

THE FIRST CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH OF BURLINGTON  
UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST

APRIL 26, 2020

“Resurrection Undisguised”  
Preached by the Rev. Elissa C. Johnk

May the words I speak, and the meditations of all our hearts, be transformative in our lives, and pleasing in your sight, for you are our rock, our redeemer, our resurrection. Amen.

When my grandfather was a child, the farm was so much smaller. Large, for the time, it was little more than 100 acres. If you sit on the wrap-around porch, carefully crafted by my Great-Grandfather and his siblings, you can still see those 100 acres, in their full glory, with the full spectrum of green stretching before you in summer, an array of light browns and golds in fall, shades of gray and white in winter, and a lined canvas of deep, rich, mahogany browns in spring.

Now, though, to survive, the farm also stretches behind the house, and to either side. My uncle, who continues to work the land, also rents land a few miles down the road to the north, and to the west. If I want to think about the changes we have made to the environment around us, I need go no farther than the farm. To make ends meet, my uncle farms far more than 10 times the amount of land he did as a child; churning up the earth each spring and fall. Pulling shoots of life from deep within the earth each summer. The change is exponential, not incremental.

When Senator Nelson organized the first Earth Day fifty years ago, he did so on the back of the largest oil-spill in American waters to date. Pressure control system failing, over 80,000 barrels of crude oil were vomited into the ocean off the Santa Barbara coast, slaughtering all life in its path. The largest American spill at the time, it is now only third, and barely middle of the pack world-wide. <sup>i</sup>

The growth in human population – from around 1 billion when my Great-Grandfather built the farm, to nearly 8 billion now<sup>ii</sup> – has been an unmitigated disaster for the rest of the world. You’ve all heard the poems already written about the time we are currently in; we are the virus, as they say.

They are not stretching the truth, even literally. The United Nations Environmental Program estimates that humanity has altered over 75% of the earth’s surfaces<sup>iii</sup>. This means that zoonotic diseases – diseases that occur when pathogens jump from animals to humans, like the Coronavirus – these diseases are expected to continue to increase in frequency, because nature has nowhere else to go.

I don't need to show you the plastic in the oceans, larger than Texas for you to know that this time in human history is dark.

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This morning's scripture tells us that, in the middle of the darkest point in their lives, the two disciples took to the road. Going home, most likely.  
After all their hopes came crashing down around them – *we thought he was the one* – what else were they to do?  
We've all known that kind of grief. And if you haven't, you will.  
The kind that makes the rest of the world dark and gray.  
When it seems absolutely unbelievable that the world should continue as before.  
*Are you the only one who does not know?*  
Who knows if that was the case?  
Over 500,000 living in Jerusalem at the time, it could very well have been all of them,  
As, regardless of how they felt about Jesus, his crucifixion represented the  
overwhelmingness of the whole situation. The power of the Romans. A people divided.  
Desperately wanting something different.  
An entire city alive, vibrating, with grief.  
Stopped from their work, if only for a few days, gathered as they were for the religious  
festival, praying for yet another deliverance, Passover, freedom.

It must have seemed so dark.  
So hopeless.

*We thought he was the one.*

But, of course, he was the one.  
Entering in, not just into the tinderbox of first-century Judea, but also of their grief.  
Listening, patiently, to their trauma.  
Walking beside them on the road.  
It just didn't look like what they expected.  
How could it have?

But is that enough?

The extraordinary poet and preacher Kaitlin Shelter writes of this passage:<sup>iv</sup>  
if all these blessings  
are really  
disguised by god  
then you and i  
are just victims  
of divine gaslighting  
[...]  
and i will not praise  
him in this storm

because i'm too busy  
looking for shelter  
and  
i refuse to be swept  
away by waves of  
blind faith  
when i have people  
counting on me  
to survive  
it's sink or swim here  
god  
and i don't have time  
to play cruel games  
of find-the-blessing  
are you an  
abuser  
or a  
savior  
do you treat my  
misery lightly  
do you laugh at  
my pain  
are you a merry  
god  
designed to mock me  
or are you who you  
say you are  
don't play coy  
it's not hide-and-peek  
when my life  
is on the line  
[...]

i don't want  
supernatural  
suspense  
or surprises  
give it to me straight  
[...]

and  
i do not need

a god  
who  
disguises  
his blessings  
and tortures  
his souls  
i need one  
who  
heals wounds  
preferably  
ones  
he didn't  
first inflict

And isn't that the rub,  
The salt in the wounds?

"He died for us" – "God sent him to die for us."  
To create that very sadness that circled those disciples on the road like an albatross.

*Give it to me straight, don't make me work for this God, it's life or death down here right now.*

And it's true, a lot of the time, when we are looking for God in our stories, it comes in hindsight. Like we are looking for her there on our Emmaus roads, trying to discern her presence in the darkness.

But not always.

Sometimes, you are in the middle of a pandemic, and your daughter is about to give birth, and you can't be there. And it's terrifying and dark.

[Michael Samara witness]

Sometimes the presence is so clear, you can touch it.

[Baki witness: I have met God on the road several times... but the most profound time was... When I was on the pole, in the execution yard, blindfolded and ready to die. That moment was very profound and I think I've never touched never met God as real as that moment.]

Bad theology tells us that God causes the darkness, and we have to work hard to find the resurrection.

But the reality is that we created the wounds. The ones Thomas wanted to see and touch last week? Those were our doing.

But Jesus was right there.  
Jesus is right here.  
And the oceans of trash, and skies dark with pollution, well, those are our doing, too.  
But Jesus is right here.

Friends, we do not have to look hard for the resurrection around us.

We don't have to look at all.  
It is as plain as your hand in front of your face.

[New Delhi photos]  
[Venice photos]

There are fish in the canals in Venice.  
Now, I don't know if you know how remarkable it is. But Venice usually smells, the water is so polluted. Now, there are fish.

There are birds in Wuhan – unheard of.

The same is true across all the major cities. L.A., Paris, Lebanon, Rome. The air is clear.

Now, I am not Pollyanna here.  
Some projections estimate that the drop in emissions could be as high as 4% for the year.  
But that is only 4%.  
And currently the federal government is using this time to push through a sweeping reduction in environmental protections, because they think no one is watching.

It is dark, and it is still dark, but there is resurrection all around us, and it is begging – begging to be noticed.  
It is walking alongside of us like Jesus on the road, saying do you not see?  
Do you not see what is now possible?  
Will you not take this resurrection and let it grow?

Or will you simply shut your eyes and ask where God is to be found?

So often it can seem that we are looking for God in interactions, trying to piece together meaning from hindsight and despair. But right now it has never been more clear. There is a literal resurrection happening around us. What once was thought to be dead has come back new, unlike ever before.

And it is not just the sky, or the sea.

That first Earth Day, fifty years ago, Senator Nelson wrote that it was not simply about air, soil, and water. Instead, he wrote, “the environment involves the whole broad spectrum of [humanity]'s relationship to all other living creatures, including other human beings. It involves the environment in its broadest and deepest sense. It involves the environment of

the ghetto which is the worst environment, where the worst pollution, the worst noise, the worst housing, the worst situation in this country -- that has to be a critical part of our concern and consideration in talking and cleaning up the environment."

Right now, we are seeing the sins of America exposed.

Really seeing them.

The way we claim to value life, but treat healthcare as a privilege.

The way access to basic necessities – food, water, shelter – is denied even our children.

Where black and brown bodies are dying at the hands of our structural sin. In Michigan, Blacks are 133% more likely to contract the Coronavirus. In Illinois, they make up 15% of the population, yet account for 70% of Coronavirus deaths.<sup>v</sup>

But this, too, is a time when resurrection becomes possible.

For the first time in my life we are talking about the realities of low-wage workers.

The burdens placed on those on whom we absolutely, fundamentally depend.

We are talking about the realities of physical connections as fundamental need.

Shutting it all down for the most vulnerable amongst us.

We are seeing what we are capable of together.

*We had hoped he was the one to redeem us.*

Give it to me straight, God.

i don't want  
supernatural  
suspense  
or surprises

[...]

i do not need  
a god  
who  
disguises  
his blessings  
and tortures  
his souls  
i need one  
who  
heals

Friends, look around.

This is the most profound resurrection moment you are likely to see in your lifetime.

Right now.

When the way it was has been exposed as fraudulent and death-dealing, and we are being given the chance to say no more, never again.

This blessing is not disguised as torture.  
It is not disguised at all.

This is God rising up from the very earth to say – I will use this, even this, for good.  
I will use you, even you, to heal.

Now, in a few short weeks you will hear talks about how things should go back to normal.  
Things that will tempt you to forget what this has taught us.  
About empathy and connection.  
About the solidarity necessary for our very survival.  
About our interconnectedness.  
About just how much we need – and don't need to survive.

They will ask you to buy.  
To consume.  
To forget.

And when that time comes, friends, you can go along the road as you always have.  
You can praise human ingenuity and resume the curse disguised as blessing that is modern  
consumption.

But if you do, you will have turned your back on the greatest opportunity God has given us  
for wide-spread, systematic and systemic change.

You will look back at this time in your life and wonder where was God.  
And God will look back on this time, and wonder where were you?

For all you have to do is open your eyes, and see.

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<sup>i</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_oil\\_spills](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_oil_spills)

<sup>ii</sup> <https://worldpopulationhistory.org/map/2020/mercator/1/0/25/>

<sup>iii</sup> <https://news.un.org/en/story/2020/04/1061082>

<sup>iv</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/kaitlinhardyshetler/>

<sup>v</sup> <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/fixgov/2020/04/09/why-are-blacks-dying-at-higher-rates-from-covid-19/>