mother recently died of COVID-19 at a nursing home in Minneapolis)

Antonio, Chris von Weise's 17-year-old nephew in hospital with an infection

*health care workers, first responders, and delivery and grocery workers
people living with COVID-19
people who are isolated and alone
people with stressed home situations which are intensified by quarantine*

Prayer of the Day

Prayer of Our Savior

Our Father who art in heaven: hallowed be thy name; thy kingdom come; thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven; give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us. Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil; for thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.

POSTLUDE

Chorale in E Major

César Franck

BENEDICTION

PARTING WORDS



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