

Now the Green Blade Rises
Rev. Thomas Cary Kinder
United Church of Strafford, Vermont
April 24, 2022 Second Sunday of Easter, Earth Day Sunday
Psalm 16; John 20:19-31

Welcome: Welcome to the United Church of Strafford, Vermont, on this Second Sunday of Easter and Earth Day Sunday. Welcome to those of you in the sanctuary and those online.

Today we will hear the Easter story continue. The Disciples had scattered after Jesus was arrested, but they came back together on the Sabbath, the next day. We would not be here if they had not overcome their fear and guilt and confusion and let nothing stop them from gathering.

Everything we do as a church still depends on our making the effort first and foremost to be a family, walking through life together.

After the service every Sunday we have one of the most important jobs Christ ever gives us, which is to make sure that every person here feels known and affirmed as an important part of our family. We need each other.

After the service today please reach past the locked door of shyness or difference and open your heart and loving care to one another, most of all to those you know least of all, both in person and on Zoom.

Call to Worship: Psalm 16 says, “You show me the path of life. In your presence there is fullness of joy.”

Religion exists to help us find the right path through life, sometimes called the way or sacred way. That path is characterized not by painless perfection but by getting up after falling, by rising again after every form of dying, by passing through loss and grief into the joy of renewal and resurrection.

The more we want to find that path, the more we get from church. The more lost we are the more amazing the grace. The more we need the Spirit’s peace or joy, the more we find. The more we have passed through shadows back into light, the more gifts we have to offer others when they are struggling in their shadows.

Even in our times of anxiety or depression, Jesus comes through our locked doors and breathes the Holy Spirit into us and gives us some act of love that we can do, and that feels good.

Whatever condition we are in, let us open ourselves to a Sunday of Easter joy. Let us worship together...

Children's Time: Three years ago on this Sunday my brother George was here to talk about creating a Golden Civilization, meaning a society that follows the Golden Rule, being good neighbors to everyone and all the earth, where people live in freedom in democracies with equality, justice and enough of life's essentials like ice cream sandwiches for all.

George reminded us that if you want to send a satellite to the planet Saturn, if you are off even by just an inch in your aim when you launch, by the time you get to Saturn you would be off by thousands of miles. Or if you want to walk to the other end of the sanctuary aisle, if you turn your feet off center just a little and walk in a straight line, you will probably bump into a pew before you get there.

Jesus called us to help people live in the realm of God on earth—he said earth could be God's realm right now, a world ruled by love and kindness, if we aimed straight for it in our hearts and in our actions. But if our hearts are off course by just a little, if we let the gravitational pull of selfishness keep us just a little hard hearted and unkind, we will miss creating a good world by miles.

And yet nobody is perfect, so if we want to create a better world, we need to do what the space program does if a rocket gets knocked off track. We need to make a course correction, like what our smart phones do if we take a wrong turn and they say "re-routing." Forgiveness is a huge part of this, as Jesus taught and showed, in order for us to let go of shame and guilt and get back quickly on the right path.

Earth Day was this Friday, and as we look around the world we see many ways in which humans are hurting the earth and other humans—but we also see beautiful things, we see the path to the realm of God on earth in gardens and pocket parks and wildflowers blooming in the woods and the music of birds and our church sending a big amount of money to help feed people in Ukraine and donating food to our local food shelf and neighbors helping neighbors and families full of love and so much more.

So if we want to make it so the whole earth is full of that goodness, we need to start with forgiveness whenever we or others are selfish or negative or lost, so we can get back on track.

And then we have a tool that reroutes us and helps us see the course corrections that the world around us needs to make. Prayer! Let us pray the Lord's Prayer...

Sermon: *Now the Green Blade Rises*

The disciples were hiding
in a locked safe house on Easter night
because the authorities that tortured and executed Jesus
could come for them next.
The disciples were sleep deprived,
terrified and traumatized.
The men were ashamed
of what they had done or not done,
deserting, denying and hiding,
and the women were broken hearted and lamenting
that they did not get to prepare his body for burial.
And now they were all shocked—
freaked out, really—by the news of the empty tomb
and Mary saying she had seen Jesus alive.

The room where they were huddled was stifling
with the fumes of oil lamps
and the scent of anxious sweat.
There were tears and raised voices and tense silences.

Then suddenly Jesus was standing among them,
saying, "Peace be with you." Imagine that.
Their world was turning upside down
and Jesus had passed through those locked doors
like a ghost, but instead of bringing heightened guilt,
terror or confusion, he brought peace.
Instead of sending them out
screaming, questioning their sanity,
never wanting to see each other again,
he formed them into a beloved community
and sent them out with the power of his love.
He breathed into them the Holy Spirit
to give them the courage and sense of purpose
that they needed to unlock those doors

and boldly do and say the same things
that got Jesus killed.

A person rising from the dead
is a miraculous thing, and hard for us to believe,
but what happened to that group of people
was every bit as miraculous.

It, too, was a resurrection, but one that we can prove happened
because the church exists and we are here.

It is a resurrection that we can more easily believe
because we have felt Jesus do the same thing for us,
coming into the room of our heart
when we have felt locked in guilt or fear,
anxiety or depression, anger or grief,
confusion or doubt. We have prayed,
or we have gone out into the springtime earth,
or we have talked with a wise friend,
or we have come to church, and Jesus has passed through
the lock door of our heart and brought us peace,
and breathed the Holy Spirit in us and sent us out.

Later we will sing:

Now the green blade riseth from the buried grain,
Wheat that in the dark earth many days has lain;
Love lives again, that with the dead has been:
Love is come again, like wheat that rises green.

When our hearts are wintry, grieving or in pain,
Jesus' touch can call us back to life again;
Fields of our hearts that dead and bare have been:
Love is come again, like wheat that rises green.

Today's gospel passage is not just a ghost story,
it is not just the story of the beginning of the church,
it is a story played out over and over
in all Creation, every spring as earth rises green,
and every time the human heart
shows its resilience rising to love again.
When Jesus came through the locked door

into that room full of scared, confused,
grief-stricken disciples, it was the cosmic force
that formed the earth out of galactic dust
once again gathering scattered pieces
that violence had made incoherent and useless.
It was the same Spirit breathing into them
that brooded over the primordial waters
and breathed into the first single cell of life.

The same Spirit that rises green from buried seed
rises in us. Like all living things, we are designed
to go through times of dormancy,
to go through winters of die-back and rest,
and then burst from our tombs
to bring forth new fruits of love.

In all the expanse of the Spirit moving this way
through billions of years before and after us,
this is our moment, this is our place,
and Jesus is walking in this door
saying "Peace be with you," loving and forgiving us.
He breathes into us the Holy Spirit
and sends us out to do our great complex creative works
like raising children or having jobs or nurturing churches,
and our small single cells of kindness and compassion.
This is our chance to contribute our part.

The question is, what is the Spirit of Christ sending us do?
We each need to discern the answer for ourselves,
and the church is here to help us do that discernment.
We also need to discern the answer
for our congregation as a whole.
Four years ago this church had just emerged
from a long, hard winter between settled pastors.
We asked ourselves what God was calling
this congregation to be and do.

We came up with a Future Directions vision
that begins: "The United Church of Strafford aspires

to be a community of open hearts and minds
embracing differences and diverse traditions,
extending faithful Christ-like love and support to all,
reaching out especially to those in need.
We intend to be a force, not merely a presence,
effecting positive social change
for peace, justice and the care of God's creation."

Then the pandemic came, another kind of winter
when we had to endure the challenges of covid.
Now the green blade is rising again
as we reconstitute a Fulfilling Our Vision group
and take back up the work we left off in 2020.

The urgency is even greater now.
Racism is aggressive and threatening in Vermont,
and a trans person has just been murdered
in a context of inflammatory rhetoric
by the leadership of one political party in the state.
In other states gains that have been made on these issues
are being fiercely challenged and reversed.
Meanwhile the news is full of a horrifying war
and even more horrifying stories about the earth.

But a counter-movement keeps rising to turn us back,
as Gus Speth describes in today's bulletin. He says:

"Something beautiful has begun. Advocates for racial justice and for
environmental protection are beginning to come together in new
ways.... How do we overcome our tragic legacy of subordination of
nature to humans and of humans to other humans...? Love, care,
respect—these we owe both to each other and to the natural world.
Their common wellspring is an attitude of the heart—an abiding
humility, awe, and reverence in the face of life's wondrous creations."

Love, care, respect.

Humility, awe, reverence for God's creation...

These are the green blades that need to rise now,
and our Fulfilling Our Vision work can help that happen.

We cannot and do not need to see

what will come of our efforts,
all we need to know is that the same force
that makes the green blades rise in our fields
is urging us to rise in our day
to do this meaningful and important work,
and that means we have the power of the universe
on our side, so how can we lose?
Love lives again, reborn in this sanctuary
as it has been countless times over two hundred years.

I look forward to walking with you
as we follow where the Spirit leads us
on this next exciting stage along the sacred way.

Let us pray in silence...

Haiku by Mel Goertz:

A fox den under a fallen tree.
The young kits
play in the branches.