



**FIRST CONGREGATIONAL**  
UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST  
235 South Kenilworth Avenue, Elmhurst, IL  
*Partners in Christ's Service since 1890*

FIFTH SUNDAY OF LENT  
At Home or Small Group Worship for March 29, 2020

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**CALL TO WORSHIP**

**This week was full of moments in which we sought God's blessing.**  
*Briefly, think about or share what this means to you.*

**Even though we wander, somehow, someday, our wanderings bring us back to God.**  
*Briefly, think about or share what this means to you.*

**No matter what, we are never lost to God.**  
*Briefly, think about or share what this means to you.*

**Let us worship.**

**OPENING PRAYER**

**O God, fill us with your courage and strength as we prepare for the cross of Jesus. No matter where our wanderings take us, whether chasing hopes that lead us onward or shrinking to the fears that hold us back, remind us that you are with us every step of the way. In Christ's name, we pray. Amen.**

**GLORIA PATRI #35**

**Glory be to the Father, and to the Son  
And to the Holy Ghost: as it was in the beginning  
Is now and ever shall be, world without end. Amen, amen.**

**PRAYERS OF THE CHURCH**

Lenten Prayer Hymn #566 Be Still My Soul (v. 1)  
**Be still my soul, for God is on your side,**

**Bear patiently the cross of grief or pain.  
Trust in your God, your savior and your guide,  
Who through all changes faithful will remain.  
Be still my soul, your best, your heavenly friend,  
Through thorny ways leads to a peaceful end.**

Silent Prayer

## **PASTORAL PRAYER**

Loving and Gracious God, whose love is unfailing, we offer ourselves to you that we may find refuge from all our concerns in the week gone by. We come seeking to find hope for the week that is yet to come.

Hear our prayers for those people and places in the world in need of your hope, healing and strength. Equip us to be Christ's living body. Equip us to be an answer to the prayers of others, especially those most in need in this time of global crisis. Bless the scientists, healthcare workers, and emergency responders who comfort and healing. Please bring comfort to all who suffer and mourn, and ease our worries about loved ones whose futures are uncertain.

We thank you for Christ's eternal love and for this church that nurtures and sustains us. We particularly thank you today for the children and youth. Bless us, as we seek to follow your way.

Anoint our lives that we may delight in our life with you. May we see and believe that we are made in your holy image and gifted in ways that will make a profound difference in this world. Inspire us to believe in all that is good about humanity and sustain us with a wisdom that comes from your holy presence.

Roll away every stone that is a barrier between you and us. Shape your grace around our innermost needs. Let us not fall victim to ourselves and our fears. In times of universal sadness and global uncertainty, give us the courage to reach out in understanding and in deeds of kindness to others. May this be a time of spiritual renewal and an opportunity to invest in the things that will promote peace and love among all your children of this world.

We pray in the name of Jesus, who taught us to pray....

## **OUR LORD'S PRAYER**

**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 sins, as we forgive those who sin against us. And lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.**

**CHILDREN'S MESSAGE** *can be found on the church website*

**MUSIC MINISTRY** *can be found on the church website*

**SCRIPTURE & MESSAGE** *also on the church website*

**John 11: 1-45 NIV (vv. 17-27 below)**

On his arrival, Jesus found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb for four days. Now Bethany was less than two miles from Jerusalem, and many Jews had come to Martha and Mary to comfort them in the loss of their brother. When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went out to meet him, but Mary stayed at home.

“Lord,” Martha said to Jesus, “if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But I know that even now God will give you whatever you ask.” Jesus said to her, “Your brother will rise again.”

Martha answered, “I know he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day.”

Jesus said to her, “I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die; and whoever lives by believing in me will never die. Do you believe this?”

“Yes, Lord,” she replied, “I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, who is to come into the world.”

**SERMON**

**“AN EASTER PREVIEW”**

*Let us pray. God of Love, when stones block our lives and seal us off from the power of your love and hope, roll them away so we may know of your goodness and grace. In Christ's name. Amen.*

It's not easy when hopes, dreams, or plans come to an abrupt stop. We feel disoriented and lost. Life-changing events happen all the time. We grow older, and our minds and body function differently. Perhaps we develop a chronic illness or run into financial troubles due to the loss of a job. Right now, we are all facing something no-one-saw-coming, a global pandemic that has rocked our sense of wellbeing and feeling secure.

There are many types of challenging life events that are harder than we expect, making each day more than just a little difficult. As a result, emptiness emerges, and dreams feel dead and buried.

After reading today's story, do you think Mary and Martha felt that way as they stood beside their brother's grave? Were they holding tight to each other's hand, feeling afraid and lost because it seemed like their world had changed forever? Their brother was dead, and their one friend who could have helped did not come.

The Rev. Wesley Stephens says something that I really like. It's a reminder. "The road to Easter – the road to new life and Easter joy – runs through a cemetery. So many times in life, we struggle. Despite our best efforts, the future seems sealed away, and unalterable."

Today's story tells us that Mary and Martha sent word to Jesus that their brother Lazarus was ill. They were all good friends and it was Mary and Martha who had done a lot for Jesus. Mary anointed him with perfume and wiped his feet with her hair. Jesus had stayed at Mary and Martha's house, probably on lots of joyous occasions. But, they also gave protection when Jesus was in danger. They knew of Jesus' healing powers, so they sent word, hoping their friend would come before it was too late.

Jesus got the news but didn't go right away. He waited. And, Lazarus dies.

Four days had gone by since the death and burial of Lazarus. The neighbors gathered to console Mary and Martha all those days of mourning. They did what good neighbors do. They took care of Mary and Martha in their time of need.

Finally, Jesus arrives, but before Jesus could walk up the driveway, Martha ran out to meet him. She confronts Jesus telling him that if he had been there, Lazarus would not have died. Then, a little while later, Mary comes out, and she is crying. She repeats Martha's anguish. Where were you?

Jesus saw Mary crying. In this tender moment, Jesus' humanity comes into full view, and he begins to cry too. He has lost a dear friend. He felt the grief of two sisters. A beautiful reminder that sometimes the best thing we can do for another is to put words aside and simply cry with them. His tears communicate the understanding that words cannot.

Jesus says, "Let's go to Lazarus' grave." He asks for the stone in front of the grave to be removed. Martha reminded Jesus that her brother had been dead for four days and that would be unpleasant to do so. But Jesus knows that if we want to see the full Glory of God, we sometimes have to get beyond the limitations of our earthly understandings. The stone is removed. Then Jesus calls Lazarus to come out. The final words of Jesus in this scene are, "Take off his grave clothes, unbind the wraps, and let him go."

This story works as a preview for what Easter has in store for us. Where we see death, God sees life. When we see failure, God sees a new path. When we feel abandoned, God draws near and hope is renewed. When fears close in and bury us, God releases angels, to bind our wounds and unbind our spirits.

Can you see how today's gospel moves from sunset to sunrise? We have, in this story, the good news of Easter. What looked like defeat and loss becomes a victory. However, the reminder is that before we got to the joy of a new day, there is loss, heartache, and grief.

Kathryn Matthews writes in her commentaries on this passage, "What lessons might we be learning in our present situation, this pandemic shared so widely across nations and even continents, let alone across families, neighborhoods, and communities? Many people are (necessarily) closed up in their homes, understandably anxious and afraid. What words of *freedom* might ease their spirits? How do we help to "unbind" one another from anxiety and dread?"

She goes on to say, "There are places and times when our (religious) imagination fails us, stops us, refuses to move us to places of new life and possibility. Often, the world around us tells us about "real life"--and claims that it clashes with the gospel vision of being truly alive. What do we think we need to do in order to "achieve" or "accomplish" new life as if it were our doing and not God's?"

Martha and Mary confronted Jesus. If he had been there when Lazarus was sick and dying, he would have lived. Jesus tells them he will live again. But, in that moment, they hear Jesus' words, but not what he is saying. Their hearts are still too

broken. They believed, but do not understand. Understanding comes later. Then, Jesus speaks that word of freedom. "Come out! Unbind him. Let him go."

The season of Lent is a time to examine our discipleship, check our motives, unclutter our minds, and make room in our hearts. Lent is a time, not just to prepare for Easter. It is our time to prepare for life after Easter. A time to remember that we can trust the things about faith that we do not fully understand.

Today's story also gives us a preview of Easter faith. A faith that gives us the courage to wrestle with and overcome whatever life throws our way. We are given a glimpse of the Kingdom and the power of God's love. There is a hope in the world that meets the reality of loss with reversal. There is a love in the world that overcomes defeat with victory. There is a power in the world that is stronger than the fear of death.... keeping our focus on what we will "gain" rather than on what we will "lose."

As people of faith, we believe that *death* does not have the last word, *worldly power* does not have the last word, and *we* do not get the last word. God has the last word. And we know that God's word is never far from love.

Many years ago, a Scottish minister by the name of A.J. Gossip was gaining notoriety. He was also a professor of Christian Ethics and Practical Theology. His passion was teaching and living the good news of the gospel. But, sadly, he lost his wife at a young age. The hopes and dreams they shared seemed to disappear in the blink of an eye.

In dealing with this personal grief and wanting to bring comfort and healing to others, he wrote a sermon entitled, "When Life Falls Apart." In it, he says, "When one complains about ankle-deep water, what will they do when the swelling streams come upon them when little troubles come, and we go astray, what will happen when all fall in? I have been in the swelling current, my feet have touched the bottom, and the good news I bring to you is that the bottom is solid, you can survive."

Amen

## **OFFERINGS**

*God provides for us in ways that we do not always recognize.*

## **DOXOLOGY**

**Praise God from whom all blessings flow;  
Praise him, all creatures here below;  
Praise him above, ye heavenly host:  
Praise Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. Amen.**

## **HYMN**            God of Grace and God of Glory

God of Grace and God of Glory,  
on thy people pour thy power.  
Crown the ancient church's story,  
bring its bud to glorious flower.  
Grant us wisdom, grant us courage,  
for the facing of this hour,  
for the facing of this hour.

## **BENEDICTION**

Go forth and be of good courage. Hold fast to that which is good. Render no one evil for evil. Strengthen the faint-hearted, support the weak, help the afflicted. Honor all people. Love and serve God, rejoicing in the power of the Holy Spirit. Peace be with you, amen.