



# A HOLY IMAGINATION

**Rollstone Congregational Church**

**United Church of Christ**

199 Main Street, Fitchburg, MA

Pastor: Rev. David B. Hanks 978-821-9571

Moderator: Paul Stansel 978-337-1608

Church Organist and Musician: Gavin Klein

# *Third Sunday of Easter*

## **April 18, 2021**

**Prelude:**

**A Morn of Easter**

**Flor Peters**

### **Call to Worship:**

O God, be not far from us,  
For we are your children.  
O God, help us to believe,  
For in Christ we would live abundantly.  
O God, we search for you and would worship you,  
For in you we live and move and have our being.

### **A Time of Prayer:**

Eternal God, from beginning to end, we rest in your embrace, though we do not always acknowledge or recognize your presence. All along our days you journey with us. Sometimes you are a loud shout to help us to heed your call. Sometimes you are a quiet whisper to help us to listen. You help shape our questions and are patient with our answers. You are full of compassion and care like a loving grandmother. You love us tenderly like a mother cradling her child. You give us visions to soar like the eagle. Like a wise doctor, you heal our memories with a gentle touch.

O God, how wonderful you are. How good it is to be in your presence. We bring to you our whole life, our joy and our grief, our patience and our worry, our dreams and our despair. Like a long-time friend, you know us, beginning to end. And you embrace us into new life. Amen.

### **Opening Hymn:**

**“Come, Christians, Join to Sing”**

Come, Christians, join to sing  
Alleluia! Amen!  
Loud praise to Christ our King;  
Alleluia! Amen!  
Let all, with heart and voice,  
Before His throne rejoice;  
Praise is His gracious choice;  
Alleluia! Amen!

Come, lift your hearts on high,  
Alleluia! Amen!  
Let praises fill the sky;  
Alleluia! Amen!

He is our Guide and Friend;  
To us He'll condescend;  
His love shall never end;  
Alleluia! Amen!

Praise yet our Christ again,  
Alleluia! Amen!  
Life shall not end the strain;  
Alleluia! Amen!  
On heaven's blissful shore,  
His goodness we'll adore,  
Singing forevermore,  
"Alleluia! Amen!"

### **A Reading from the Scriptures:**

**1 John 3:1-7 (NIV)**

<sup>3</sup>See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are. The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him. <sup>2</sup>Beloved, we are God's children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is. <sup>3</sup>And all who have this hope in him purify themselves, just as he is pure. <sup>4</sup>Everyone who commits sin is guilty of lawlessness; sin is lawlessness. <sup>5</sup>You know that he was revealed to take away sins, and in him there is no sin. <sup>6</sup>No one who abides in him sins; no one who sins has either seen him or known him. <sup>7</sup>Little children, let no one deceive you. Everyone who does what is right is righteous, just as he is righteous.

### **Hymn of Praise:**

**"Lift High the Cross"**

#### *(Refrain)*

Lift high the cross, the love of Christ proclaim  
till all the world adore his sacred name.

Come, Christians, follow where the Savior trod,  
the Lamb victorious, Christ the Son of God.

Each newborn servant of the Crucified  
bears on the brow the seal of him who died.

O Lord, once lifted on the glorious tree,  
your death has brought us life eternally.

So shall our song of triumph ever be:  
praise to the Crucified for victory!

**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.*

Joyful and giving One, we continue to walk the path of resurrection, encountering you on the journey to Pentecost. It is easy to forget the celebration of Easter Day, yet we are an Easter people forever.

In this 50 days of Eastertide, may we daily live the resurrection in our spirits and show the joy of resurrection to all around us. When the joy is elusive, remind us, O God, that your plan for each of us and all of us in Christ's community is larger than our own desires, our own hurts, our own plans. Keep us connected to your energy of love, so that we cannot help but share it with the world.

As we await the day of the Holy Spirit, may you keep us alive in your hope. We ask it in the name of the Risen One. And now O God, we remember those words which he taught us to pray to you 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."

**Musical Interlude:**                    **"Now the Green Blade Ridety"**                    **Ness**

**The Message:**                    **"A Holy Imagination"**

Cultivating imagination is an important part of childhood as little ones develop crucial psychological and emotional capacities that help them understand the world and their relation to it. Cultivating a holy imagination is still important for children of God who, at any age, are called to see the present in light of the imagined future made possible by Jesus Christ.

In 1938, a soon to be famous man stated the following, "Over at our place, we're sure of just one thing: everybody in the world was once a child. So in planning a new picture, we don't think of grown-ups, and we don't think of children, but just of that fine, clean, unspoiled spot deep down in every one of us that maybe the world has made us forget and that maybe our pictures can help recall."

That was spoken by Imagineer extraordinaire Walter Elias Disney.

Imagination is a wonderful gift that we are all given early in life and it helps us to develop the people we are to become.

Watch a group of young children playing together, and the first thing you'll notice is that each of them believes that they are more than they appear to be. Give them a bunch of pillows and blankets, and they are no longer small children, but mighty warriors constructing an impenetrable fortress. Tie a tea towel around their neck and they transform from a mild-mannered kindergartner

into an invincible caped crusader. Give them a leftover cardboard tube and suddenly they are a wizard, a musician, or an astronomer scouting the stars.

What looks like simple fun to them is actually vitally important work in a child's development. Imaginative play develops important psychological and emotional capacities in children, helping them to learn how to solve problems, create new possibilities, and — perhaps most importantly — develop the belief that they can one day change the world. Imagination transcends the limits of the present physical world and the limits of a child's inner world, opening new ways of seeing and being.

Somewhere along the line, however, imagination begins to become less important than knowledge. As we get older, we tend to be more concerned with what is than what could be. Education gives us amazing tools for learning about the present world and about ourselves, but sometimes that knowledge can begin to impose limits on our imagination and our capacity to think outside the box. It's not that knowledge is unimportant; it's that knowledge is limited without imagination. Albert Einstein, who most people would consider the avatar for the pursuit of knowledge, once said, "Imagination is more important than knowledge. For knowledge is limited, whereas imagination embraces the entire world ... Imagination is everything. It is the preview of life's coming attractions."

What's true for education would also seem to be true for theology and the life of discipleship. We pursue knowledge of the Bible, knowledge of God, knowledge of doctrine — all important things — but sometimes we can become so enamored with that knowledge that we fail to cultivate an imagination of what God is actually wanting to do in us and through us. Plenty of biblical scholars aren't believers, for example. They have knowledge, but no imagination. We need both a strong foundation of the knowledge of God and a holy imagination to live out the vision for eternal life God has for us, both now and in the future.

Perhaps that's why John consistently refers to his audience as "children" in this "epistle" of 1 John, which is more of a homily. It's an invitation to cultivate a childlike imagination for the kind of life God has made possible for them in Jesus Christ.

Earlier in the homily, John lays out the difference between the accumulation of knowledge and the imagination that leads to action. It's one thing to have the knowledge of the truth and say, "I am in the light" (John's metaphor for walking with Christ). But if one cannot use that knowledge to imagine and demonstrate love for one's brothers and sisters, that one "is in the darkness, walks in the darkness, and does not know the way to go, because the darkness has brought on blindness" (1 John 2:9-11). "Antichrists" had slipped into the community, denying that Jesus is the Christ, and John urges the community to refute that falsehood with their "knowledge" (2:20). But that knowledge had to become activated in their imagination of who Christ is and who he called them to be: "If you know that he is righteous, you may be sure that everyone who does right has been born of him" (2:29).

Those who are born of him are indeed "children of God." We might say that the children of God are the product of God's own imagination going all the way back to creation, when God created humankind in God's own image (Genesis 1:26-27). In the prologue to the gospel of John (which was likely written by the same writer who penned 1 John), we read that Jesus, the Word made flesh, is the

perfect image of God, the one who has “made him known” to the world” (John 1:18). Those who receive him have been given “power to become children of God, who were born not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God” (John 1:12-13).

All of this is at God’s initiative, out of God’s imagination, and through God’s love. “See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are” (1 John 3:1). But we aren’t merely God’s children now, John goes on to say. We are to imagine something more. “What we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is. And all who have this hope in him purify themselves, just as he is pure” (vv. 2-3). In other words, the children of God are to imagine that they can and will become like Jesus, the perfect image of God!

To put it another way, the children of God are to imagine themselves in the person of Jesus Christ and act accordingly. Like children wrapping themselves in the garb of the hero they want to be, we are to “put on Christ,” as Paul imagines in Romans 13:14 and Galatians 3:27. As a child might imagine being a force for pure good in the world, children of God who imagine that they can be like Jesus also “purify themselves just as he is pure” (1 John 3:3).

And then there’s the real superpower for those who believe. The more a child of God believes that they are in the mold of Jesus, the more power they have over sin. “You know that he was revealed to take away sins, and in him there is no sin,” says John. “No one who abides in him sins; no one who sins has either seen him or known him. Little children, let no one deceive you. Everyone who does what is right is righteous, just as he is righteous” (vv. 5-7).

This might sound less like imagination and more like delusion, given the human propensity for sin even among those who are striving hard for holiness. John admits earlier in the homily that sin is still a factor in the life of the believer: “If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us” (1 John 1:8). But sin doesn’t have to be the deciding factor. Indeed, the more we imagine ourselves being formed in the image of Christ through disciplines like prayer, immersion in the Scriptures, accountable relationships with other believers, and regular confession of sin, the less sin becomes a nemesis in our lives. As D. Moody Smith puts it, “The work of Christ brings about the birth from God that is freedom from sin, but a freedom that must be ratified continually by willing and doing what is right, as John never tires of urging.”

Here’s where imagination becomes critical for the children of God. If we cannot imagine that we can have victory over sin — that we are trapped in a never-ending addictive cycle of sin and repentance — then that’s a good indication that we aren’t living as the children of God, but rather as children of the devil, who “has been sinning from the beginning” (1 John 3:8). If we believe we are born of God, however, we can imagine a life that is not dominated by the constant cycle of sin because our lives are modeled after Christ and empowered by the Holy Spirit. The proof of our imagination is ultimately found in the results: “The children of God and the children of the devil are revealed in this way: all who do not do what is right are not from God, nor are those who do not love their brothers and sisters” (v. 10).

A child at play believes he or she can be or do anything. A healthy

imagination breeds creativity, confidence and a vision for the best of what life can be. Imagination can lead to discipline in pursuit of an imagined goal, a focus on what to embrace and what to avoid in pursuit of that goal, and the imitation of the kind of people we want to be. Children of God need to cultivate a healthy imagination for the kind of people God created them to be — people modeled on Jesus Christ, who love God and one another — and then develop the habits and practices that get them there.

That's how we change and how God can use us to change the world!

**Closing Hymn:           “Lord, Speak to Me That I May Speak”**

Lord, speak to me, that I may speak  
In living echoes of Thy tone;  
As Thou has sought, so let me seek  
Thine erring children lost and lone.

O, strengthen me, that while I stand  
Firm on the rock, and strong in Thee,  
I may stretch out a loving hand  
To wrestlers with the troubled sea.

O, teach me, Lord, that I may teach  
The precious things Thou dost impart;  
And wing my words, that they may reach  
The hidden depths of many a heart.

O, fill me with Thy fullness, Lord,  
Until my very heart o'erflow  
In kindling thought and glowing word,  
Thy love to tell, Thy praise to show.

O, use me, Lord, use even me,  
Just as Thou wilt, and when, and where,  
Until Thy blessed face I see,  
Thy rest, Thy joy, Thy glory share.

**Benediction:**

Eternal God, grant us the grace to see your vision of blessings for all your children;

Give us the hope to make your vision real in your world;

Provide us with love that knows no limits, least of all the boundaries of poverty, sickness or death;

And may our lives reflect your vision in ways beyond our imagining, all in Jesus' name.

## PRAYER LIST

### **Jacob Allen - Deployed/Middle East**

Amy Belli  
Carolyn Barney  
Jack Brigham  
Becky Colwell  
Maureen Daoust  
David Dufour  
Diana Escarbie  
Robert Fitton  
Cathy Fontaine  
Bob and Pat Goguen  
Linda Haas  
Douglas Hanks  
John Hanks, Jr.  
Timothy Hoffman  
Linda Hurd  
Tom Kazanjian  
Sarah Kee  
Colin Lajoie  
Bob and Doris Lane  
Diane Lane Cormier  
Linda Long  
Lorraine Michaud  
Audrey Painchaud  
Maria Piazza  
Melanie Pouliot  
Jackie Reiss  
Del Sampson  
Elwin Shepard  
Amanda Sicard  
Ron Smith  
Diane Staples  
Carole Ann Sumner and Henry  
Donna Thorne  
Daniel Tousignant  
Marilyn Wales  
Mary Wayman

All who are experiencing difficult times and situations

All who are lonely or depressed