

Holding On and Letting Go, Part II
Rev. Thomas Cary Kinder
United Church of Strafford, Vermont
March 31, 2024, Easter 10:00 AM Service
Psalms 118; John 20:1-18

Welcome to the United Church of Strafford, Vermont, an Open and Affirming Congregation, on this Easter Sunday. Welcome to you who are in the sanctuary and welcome to you online, and a special welcome today to the Cantornote Church Musicians including Lilian Broderick, Soprano; Jacob Cooper, Bass; Lisa Willems, Organist and Sarah Cantor, Susan Hodges, Rachel Kurland and Amber Wylie, Recorders. What a joy to have you here!

We acknowledge that we are on the ancestral and unceded land of the traditional caretakers, the Western Abenaki people. We share the belief that the land and all life are gifts of the Spirit, and that our role is to honor and protect the creation, building a loving community that includes all.

Imagine strangers meeting at the empty tomb that first Easter morning, hearing the wild story of the risen Christ and wondering if this miracle could be true.

Imagine how sharing that experience would make them not be strangers anymore. If you were at the tomb, or even if you were on Zoom or FaceTime on a disciple's phone, you would want to connect with everyone there because the more you shared it with one another the more you would feel the joyous hope that something as beautiful and good as the love of Jesus can be stronger than death.

Jesus wanted us to feel this love and oneness, so after the service please see one another not as strangers but "as part of yourself you do not yet know," as Valerie Kaur puts it, and reach out to make sure every person here feels included in the joy of loving community, in person and on Zoom. [Valerie Kaur, *See No Stranger*]

Call to Worship (at the end of Announcements) I have one more announcement... "LENT IS OVER!" We have emerged from the wilderness into a day of celebration. It is a day to put resurrection and new life above all else. Let those facing trials hand everything over to God because this day proclaims that the Spirit's power to renew and restore is greater than any earthly power, including death itself.

So do not worry about anything! Forget confessing your wrongs today—you are forgiven! The resurrection has released a force of cosmic light into the world that nothing can overcome. If you do not feel joy today, try acting joyful anyway, in the hope that with God's help your behavior will change your attitude. Let us join in worship together with reckless abandon and loud jubilation!

It takes music and poetry to capture the spirit of this day. Here are the words of ee cummings. Let us pray...

i thank You God for most this amazing
day:for the leaping greenly spirits of trees
and a blue true dream of sky;and for everything
which is natural which is infinite which is yes

(i who have died am alive again today,
and this is the sun's birthday;this is the birth
day of life and of love and wings:and of the gay
great happening illimitably earth)

how should tasting touching hearing seeing
breathing any—lifted from the no
of all nothing—human merely being
doubt unimaginable You?

(now the ears of my ears awake and
now the eyes of my eyes are opened)

Amen.

Reflection: Holding On and Letting Go, Part II

The followers of Jesus that first Easter
were scared, angry, confused, in deep grief,
everything but what we think of as Easter joy,
so where is the seed of joy in this story?

Mary Magdalene could not sleep.
She left the house when it was still dark.
She walked the hard, deserted Jerusalem streets
and went out the city gate to the garden
of tombs down in the valley.

She went to be with the one
who had changed her life, her beloved teacher,
even though she knew she could not really
be with him. He was dead, and a heavy stone
kept even his cold body from her.
She went thinking she could not feel
emptier than she did,
only to find the stone rolled away, the tomb
empty, and the one thing she had left
to hold onto taken from her.
She ran back to the safe house
half-crazed with fear and grief
and told the others,
and then returned to the garden.
Where else could Mary go?
He was everything to her.
It felt as if she had reached
the end, as if no road she could take
could possibly lead out
of that place of devastation.
All that remained was the grieving love
pouring out of the empty tomb of her heart.

Mary Magdalene stood weeping
by the rolled away stone
as the day dawned,
and Jesus came to her there.
He spoke her name, the sound
she wanted to hear most in the whole world.
She rushed toward him full of ecstatic joy
with her arms spread wide to embrace him,
but he said no. He stopped her.
Mary would have held onto the risen Christ,
but he told her she had to let him go.
Imagine that. Imagine losing what you love most,
then getting it back only to be told
you may not keep it.
Imagine how the grief would reach
to the very bottom of your deepest soul,

and tear your heart in two, a living death.

But “let go” was not all that Jesus said.
He said, “Do not hold onto me [yet],
because I have not yet ascended to God,”
and he sent Mary to tell the others.
Jesus took away his being in the flesh
but gave Mary back his being in the Spirit.
He gently kept himself apart from her arms
but gave her a whole beloved community to embrace.
He gave her a path to follow, a world to serve.
Still, letting go, turning, walking away
must have been the hardest thing
Mary had ever done, not knowing
if she would ever see him again,
maybe beginning already to wonder
if seeing him had been just a dream.

We may wish that we had some other proof
that Christ rose from the dead,
but what we have is this:
that when we follow the way
of self-emptying love as Mary did,
letting go, we can experience a connection to
other people and the earth that feels
as if the loving Spirit that was in Jesus is alive
and at work within and around us.
As Mahatma Gandhi said, when people
let go of everything and reduce themselves to zero,
they fill with spiritual power and new, far greater life.

The Spirit comes to us
as a parent comes to their little child
who has climbed into a tree
and now clings to the low branches in fear,
not knowing how to get down.
The parent says to the child,
let go, and I will catch you.
For a long time, the child’s frightened mind

says no, it's not safe.
Fear keeps the child isolated and unhappy,
but finally the child decides to trust,
and lets go and falls into
those loving parental arms and is free,
reconnected to the source of love and joy
and the comfort of a deep, deep peace.

This is the secret of life that Jesus and
spiritual teachers of all traditions have taught,
the secret of the deepest peace and most powerful love,
which is to let go of the life we cling to,
let go of our self-concern and self-interest
and allow ourselves to be led by the Spirit.
What the resurrection teaches us is that dying
to old ways, self-emptying, letting go
is the beginning of truer and greater life.
The Sufi poet, Rumi, put it this way:
“The Mystery of “Die before you Die” is this:
That the gifts come after your dying and not before.
Except for dying, you artful schemer,
No other skill impresses God.”

An Easter hymn begins,
“Now the green blade rises from the buried grain.”
A seed dies to its old life
and rises again as something new and greater,
bearing fruit and many more seeds.
It doesn't matter how old we are,
a seed within us is always preparing
to send up a green blade of new life,
something that a changing world
needs us to become. I've seen this happen
even on deathbeds.

Humans get to choose whether
to accept or resist the resurrection
that wants to happen in them.
Mary Magdalene had first turned to Jesus

after resisting a long time,
when her inner seed was finally ready.
She became a green blade among the disciples.
she became something
she did not even know she could be.

Now as she walked away on Easter,
dying inside as she let Jesus go,
she was cracking open again
to become something even greater,
just as his death and resurrection
had made Jesus something greater.

The Spirit in us each wants to lead us
into the joyous, life-giving light
of a new dawn, a new spring,
where we bear the fruit of love.
The Spirit of life wants us to learn to trust
that when the day comes at last
for our physical dying from this world
we can let go with the same peace and joy and love
with which we lived our days,
knowing that we are falling into loving arms again,
and will rise again
into the light.

It is natural to fear death, but the reason
Easter has been celebrated
with hope and triumphant jubilation
for two thousand years is that the Spirit of the earth
has given us something other than fear
to feel about death. It has given us
warm sun on our face in a cold March wind,
it has given us the sight of swelling buds
holding up tufts of fresh snow,
it has given us the taste on our happy tongues
of maple sap freshly boiled to perfection,
it has given us the sound of snowmelt flowing,
it has given us all the hopeful joys

of new life rising out of wintry ground,
and through it all the Spirit says
you can be part of this great irrepressible
and eternal flow, you can be transformed
into greater life, you can say yes
to this precious opportunity
that you have been given
to rise to your full stature and love and serve
and help save this earth
as you were born to do.

What do you need to let go of today
so that you can take hold of
the new life that is waiting in you
to rise into the light
and have that Easter joy?

Let us pray in silence...

Offering Please remember that we are taking our offering online on the Welcome Page of our website just below the slideshow, or you can send donations into the church by mail.

Mahatma Gandhi urged us to reduce ourselves to zero, but he said this about holding on and letting go: “As long as you derive inner help and comfort from anything, you should keep it. If you were to give it up in a mood of self-sacrifice or out of a stern sense of duty, you would continue to want it back, and that unsatisfied want would make trouble for you. Only give up a thing when you want some other condition so much that the thing no longer has any attraction for you, or when it seems to interfere with that which is more greatly desired.”

The offering can be like that, whatever and whenever we give, if we recall how greatly we desire the well-being of all life on earth, and dedicate our gift to help this church work toward that end.

Haiku by Herbert A. Goertz
Gliding off their tree
Seven turkeys in a row
Landing in deep snow

