

For Heaven's Sake
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The Monroe Congregational Church, UCC
March 15, 2020

Mark 12:1-12

I have to be honest, on Monday morning, when I thought about the week ahead; which already included a funeral for a dearly loved church member, preparations for a confirmation retreat, and news about a public health crisis, I was very grateful that Debi, our member in discernment was lined up to preach!

What's that saying? *We make plans, and God laughs.*

Unfortunately for the confirmands, the retreat we were looking forward to was cancelled. And then, like a row of dominoes, school and nearly everything else has been cancelled. There have been some difficult choices to make about how we live our lives together this week, and how we're going to respond to this crisis. We've tried our best to react with compassion, reason and prudence.

And let's face it, I may be too much of a control freak to let this chance to preach slip through my fingers and just CLOSE church, so we're trying a new thing – suspending public worship and putting forth an online worship experience this Sunday and next.

Thanks to Don, Kate, John, Jacob and Bethany for trying this new way with me. It's not what any of us would choose to do, but it's what we have to do. Hopefully, by the time Holy Week rolls around, we will have received the "all clear" to worship together again publicly, as our ancestors have here in this place for over 250 years.

And not to make this about me or anything, (because it is not), but I do want to thank you all for the love and support you have given me as I have navigated a particularly challenging and somewhat exhausting week of ministry. Thank you for the kind texts and emails and calls, for helping me talk through solutions and, especially, for your prayers. I am so grateful for this church, for our wider community, and for the Body of Christ that gathers here in this sacred place.

As people living on this side of the resurrection, we know how this story is going to end. No, I'm not talking about the stories swirling around the news (*seriously, for your own mental health, if you are stuck inside streaming the news, just quit it. Take a walk outside. Read a book. Get a cup of tea. Do a jigsaw puzzle or something!*)

I'm talking about Lent. We know that it is going to end with resurrection; but going through this season – with Jesus in the wilderness, gathered around the table for the Passover meal, experiencing the betrayal, trial and crucifixion and then waiting with agony, but also with hope, for resurrection – it is hard not to get caught up in the suspense and the drama of it all.

Because, after all, this is why we gather in the first place: because we believe in TRANSFORMATION. This is why the Christian Church first took form: because together we believe that love ALWAYS has the last word.

This morning's scripture reading from the Gospel of Mark is a parable, a teaching story. And in this teaching story, Jesus talks about a man who planted a vineyard and leased it to some tenants, then went away to another country. He sent some slaves back to the tenants to collect the man's share of the crops. Each of the slaves the man sent were seized, beaten and killed. Eventually the man decided to send his son, thinking that there was no way the tenants would kill his son; but (predictably, I think) they did.

You know, those wicked tenants were even hoarding grapes? Gosh, it's not like its toilet paper, Clorox wipes or Purell! (Seriously, someone explain the toilet paper hoarding thing to me.)

So, Jesus says, the man had no choice but to destroy the tenants and give the vineyard to others, citing scripture from Psalm 118:

*The stone that the builders rejected
has become the cornerstone;
this was the Lord's doing,
and it is amazing in our eyes?*

We know what Jesus is talking about here, right? His authority is being called into question and, as people living on this side of the resurrection, we get it! *He* is the son that is going to be sent to die; *he* is the cornerstone.

The suspense and the drama are building. The chief priests and the scribes and the elders who were already questioning Jesus' authority heard this parable and were starting to get nervous. They knew something big was about to happen and that it was going to change the trajectory of their lives, and the world would never be the same.

And maybe it is just because I am a church nerd, but even living on this side of the resurrection and knowing how the story ends, it's easy for me to get caught up in the drama and suspense of it all.

Because no matter what you believe about Christ and who he was (I know we all fall on various points on the spectrum) I think we can all agree that the Easter narrative is a compelling story.

This man, who came into our imperfect and broken world in the most humble and simple way,

This son who God called from heaven at his baptism and named, "the Beloved,"

This teacher whose authority was called into question from the very beginning,

who preached a message of light, love and grace,

who called others to be in ministry with him,

who reached out to the marginalized and the oppressed,

who healed people who were sick and in pain.

He is the son who invited his friends – who he knew were going to betray

him – to share one final Passover meal with him,

who died on a cross and who, after three days, was resurrected to new life.

And therein lies the hope of the story...

That light always shines.

And love always wins.

And grace can always be uncovered.

And resurrection is real.

Beloved, that's a word we need to hear right now. This season of Lent boldly proclaims a story that is the reason that we gather in the first place.

And I wanted to invite you all, even though you know how it ends, to get caught up in the suspense and the drama, so that, on Easter morning, we can be just as surprised and overwhelmed by amazing grace as the women who found that empty tomb were.

On Easter morning, I want you to not only celebrate resurrection, but to know that it is real and that it is still happening today. Jesus teaches us that we can transform our anxiety into discipleship. So let's figure out how we can best be church to each other in these times, and draw as near to each other as we safely can, and remind one another that yes, we will get through this. Because we will.

And for heaven's sake, beloved, wash your hands!

Amen.