

“Sunday words” for April 19, 2020

Good morning from a SUNNY hill in Rockport!

We know that “April showers” bring May flowers, but enough already with the chilly, cloudy, rainy days! It is, indeed, good to see the sun shining this morning with a forecast of it remaining sunny all day....

It has been a week of hard news – more cases of this deadly virus, more people dying—near and far, and growing angst and anger among those who want to get back outside and back to work and play, regardless of the danger of Covid-19 lurking everywhere. We live “day by day” now more than we ever have, wondering if any sort of “new normal” will come and replace this uncertainty, this uneasiness, this pent-up feeling and reality of isolation.

But, history reminds us we will survive and begin again. My church history professor at Bangor Theological Seminary, Dr. Glenn Miller, said in class one day, “History is the breath we give to the present.” I’ve never forgotten Glenn’s words. My hope and prayer is that we can take in that history of death and destruction, anger and violence, hope and renewal, optimism and trust and go forward with new breath, new energy, new confidence in the strength of the human spirit and the desire to spread good will....

Along with the “simple worship service” I’m sending out via e-mail, and my sermon, both in that e-mail and on my Facebook page (freerangepastor), I will be forwarding to all on my e-mail list, information from the UCC Maine Conference about a worship service you may view on line this morning. It was put together by the staff of the Maine Conference. You are welcome to tune in via the instructions given in the e-mail I will forward to you. The Maine Conference staff decided to offer this service this morning so that any clergy who felt the need to take this Sunday “off,” could take a day of rest from leading worship. I didn’t feel the need to take today off, so you have access, and the choice, to participate in both services, one or the other, or take a day off from “church” yourself!

As I end these “Sunday words,” I am reminded of several thoughts about adversity:

“Adversity is the diamond dust Heaven polishes its jewels with.” ~ Thomas Carlyle

“In times of great stress or adversity, it’s always best to keep busy, to plow your anger and your energy into something positive.” ~ Lee Iacocca

“You know, you have to have some inner philosophy to deal with adversity.” ~ Kirk Douglas

“Comfort and prosperity have never enriched the world as much as adversity has.”  
~ George Washington

Blessings and love to all this sunny morning from a hill in Rockport..... Susan

**A simple online worship service for Sunday, April 19, 2020**  
**The 2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday of Easter**  
**as prepared by Rev. Dr. Susan Stonestreet**  
**Pastor of the Federated Church of Thomaston**



**Opening Prayer**

When doors were shut and the world was kept out,  
resurrection found the disciples.  
When the church gathers and the world waits outside,  
resurrection finds us.  
When fear grew and new questions were found,  
resurrection found the disciples.  
When faith leads us into new questions about life,  
resurrection finds us.  
When suffering remained and the city was hostile,  
resurrection found the disciples.  
When Christ gathers with his followers in living worship,  
resurrection finds us.  
Come, let us worship God!  
Amen.

**“A Prayer for Unity” \***

Welcoming God, we thank you for the privilege of being together this day,  
in spirit if not in the same place together.  
As your people, we pray that your love will unite us into a fellowship of discovery.  
Cleanse us of everything that would sap our strength for togetherness.  
Unravel the knots in our spirits.  
Cleanse the error of our minds.  
Free us from the bondage of our negative imaginations.  
Break down the barriers that sometimes keep us apart  
and cause us to drift along without a dream.  
Remind us of new possibilities for service.  
Kindle within us the fires of your compassion  
so that we may not wait too long to learn to love.  
May we be a people with loving purposes –  
reaching out... breaking walls... building bridges...  
even as we “shelter in place” through these challenging days.  
Let us be your alleluia in a joyless, fragmented world.  
Let us be your people of peace and love  
in this time of rampant virus, fear, loss and death.  
Remind us always that you are with us in sickness and in health,  
in good times and bad, even unto our last breath and beyond.  
Amen.

\*Adapted from a prayer by Champ Taylor in *Hymns for the Family of God*

## A Reading of Scripture – John 20:19-31



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.” After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, “Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.” When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.”

But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. 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.”

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.” 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.” Thomas answered him, “My Lord and my God!” 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.”

**Now Jesus did many other signs** in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. 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. John 20:19-31

### A sermon based on John 20:19-31 – “....Jesus did many other signs....”



Will you pray with me. Surprising God, call us to attention yet again this morning. Help us to see you where we least expect you to appear. Help us to believe in you in our hearts in spite of our doubting minds. Give us a sign, O God, that all our wandering and wavering and wondering are not without divine direction. Amen.

I want to begin with our Sunday School lesson for today. This particular Sunday is known as the second Sunday OF Easter, rather than the first Sunday AFTER Easter. This is because Easter is more than a day-long celebration. Easter lasts fifty days in the Christian calendar and tradition.

So, for these next fifty days we hear stories of the risen Christ.

For fifty days we are called to be revitalized by remembering the growth and the struggles of the early church.

For fifty days we reflect again on the impact the news of Jesus’ resurrection has on our individual lives and our lives together, even as we are apart over these weeks, and months?, because of a worldwide pandemic affecting even us here on the coast of Maine.

At the end of these fifty days OF Easter, the season closes with the Feast of Pentecost, in which the early Christians, and hopefully us, too, recognize and give thanks for God’s gift of the Spirit to the church.

We have no way of knowing if we will be back together, in the flesh, gathering for worship on Sunday morning for Pentecost this year. We all hope we will be, but we simply can't know that yet. So, there's the end of your Sunday School lesson for this morning.

Today, we hear of Jesus' first post-resurrection appearances to his disciples. These take place after Jesus' appearance to Mary Magdalene at the tomb that we heard about last Sunday. We are led to believe that all of Jesus' disciples are there for his first post-resurrection appearance, except the disciple Thomas. When he appears the following week, Thomas is there. There are many aspects of this reading to explore, but for today, rather than thinking about "doubting Thomas," which is the usual theme taken from this text, I want to focus on another theme.... Signs.

The reading ends with these words, "**Now Jesus did many other signs** in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book." (Jn 20:30)

What is a "sign"? I was amazed at the number and variety of meanings of the word "sign" when I looked it up on my trusty iPhone Dictionary.

Maybe I'm focusing on signs because right now we are all looking for signs that this pandemic is under control,

signs that we can get "back to normal,"

signs that we can leave our homes and safely go wherever we want without face masks, without the fear we will contract this deadly virus, or unknowingly give it to others.

Maybe all of this is why the verse least talked about in our passage for this morning jumped out at me this time in my reading of John. "**Now Jesus did many other signs** in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book." (Jn 20:30)

My computer dictionary tells me that a "sign" can be:

"a thing representing something else, or something conveying an idea, or an advertising notice, or an information notice, or an indication, or a trace left by an animal, or an omen, or a division of the Zodiac, or evidence of disease, or a symbol used in math or logic, or a musical notation symbol, or the same as sign language."

And those are just the twelve definitions of the *noun* "sign."

Then my computer dictionary goes into the eight definitions of the *verb* "sign."

This little four-letter word carries a lotta weight! It seems Jesus knew that! And gospel writer John knew it. "Now Jesus did many other signs... But these are written so that you may come to believe." (Jn 20:30-31) I think it can be helpful to think about Jesus in the context of the twelve definitions of the noun "sign." Don't worry, I'm not going to keep you on line until noon!

First, Jesus' signs as a "thing representing something else." Jesus' appearances after his death and resurrection represent the presence of God popping up where we least expect God to pop up. When people die, they don't come back to life... do they? John would have us wonder about that.

Second, Jesus' signs as "something conveying an idea." Jesus' appearances after his death and resurrection represent the idea that we don't know all there is to know about God. Sometimes we act as if we think we know all there is to know about God. But Jesus' post-resurrection appearances remind us... we shouldn't be so cocky about what we think we know about the idea of God.

Third, Jesus' signs as an "advertising notice." "Now playing, 'Jesus, the risen one,' in your local theater, your local church, or even, dare I say it, in your own living room!"

Fourth, Jesus' signs as an "information notice." Here's the sign, "Pay attention, people! Listen up!" Think of that the next time you STOP at a "Stop" sign. Instead read, "You! Pay attention! Jesus is coming!"

Fifth, Jesus' signs as "indication." Maybe John wants us to know that Jesus came as an indication of God's presence in the midst of trial and tribulation as well as in the glory of good times.

Sixth, Jesus' signs as a "trace left by an animal." I have this little plastic collection of cards that give drawings of animal "scat" – a word I didn't know before moving to Maine – so you can go out in the fields and woods and find traces of certain animals by observing their "scat." Now some might take offense at this, but I envision Jesus' signs, his "scat," as traces left by God so we can identify "Christ-like" beings and happenings in our midst.

Seventh, Jesus' signs as an "omen." For this one I refer back to the fourth sign, an information notice. "You! Pay attention! Jesus is coming!"

Eighth, Jesus' signs as a "division of the Zodiac." It seems to me Jesus' is present in all the signs of the Zodiac. I'm a Virgo, and I'm also a follower of Jesus. How about you? What's your sign? Who do you follow?

Ninth, Jesus' signs as "evidence of disease." This is the hardest sign, it seems to me, because Jesus' death was evidence of the disease of the human mind and heart that refuses to get the message of God's love often enough. If we got the message, he wouldn't have to have died the way he did. Some individuals say, "Jesus died for *my* sins." Others of us would say, "Jesus died for the sins of a diseased world."

Tenth, Jesus' signs as a "symbol used in math or logic." "Look at my pierced hands, Thomas. Look at my pierced side. Fact – they crucified me. They tied me up and hammered nails into my hands and stuck a sword in my side. Wound me and I bleed, just like you do."

Eleventh, Jesus' signs as a "musical notation symbol." What key are *you* in when it comes to Jesus? The key of dissonance and disharmony with a lot of sharps and flats? Or the key of harmony, the key of "C," the key of "Jesus the Christ"?

And finally, twelfth – you thought it would take longer, didn't you?! Jesus' signs as the "same as sign language." (make the sign for "Jesus is love.") Jesus is love.

... because I truly believe Jesus came to teach us how to see the signs of his love – how to want that love, how to live it out, and how, if need be, to die for it – for the love of one another, for the love of Jesus, for the love of God for us all.

Let the people say, "Amen."

## **A Pastoral Prayer for Sunday, April 19, 2020 from the New England Conference of the United Methodist Church**

By Rev. Ted Crass, President, United Methodist Foundation of New England  
Scripture: John 20.19-31

Loving God, on this morning, we are needing you.  
We will listen.  
Like the disciples, we are behind closed doors, click, click, click – all locked up.  
Doing our civic duty .... not wanting to acquire or spread the virus.  
We are thankful for our health workers.  
Some of us are told we are essential,  
and some of us are told we are non-essential and have the privilege of lock-down.  
Holy One, the virus does not discriminate among us,  
But its impact makes visible our sin and the systemic wounds we inflict  
through mortality across race, age, nationality, economic status  
and the growing drumbeat of scapegoating.  
A beat you know intimately.  
O God, thank you for coming to us through our closed minds and fears.  
You invite us to touch your scars to discover they are very real.  
Dare we touch them? Forgive us if we pause...  
We will try.  
We hear you say to us, “Peace be with you.” Peace be with you ... all.  
O Lord of Love,  
In this unknown time with our inexperience,  
When we don’t fully understand the ramifications of our situation,  
and when our next steps are uncertain, we acknowledge your presence with us.  
Remind us that our hope is in you and that we are all essential personnel  
in the building of your kin-dom of justice and love.  
Today, instill within us the courage  
to offer our own hearts, minds, hands, feet, and woundedness –  
in the smallest and greatest of ways, for your peace.  
Holy One, we thank you for your love that will not let us go  
and for the peace that you bring.  
In the name of Jesus, the Risen Christ, we pray.  
Amen.

### **To hold in our prayers this day.....**



From our most recent bulletin and more....  
Ann Foster, Carol Moss, Fred Bagnall, Harriet Williams, Julie Pollitt, Zeke Bryant,  
Sally Harjula, Elliot, Trish Perry, April DeVarney, Helmut Steger, John Flaherty,  
George Ng, Eve Anderson, Doug and BJ Thomson, Heather Van Buskirk, and  
Muriel’s grandson Jared.... and all those affected by the coronavirus and the  
families of those who have died from the virus. *Please send me the names of those  
you would like for me to add to this list next Sunday!*

## A Benediction



*May God bless you and keep you.  
May God's face radiate upon you  
and flood you with grace and tender mercies.  
May God smile upon you always  
and cover your life with peace.  
Amen.*

### **Readings from the RCL (Revised Common Lectionary) for next Sunday, April 26, 2020 – Easter Sunday**



Acts 2:14a, 36-41; Psalm 116:1-4,12-19; 1 Peter 1:17-23; Luke 24:13-35

### **Words to ponder today.....**

How do we preach Christ's presence? We do so by constantly and consistently saying to people, "Look, there's Christ in your midst, and there, and there, and there!" We do it by showing people that even if they are in darkness, they can find Christ's light shining through the love of a family member, the kindness of a friend, a phrase in a book, or the inspiration from a song. We can also preach Christ's presence by reminding people that Christ is in Scripture, in the sacraments, and in all of worship. We preach Christ's presence by pointing to the incarnation of Christ in everything: our sufferings, our joys, our relationships, and our hearts.

~ N. Graham Standish, in [Becoming a Blessed Church](#)

“Doubt is a pain too lonely to know that faith is his twin brother.” ~ Khalil Gibran