

*Holding On and Letting Go, Part III (on Wu)  
 Rev. Thomas Cary Kinder  
 United Church of Strafford, Vermont  
 April 7, 2024, Second Sunday of Easter  
 Galatians 5 & 6; John 20:19-31*

**From the Bulletin** “Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant...” *Philippians 2:5-7a*

The symbol below is of the Chinese word *wu*, a central principle of Taoism and Buddhism. *Wu* means the kind of Christ-like emptiness Paul calls us to have. It is freedom from attachment, desire and fear, the freedom to follow where the Spirit or Tao leads, which is to virtues like compassion, loving-kindness and peace.

Can you see the bird perched on top of its empty cage? The lines at the bottom represent our heart, mind, soul and body flowing freely, our Spirit-filled self, no longer held back.



**Welcome** to the United Church of Strafford, Vermont, an Open and Affirming Congregation, on this Second Sunday of Easter. Welcome to you who are in the sanctuary and welcome to you online. 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.

Later we will be reading the shorter version of the Future Directions Vision that we unanimously adopted in the fall of 2018, almost six years ago. The longer version begins,

The United Church of Strafford aspires to be a welcoming congregation of open doors, hearts and minds, accepting our imperfections, embracing our differences and other cultures and traditions, and maintaining freedom to choose beliefs as individuals while living up to the name United Church. We

want to be a place of faithful Christ-like love to which anyone who needs spiritual, personal or material support can turn, a beloved community connecting deeply and sharing honestly our joys and concerns, honoring and celebrating the experience of our elders and helping to raise the children of the town, a warm nest for us to land in when we are new to the church that becomes in time our spiritual home and extended family.

Everything else we do here depends on our first being that loving community, so today please extend extravagant hospitality and unconditional love to those around you, both in the sanctuary and online, reaching out most to those you know least so that everyone here may feel this is their spiritual home and extended family.

**Call to Worship** One of the Introit verses today says,

Because you live, O Christ,  
the spirit bird of hope is freed for flying,  
our cages of despair no longer keep us  
closed and life denying.

The stone has rolled away, and death cannot imprison!  
O sing this Easter Day, for Jesus Christ has risen.

Easter is a season of liberation. Easter frees us from cages of fear and grief and despair. Easter gives us songs of hope and triumph to sing. Easter tells us that nothing can hold the Spirit back from flowing through us with gifts of love and light to share with others, if we are willing.

Christ's way of self-emptying, of death and resurrection, of letting go of life to gain life, enables us to pass through every locked door. It leads us to freedom, peace and joy. And that way is ours for the choosing. In that faith let us worship together with Easter jubilation.

### ***Holding On and Letting Go, Part III***

When the Boston Marathon bomb went off,  
some people ran for their lives in understandable fear,  
and yet other people overcame that self-concern  
and rushed into the danger to give of themselves,  
to save lives and help those who were hurt.

Greta Thunberg as a young teenager  
risked her well-being going on strike from school

every Friday. She courageously screamed “Fire!”  
about the environment that humans are destroying  
with bombs and exhaust pipes and corporate greed.  
She has received countless threats of violence  
but keeps speaking out and protesting today.

Bernie Sanders courageously cries “Fire!”  
and rushes in to save democracy  
or working-class people’s economic wellbeing.  
He challenges the abuses of the gun and weapons  
and pharmaceutical and fossil fuel industries.  
He stands up for victims of racism and homophobia.  
Bernie courageously cries “Fire!”  
and this week an arsonist  
set his Burlington office on fire.

We have only seven months now  
to influence what could be the most important election  
of our lifetimes in terms of its impact  
on our country and the earth.

Literal or metaphorical bombs  
are going off all over the place,  
and some people are overwhelmed and paralyzed,  
they hear the cries of “Fire!” but cannot respond,  
but others see humanity and the earth  
and our nation in trouble and are running  
into the conflagrations and threats of danger.  
We know what every spiritual tradition calls us to do,  
but how can we overcome what holds us back?

It was Easter evening, only forty-eight hours  
after the followers of Jesus had seen the leader  
of their movement be publicly  
humiliated, tortured and executed,  
and they were hiding in a safe house.  
They had good reason to be afraid.  
Jesus with their help had courageously  
opposed Jewish and Roman oppression

and stood up for the poor and outcast.  
Jesus had attacked the temple for its injustice.  
Jesus had cried “Fire!” and rebuked the arsonists  
and pulled people to safety, even as  
the death threats increased,  
but now the remnants of his movement  
were in a locked room,  
paralyzed by overwhelming confusion and fear.  
Then Jesus passed through the locked door  
and appeared among them, giving them peace,  
breathing the Spirit into them that was in him,  
and sending them out as God had sent him,  
not to heaven, not to safe and pleasant paradises,  
but where people were suffering and struggling,  
where the danger was continuing and getting worse.

As Paul said, for freedom Christ has set us free,  
but the urgent question facing us today is how —  
how can people like us be freed from  
inner or outer obstacles to meet  
the dangers of this time  
and make as much difference as we can?

First, Jesus frees us by giving us a peace  
that surpasses understanding, leading us to  
a calm, empty place inside  
where we can stand in the midst of a  
changing climate or war or election,  
free of self-concern. Second, Jesus frees us  
by filling that emptiness with the Spirit  
that filled his emptiness, the Spirit  
that sent and led and drove him  
and will drive us to serve courageously  
where it needs our help.

Jesus said, “I am the Way.”  
In Chinese the word for the way is the Tao,  
and the way of Taoism has direct parallels  
to the way of Christ.

The symbol on page one above  
is the Chinese word “wu” which is mentioned  
often as a quality of the Tao.  
Wu means emptiness or nothingness,  
but it is a useful emptiness, and a nothing  
that is the greatest thing,  
like the empty nothing at the hub of a wheel  
where the axle can fit that enables the vehicle to move,  
or like the empty nothingness of a door  
that allows people to go in and out of a house,  
without which it would not serve its purpose.

Wu is the quality of the way of Jesus  
that he gave the disciples. It is the quality that the Spirit  
desperately needs us to have in our world and nation now,  
the quality of self-forgetfulness, selflessness and  
the spontaneous freedom to follow  
where the Spirit sends us to serve as Jesus would serve.

Self-forgetful, selfless, spontaneous—that is what  
those responders are who run toward a bomb blast.  
How can we be more like that?

We need to let the Spirit of Jesus  
come through the locked door of our heart.  
We need to hear his loving voice  
saying “peace,” and feel his warm breath  
breathing the Spirit into us.  
We need to heed his insistent teaching  
that the purpose and meaning of our life  
is to be sent into the world to use our unique gifts  
and resources to serve however  
and wherever and whenever we feel called.

We need to aspire to the beautiful wisdom  
of that symbol of wu, we need to do  
the spiritual, psychological and emotional work  
that will open the cage of our self  
and let our soul fly free like a bird,

so that our heart, mind, spirit and body  
can flow freely into the world  
like those little lines at the bottom of the cage.



Jesus is calling you, the Spirit and Tao  
and earth are calling you,  
all those whose lives or well being  
hang in the balance of this election are calling you  
to free yourself so you can be  
self-forgetful, selfless and spontaneous  
in the outpouring of your time and energy.  
All we each can do is our small part,  
but the essential thing is  
that we do that part every day with all we have.  
How can we gain the freedom and courage we need?

First, we can practice, we can act as if  
we already are free and brave,  
we can be intentional and turn toward  
what we fear and act boldly,  
even if it is just speaking up in church  
or extending lovingkindness to  
someone we don't know well  
or someone we know is different from us.  
Practice makes ever greater things possible.

Second, we can pray to gain the freedom and courage  
we need, praying not with words so much as  
with an expectant heart, knowing the Spirit  
will pass through our inner door any moment,  
maybe with this next breath,  
and send us out to serve the cause of love.  
So let us pray now in silence,  
so later we may practice ...

*continued*

## **Communion Invitation**

This ritual can change our lives in exactly  
the way Jesus begged us to change,  
if we see it as an opportunity  
for emptying ourselves of self  
and refilling with the Holy Spirit,  
if we come here willing to let go  
of ego and the agenda of self-concern  
and hold onto the greater truth of oneness  
and the agenda of loving others as our self.  
Jesus called us to lose our life to gain life,  
so at this table we are invited to lose,  
to let go, to empty in order to gain—what?  
Our truest heart, mind, soul and body,  
our true life that lives by the Spirit's grace  
and exists to let the Spirit's love flow through us.  
“Blessed are the pure in heart,” Jesus said,  
for by seeking the Spirit everywhere  
they learn to see God in all things  
and all things in God,  
they see and live the oneness  
that this ritual offers to help us all attain.  
So come and empty your heart and be refilled  
here and now, so that the Spirit may comfort  
and guide you and empower your love.

*continued*

**The Heart That Empties Is the Heart Christ Fills**  
tune: Sursum Corda 10.10.10.10.

The heart that empties is the heart Christ fills.  
New love flows in as poured out love runs dry.  
When we let go, the Spirit guides our wills.  
The one who humbly serves, God lifts on high.

Let go of all those things you hold most dear.  
Let go of life itself, all self-concern.  
Hand all to God in trust and do not fear.  
God gives life peace and purpose in return.

Christ's blood and body are for us to share.  
He gives them freely, saying, "Here, take, eat."  
Then, filled with his gifts, we have gifts to bear.  
Our serving makes the sacrament complete.

Sell all you own and go and serve the poor.  
Lose life and gain the life no death can kill.  
When you have given all, Christ gives you more.  
The heart that empties, Christ's own heart will fill.

Look to your heart; look to another's need;  
Split wood, lift stones: find Christ in everything.  
We nurture God's realm when we tend a seed.  
We hear God's voice when we let go and sing.

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**Haiku by Mel Goertz**  
The Easter cactus  
opened its petals at dawn  
a song to praise God.