



Dear Friends -

One of the cruel jokes of later-stage pregnancy is the sleep – or, rather, the lack of it. Sometimes it is simple discomfort, often it is the little one refusing to get comfortable (or, perhaps, getting *too* comfortable, with a dance party at 3 a.m.). Sometimes it is for no discernable reason at all. Whatever the cause, those who are fortunate enough to experience pregnancy usually remember being awake at precisely the time when the well-intentioned folks around us start saying things like, “make sure to get your sleep now, while you can.” Because the experience seems to be so common, I’ve come to think it must be, at least in part, by design. There must be some advantage in learning early how to be awake in the night.

As we draw near to Holy Week, my late-night thoughts have turned to the women at the tomb that first Easter morning, trudging up the hill, carrying their anointing oil like physical representations of their grief. They knew what it was to be awake in the night, to pay attention to things that happen before the light of a new day. Because of this, they were the first ones to know that things were not the same – and that they never would be. Staring in horror, an empty tomb, frightening men, their shock quickly turned to an understanding of new life – an entirely new *kind* of life. Life without the fear of death itself. In the middle of the night, God had done a new thing.

There are advantages to learning how to be awake in the night.

So I hope we have been paying attention these past few years. This time of darkness, of grief, of pain – this communal night we have been experiencing. Because I am fairly certain God has been using it to do something new. Let me be clear: I am **not** saying God caused the pandemic, or climate change, or the political unrest, or the warfare we are seeing now. Only that God never lets a nighttime go to waste.

Nowhere is this clearer to me than at First Church. Over the past two years, we have been experiencing first-hand what God can do with our darkness, transforming our isolation into new digital ministries, new connection ministries, new members, new music and service opportunities. The response to our Visioning book groups, sermon series, and questions, has been spectacular. A larger percentage of us have participated in leading worship – reading scripture, submitting videos, giving witnesses and prayers, playing music – than ever before. Last week, our combined attendance (in the sanctuary, and online) was higher than it has ever been in my time here.

Similarly, the response to our Visioning book groups, sermon series, and questions, has been remarkable. Asked what brought you here, you said *welcome and mission*. What kept you here? *Belonging*. What visions do we have? *Diversity, worship and service*. And how do we get there? *Openness to change*. What more could a minister ask for than a people who know themselves and are ready to go where God is leading?



Please do make sure you take the time to read the full response to our Visioning meetings on our website. I have obviously simplified, quite a lot, the breadth of your profound responses. I have done so, however, to ensure we all see that there are advantages to being awake in the night, and it is clear that First Church has been. You have not let this time go to waste, but have been using it to make way for the new things God is doing.

So let's not stop now. Over the next few weeks, we will be outlining the next steps of our Visioning process – including how to use what we have heard and learned to draw up proposals for the next stage of our life together. In the meantime, take this opportunity to sink yourselves deeply into the heart of the very heart of our life together – holy week. Experience the hopefulness of Palm Sunday, and the nighttime of our Christian story in our Maundy Thursday worship and vigil. Experience that first glimpse of new light with a simple Easter morning communion service with College Street, at 6:30 by the waterfront (on the grass just north of the Echo). Live into the fullness of the resurrection, and what it means for us, at 10 in the sanctuary/livestream. Everything you need to participate fully in these services should be in this bag – but if you are able to attend in person, we hope you do so!

And commit yourselves to doing something new with us. Use the enclosed offering to make a gift to our Easter Offering if you are able, to support this ongoing new work. 10% of this gift will go to the Vermont Conference's new Hope Fund, information on which is included. You can write "Easter" in the memo, or select Easter Offering from our online giving portal. If you are able, make a gift directly to the Mission Offering as well, and do so in honor or in memory of someone. (Mark in the memo, or select "Easter Mission".)

These gifts – of presence and possibility – will take the newness of what we are doing at First Church, the great blessings we are experiencing here, and help us make them real in the rest of the state. In so doing, it is my hope that First Church can, like the women at the tomb, be amongst the first and clearest voices telling others of the amazing new things that God is doing even now.

Friends, I know it has been dark, and I am grateful to you for staying awake, and not letting this moment pass. Now, let us greet the dawn together.

A meaningful, and ultimately joyful, Holy Week to us all.

In Faith,

Elisa

