

**The First Congregational Church of Winchester, United Church of Christ
Third Sunday of Easter & 50th Anniversary of Earth Day
Sunday, April 26, 2020**

The Rev. Dr. Jessica McArdle

Title: “The Yeast That Makes Life Rise” [4]

Text: Luke 24:13-35

Grace and peace to you in this Season of Eastertide and Earth Day Sunday.

Thank you for joining us.

Will you pray with me?

Risen One, as your beloved creation resounds with echoes of your grace, may we earnestly attend and listen to your Living Word. We ask this in the moments to come and in the unfolding of the days and months ahead. Amen.

Sermon:

Earlier this month, a writer and columnist described this period we’re in as a gateway or portal. There was the world we knew before the pandemic, before everything was upended. And now there is this place we find ourselves in, where nothing seems the same.

If we were to step back to the time period that Jesus and his disciples inhabited, their known world was also being convulsed. The land of Judea was disintegrating into chaos. Such that by the time of Jesus’ death, an even broader pattern of violence and revolt was erupting.

As with us, there was the world that Jesus and his disciples knew and inhabited. But as recorded in today’s Gospel account, their known world was about to be upended.

The Season of Easter or Eastertide, is a festal season in our liturgical year that focuses on the resurrection. Writes, author and Franciscan priest, Richard Rohr, “[While conservative Christians tend to focus their theology on Jesus’ death and resurrection], The Easter Story isn’t just about one man, Jesus, but the whole

of creation, every human being and every creature that has lived. The resurrection encompasses everything.” [1]

Its power is the yeast that makes life rise.

Today’s passage takes us on a deserted road heading up to a bygone place called Emmaus. Two disciples who had been followers of Jesus, were headed that way. Having experienced the brutal execution of their beloved teacher and master, and knowing full well that his movement was now utterly finished – even the air they breathed was thick with grief. As they walked, they were later joined on the road by one who was unrecognizable, a stranger. But it wasn’t until that evening, after darkness fell and the three of them were sheltered in place, that the Son of Man was disclosed in the taking, the blessing and the breaking of bread.

Yet the Gospel reading and its narrative point to a problem – both as identified by scripture and as experienced in the world that Jesus and his followers inhabited. Writes the author of Luke’s Gospel, “Jesus himself came near and went with the two disciples as they walked on the road, but their eyes were kept from *recognizing* him.” (Luke 24:16)

Just as we now struggle, disciples then, struggled to *recognize* the risen Christ.

However, scripture illustrates again and again that God’s disclosure, God’s revelation is particularly made known - when grief and fear and uncertainty are palpably present. Scripture affirms that out of the trauma and paralysis of grief we find meaning [2] when we live into *an alternative vision and reality*. As those early disciples who ultimately came together, we can become the “*the yeast that makes life rise.*”

Which of course is the last thing we’d expect.

(pause) This pandemic has challenged us to the core, has it not? For those already saddled with grinding poverty, lack of health-care and limited income, it has been particularly devastating. But this pandemic has also exposed a dangerous dualism, a kind of thinking that it has to be either one or the other...and it is perpetuated by those who insist upon business as usual. As if the care of God’s

creation AND protecting public health are two entirely different issues. As if being a good neighbor to current as well as future generations and all species on this planet, IS AT ODDS with protecting our children from asthma and contaminated drinking water.

This past week has marked the 50th Anniversary of Earth Day. Notes Rev. Dr. Jim Antal, environmental activist and public theologian, “Fifty years ago, some rivers were so polluted that they caught fire. The smog in major cities was so thick it was equivalent to smoking a pack of cigarettes a day. Thirty-five miles of pristine beach from Santa Barbara to Ventura were covered with 3 million gallons of toxic thick oil from a recent spill.” [3]

It is hard to fathom, but in the 1960’s there were no environmental regulations or laws in place to protect even our water supply or the air we breathe. Perceived as a hindrance on the nation’s economy and a stumbling block for consumers, nothing was in place to protect the very ecosystem that sustained us. It was in this context, that the first Earth Day was conceived and gained wide-spread support.

In fact, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), came on the heels of a bi-partisan commitment that enacted numerous laws including: The Clean Air Act, The Clean Water Act and the Endangered Species Act. It was wholeheartedly adopted because it recognized that clean water and clean air, the safeguarding of wilderness and the species that inhabit it, are wholly necessary for health and well-being; no matter what side of the political aisle you sit on and what demographic you belong to.

Is it coincidental then that the 50th Anniversary of Earth Day is commemorated in the midst of a devastating pandemic? Or could it be that we are being asked to perceive how Christ is being revealed to us in the wake of these crises?

What if God’s answer to the problem of the world is being revealed before us, now? Consider the heroic response of those currently on the front lines: first-responders, physicians, nurses, pastors, chaplains, grocery clerks, cleaning crews

and delivery personnel – who are not alone in their endeavors but are supported by those on the environmental front as well, whose commitment and mission also protects and preserves public health and welfare. Imagine that when we join in solidarity with the human family and all of God’s creation, we are in Thomas Moore’s words, “*the yeast that makes life rise,*”, the bread of life. [4]

In the months and years to come, what will be said of us? Will it be said that out of expediency and fear – we like Pilate – washed our hands of injustice, abdicated responsibility and turned our backs on the destruction of God’s people and creation? Or will it be said of us – that we did not yield to the temptation of returning to business as usual – but instead became the yeast that makes life rise? In crossing over the portal, we sought to build a more just and sustainable world.

It has been said that in the end, our noblest identity is to be known as a Christian. One who bears the love of Christ. One who makes God’s love real. One who goes the distance, and becomes in spite of everything, the bread of life. Thanks be to God. Amen.

[1] Richard Rohr, *The Universal Christ: How a Forgotten Reality Can Change Everything We See, Hope For, and Believe*, (New York: Convergent, 2019), pg. 186.

[2] David Kessler, *Finding Meaning: The Sixth Stage of Grief*, (New York: Scribner, 2019)

[3] Excerpt from Rev. Dr. Jim Antal’s sermon “at” Riverside Church in New York on Sunday, April 19. The focus was on the 50th Anniversary of Earth Day, the Coronavirus and the Climate Crisis.

[4] Thomas Moore, *Writing in the Sand: Jesus & the Soul of the Gospels*, (Australia: Hay House, 2009), pg. 94.