

Rollstone Congregational Church
Fitchburg, MA

First Sunday after Easter

April 19, 2020

Prelude:

“Variations on *Lobe Den Herren*”

unknown

Gathering Thoughts:

Dear Brothers and Sisters today we continue in celebrating the glorious good news that Christ has risen from the dead. We continue to exist through these difficult times experiencing a death by separation from each other. As difficult as these days are we must remain hopeful that we will come out of this time more empowered and ready to be the church and community that God calls us to be. I have heard from people within and outside of the church that this time has been a time of reawakening to the reality that we had become complacent by not appreciating all that we had and the opportunities available to us. We miss each other and we miss the place that we could gather to worship. Our lives had become a place where we figured that I didn't need to do this or that because I can just do it next week or next time, now our current reality reminds us that this belief is folly. My prayer today is that through these days we have come to hold a greater appreciation for the opportunities that God has afforded us. Until we meet again may you be safe!

Please feel free to share this service with others who may not have the same opportunity to worship.

Let Us Rejoice as We Worship:

This is the good news which we proclaim to you. Jesus Christ is raised from the dead!
Walk in the light of his love. Live in the light of his teachings and healing mercies.
Come, let us worship the One who overcame death. Let us celebrate the triumph of our Lord. Amen.

Opening Hymn:

“Easter People, Raise Your Voices”

William M. James

**Easter people, raise your voices, sounds of heaven in earth should ring.
Christ has brought us heaven's choices; heavenly music, let it ring:
“Alleluia! Alleluia!” Easter people, let us sing.**

**Fear of death can no more stop us from our pressing here below.
For our Lord empowered us to triumph over every foe.
“Alleluia! Alleluia!” On to victory now we go.**

**Every day to us is Easter, with its resurrection song.
When in trouble move the faster to our God who rights the wrong.
“Alleluia!, Alleluia!” See the power of heavenly throngs.**

A Time of Prayer:

God of the resurrection, we thank you for the new life you have given Jesus and all who follow him. Through the power of your Spirit, inspire us to make a leap of faith into your loving arms. May we believe the words of Scripture when they speak of your victory over death, and may we accept the promises you make for the future. We praise you for your love, your joy and your wonderful living hope - hope that points us to a future that we cannot see, but that we believe you will guide us through. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

First Reading from the Scriptures

John 20:19-31 (NIV)

19 When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, 'Peace be with you.' 20 After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. 21 Jesus said to them again, 'Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.' 22 When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, 'Receive the Holy Spirit. 23 If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.'

24 But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. 25 So the other disciples told him, 'We have seen the Lord.' But he said to them, 'Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe.'

26 A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, 'Peace be with you.' 27 Then he said to Thomas, 'Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe.' 28 Thomas answered him, 'My Lord and my God!' 29 Jesus said to him, 'Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.'

30 Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. 31 But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.

Second Reading from the Scriptures:

1 Peter 1:3-9 (NIV)

3 Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! By his great mercy he has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, 4 and into an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, 5 who are being protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. 6 In this you rejoice, even if now for a little while you have had to suffer various trials, 7 so that the genuineness of your faith—being more precious than gold that, though perishable, is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honour when Jesus Christ is revealed. 8 Although you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and rejoice with an indescribable and glorious joy, 9 for you are receiving the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls.

The Message:

This Might Hurt

“That was easy.”

It’s the trademarked company slogan of Staples, the rising star among office supply megastores. When it comes to meeting our office supply needs, Staples has us covered. Piece of cake.

Fans of the NBC sitcom “The Office” recognize Staples was a primary sponsor of the show as well as a “character” in the plot line. Staples is the national chain that little-guy paper company Dunder Mifflin always loses business to. The crew from “The Office” is old school about sales techniques: “Business to business. The old-fashioned way. No Blackberrys. No Web sites. No Technology.”

But not Staples. They use this thing called the Internet. You can even buy their paper on it. Converted Dunder Mifflin clients have claimed that the Staples Web site makes it easy.

Just a little subtle ad placement in an otherwise brilliantly written television show.

This ad campaign for Staples has won industry awards for its creative spots containing “The Easy Button.” It’s a cherry-red, plastic, dome-shaped button with the word “easy” emblazoned across the top. Now how many of you have owned one? It would look more at home in front of a game show contestant than in front of a cube-dweller. But the concept of this magic wand device is that with just one click of The Easy Button — POOF! — Staples fixes any problem that comes up in the office.

The Easy Button translates from commercial prop to desktop tool. Business clients can download their own Easy Button — it’s the fasttrack portal for sending in orders, requesting deliveries, getting tech support, handling rebates, outsourcing print projects, etc. It’s actually pretty easy.

So think of all of the life situations — past and present — where we could use an Easy Button fix.

Those college final exams. Asking a girl out for the first time. Getting the house clean and the laundry done. Getting the kids to bed. That never-ending home remodeling project. Bigger bills than income. Strep throat. Dying parents.

Or with pastors, how about an Easy Button for ... sermon preparation. Finding volunteers. Mobilizing volunteers. Motivating volunteers. Keeping volunteers. Meeting the budget. Helping the committee meeting get something done ... efficiently.

Staples has an Easy Button. Life does not.

Staples says, “That was easy.”

Jesus says, “This might hurt.”

“This might hurt.” You hear this occasionally. Every time you donate blood or get a shot from the doctor, these words precede the prick: “This might hurt.” It is the classic parental pre-spanking mantra: “This is going to hurt me more than it hurts you.”

There are two clear “this might hurt” elements to this passage. You can see them in Peter’s language of concession: “even if now for a little while you have had to suffer various trials” (v. 6) and “although you have not seen him” (v. 8).

Christian author Philip Yancey, in his honest yet Eeyore-like fashion, has done much to bring these issues to the forefront of Christian consciousness. His explorations are those of the darker nights of the soul: *Reaching for the Invisible God*, *Where is God When it Hurts*, and *Disappointment with God*.

Clearly there are elements in life and the Christian journey that are hard. And if we’re honest, we all want God to make things easy for us — a bit like a genie emerging from a lamp to grant us wishes. But it doesn’t work that way. Life and faith are often bumpy roads and not efficient highways. They’re as wrought with longing as with liking.

This passage is important for all of us in developing a healthy and existentially viable theology of suffering. But the timing may be especially appropriate for the “this might hurt” contingent in our churches. The Lenten season has just invited people into tactile and reflective experiences with God. But for many, life’s suffering or their sense of God’s absence kept them from meeting him during this season.

Consider beginning with an examination of how we talk about suffering in Western church culture. In our media-interconnected global village, we hear stories and view images of religious persecution and abject physical poverty that seem remote from the typical American experience. It’s easy to inadvertently conceive of real affliction as exclusively the experiential trade of the Third World.

But perhaps this is limiting to how we might follow Christ more holistically. While the predominant Western lifestyle is comparatively blessed and easy, it doesn’t mean that it’s absent suffering. We do well to teach with an expanded scope on suffering, as it tends to find us all in many ways.

Emotional. Those living with depression or anxiety describe it as being like an emotional prison. Others live in the shadow of childhood traumas that impact their self-worth almost daily. While few Americans are forced to subsist on one meal a day, many people suffer under self-inflicted food disorders — overeating for perceived comfort or self-punishment through anorexia.

Physical. Whether temporary or long-term, sickness plagues many in our churches. Studies show that up to 20 percent of people deal with some form of chronic pain. The physically disabled live with a lifetime of suffering that few able-bodied people can imagine.

Familial. Discontentment and hopelessness wrack many marriages in our churches. Some families have special needs children who are functionally all consuming and lifestyle controlling. Families experience miscarriages and infertility with dream-shattering pain.

Spiritual. Many in this church, or any church, shrink back with doubts. They face unanswerable questions. They’re persecuted at work for faith. Some are handling hell while outliving relatives who died still rejecting Christ. They were wronged deeply, yet they are being called to forgive.

Relational. Ask many older single people or divorcees about how they view their relational status — loneliness, hopelessness, a sense of being passed over. Consider how many dysfunctions

divide family and friendship circles.

But along with an expanded sense of what constitutes suffering, we need to recognize that in various capacities, all of us suffer. Not just immature and weak Christians. Not just the disobedient who bring it upon themselves.

Many years ago the private, angst-ridden correspondence between Mother Teresa and her confidants was published, most notably in a must-read book called *Mother Teresa: Come Be My Light*. Teresa laments, “Lord, my God, who am I that you should forsake me? The child of your love and now become as the most hated one, the one you have thrown away as unwanted, unloved. I call, I cling, I want — and there is no one to answer, no one on whom I can cling ... The loneliness of the heart that wants love is unbearable. Where is my faith?”

No person is immune to potential suffering in life and faith. But this text can offer some hope amidst affliction.

Suffering must have meaning. Many will voluntarily suffer for an important cause, but few can tolerate suffering without perceived meaning. Look at verse 7: suffering “so that the genuineness of your faith ... may be found to result in praise and glory and honor.”

What does that mean? It means simply that what is brought into being through great effort, practice, endurance and pain has great value. Think of the NCAA Division I basketball champs — whoever they are. The March Madness tournament is over. But whoever won, the entire university community rejoiced with the team because their victory was the well-earned product of sacrifice, practice, sweat, training, endurance and perseverance.

You get the idea. The one thing they did not say when it was over was, “That was easy.”

More likely they said, “This hurt.” Or “This hurt — a lot!”

But at the podium, at the trophy ceremony, they also received great glory and much-deserved praise.

Suffering brings transformation. We need to be awakened to the spiritually formative elements of hard knocks. How might Christ be at work in us and upon us through our suffering? How are we being changed? How can we bring God glory through the way we respond to trials and afflictions?

Still yet, we may experience a great sense of God’s absence during our suffering. Here again, listen to the staggering example of Mother Teresa as she confided in a friend: “Pray that I may have the courage to keep on smiling at Jesus. I understand a little the tortures of hell without God ... and yet, last First Friday knowingly and willingly I offered to the Sacred Heart [God] to pass even eternity in this terrible suffering, if this would give him now a little more pleasure or the love of a single soul.”

Like Teresa, how can we love him although we do not see him? (v. 8). At times when God seems so distant in our pain, can we still assume upon what we know of him in order to persevere? Can we hope that what we read and hear of God is true, and love him in that hoping?

And perhaps as much as meaning in suffering, we need greater perspective on it. In most of our “this may hurt” life experiences, we understand that short-term pain prevents long-term suffering.

While a shot or a swat have momentary hurt, they help avoid a lifetime of debilitation through sickness and recklessness. Despite our levels of needle angst, all of us would prefer 10 seconds of anguish from an injection rather than a lifetime of suffering through polio or smallpox.

Suffering is like this. Most cancer survivors say they are stronger for it, and would not take their sickness back if they could. Pain today often results in blessing tomorrow.

Suffering well means finding God at work in our afflictions. There is no red button we can push to ensure “That was easy.”

There’s only a cross that says, “This might hurt.”

Organ Interlude:

Psalm 150

Michael P. Hensworth

A Time of Prayer – *let us remember all of our brothers and sisters on the prayer list, especially those who are having a difficult time during this period of social distancing. Please share your prayer concerns so that they may be added to the prayer list by emailing your concern to Pastor Dave at dbhanks92@comcast.net or by calling him direct at 978-821-9571. He is available every evening and on weekends. During this time we suggest that you create a prayer partner with whom you can pair up until we are able to worship together at the church.*

PRAYER LIST

Amy Belli
Carolyn Barney
Jack Brigham
Becky Colwell
Cathy Fontaine
Chuck Funk
Paula Gaudet
Bob and Pat Goguen
Linda Hurd
Sarah Kee
Kyle, a.k.a, Kippy
Bob and Doris Lane
Diane Lane Cormier
Linda Long
Lorraine Michaud
Family of Stephen Pacheco
Cathie Perra
Family of Constance Pettingell
Maria Piazza
Melanie Pouliot
Alex Robinson
Del Sampson
Elwin Shepard
Ron Smith
Carole Ann Sumner and Henry
Donna Thorne

**Marilyn Wales
Patty Westerman
All who are experiencing difficult times and situations
All who are lonely or depressed
All who are personally dealing with the affects of the COVID-19 Virus
Those who are currently unemployed because of the virus
All medical personnel – doctors, nurses, testing staff, first responders
Those whose livelihoods have been impacted through lost jobs or reduced financial stability
Our government – that they may make timely and wise decisions
Our Church and all of its members**

God, Giver of life, Victor over death: While we rejoice with boundless joy in the resurrection of the Lord, we recall, for self-examination, some of the men and women who played a part in the tragedy and triumph of those three days.

We remember his mother and the disciples who watched him die; and the unnamed Roman soldier who showed him pity by giving him a little drugged wine in that sponge.

We recall with gratitude the compassion of Joseph of Arimathea, who risked the displeasure of his fellow judges on the high court, when he provided a decent tomb for our Lord's burial; and the devotion of the women who were ready to prepare his body, according to the dictates of the Law, for its final rest.

We remember with quickened heartbeat the resurgence of faith in the hearts of Peter and John and their historic race to the empty tomb; and the stubborn faith of Mary Magdalene, who loved our Lord so much because he had forgiven her so very much.

We recall the treachery of Judas, but we know that the Lord, who commanded us to love our enemies, would forgive even the disciple who betrayed him.

We evoke, with understanding and sympathy, that deeply stricken disciple, Thomas, who wanted so much to believe the unbelievably Good News, but was unable to believe until the Lord himself dispelled his agonizing doubt.

Loving God, we acknowledge that, at the death of someone we have loved or when face to face with our own end, our reactions are likely to be just as mixed, just as unheroic as were those of our Lord's earliest followers. Grant us strength, that our faith may hold firm in crisis. Help us never to forget the promise of our risen Lord: "Lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age." Aware of his presence and of his redeeming love, may we face the death of loved ones as well as the end of our own journey unafraid and armed with the Easter assurance. We pray in the name of him whom you raised from death that, in him, we might have life, and now let us pray together those words that he taught us to pray in saying.....“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 debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory, forever. Amen.”

Closing Hymn:

“Thine Is the Glory”

Edmund L. Budry

Thine is the glory, risen, conqu'ring Son;
endless is the vict'ry Thou o'er death hast won.
Angels in bright raiment rolled the stone away,
kept the folded grave-clothes where Thy body lay.
*Thine be the glory, risen, conqu'ring Son;
endless is the vict'ry Thou o'er death hast won.*

Lo, Jesus meets us, risen from the tomb.
Lovingly He greets us, scatters fear and gloom;
let His church with gladness hymns of triumph sing,
for the Lord now liveth; death hath lost its sting.
*Thine be the glory, risen, conqu'ring Son;
endless is the vict'ry Thou o'er death hast won.*

No more we doubt Thee, glorious Prince of life!!
Life is nought without Thee; aid us in our strife;
make us more than conqu'rors, through Thy deathless love;
bring us safe through Jordan to Thy home above.
*Thine be the glory, risen, conqu'ring Son;
endless is the vict'ry Thou o'er death hast won.*

Benediction:

May the Good News of Jesus Christ go with us all. May we be light and life to all the world. May the risen Christ go with us and fill us with strength and courage. Share the faith, keep the promise, speak a kind word, share the gospel, and bring peace to the earth. Amen.

Postlude:

“Lauda Anima”

Thomas Anderson