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 The First Congregational Church of Old Lyme  
 Texts: Isaiah 30: 18-21; Mark 16: 7; John 14: 1-6  
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“He Is Going Ahead Of You”

*“But go, tell his disciples and Peter that Jesus is going ahead of you...”*  
 -Mark 16: 7

That phrase, from the very end of the Gospel of Mark, may be one of the most important lines in all of the New Testament. The scene is familiar: on the first Easter morning, a small group of women arrive at the tomb where they had laid Jesus’s body. But they find it empty. Instead, an angel greets them, offering a message meant for all of Jesus’s followers, then and now. “He’s not here,” the angel says. “He is risen. But also, he didn’t wait around for you to get here. He’s moving out ahead of you, and you’re going to have to catch up.”

He is going ahead of you. That’s the message I want to convey to you on this Stewardship Sunday. As a community of faith – a church – Jesus is always out there ahead of us, urging us to catch up. In each of our personal lives, too, Jesus is out there in front, way out in front, drawing us on, encouraging us, beckoning us to keep on going. In this time of acute pandemic fatigue, when it seems that so many people are losing heart and losing patience, we could all use the angel’s encouragement this morning: keep moving. Jesus is out there ahead of you.

We can use those words, but perhaps we can also use the words of Herman Melville on a Stewardship Sunday nearly two years into a global pandemic, words that correspond to those of the angel. Toward the beginning of *Moby-Dick* (I know - some among you will wonder if my intellectual life is confined to that book alone, given how often I’ve drawn upon it lately!) we find Ishmael, the novel’s narrator, entering a church in New Bedford, Massachusetts. Melville, through his narrator, then devotes an entire chapter to describing a curious pulpit, whose architect must have heeded the words of the angel in the Gospel of Mark. The pulpit has no entrance or exit save by way of a ladder fixed along its side. The preacher must climb in, after which he or she must hoist the ladder up into the pulpit, as if it were a sailing vessel. But other features are striking as well. The wall behind the pulpit is painted with a depiction of a large ship in the midst of a terrible storm, and the front of the pulpit itself is designed to look like the bow of that very same storm-tossed ship. The lectern, upon which the Bible is placed, is a projecting piece of scroll work extending out over the edge of the pulpit itself, as if stretching into the horizon. Here, at last, are Melville’s words about that design:

What could be more full of meaning? – for the pulpit is ever this earth’s foremost part; all the rest comes in its rear; the pulpit leads the world... Yes, the world’s a ship on its passage out, and not a voyage complete; and the pulpit is its prow.<sup>1</sup>

Those are powerful, if also haunting words. Haunting enough to make a preacher tremble, to say nothing of a congregation. After all, much has changed in the world since those words were

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<sup>1</sup> Melville, Herman, *Moby-Dick* (New York: Random House, 1930), pg. 57. See all of chapter 8.

written. Few these days would regard words spoken from a pulpit as the prow of the world. In fact, a good many people might wonder if a better description of a pulpit, or really, the church, might show it facing in precisely the opposite direction – backwards, looking out at the rear, at the wake of the ship’s passing. A lot of churches, and by extension, a lot of pulpits, spend a lot of time looking back, recreating the past, longing for an idyllic golden era that probably never existed. In fact, many churches, and many pulpits, are something like Lot’s wife, turned into a pillar of salt for the sin of looking backwards, trying to keep things the way they were. There is a virtue in learning from the lessons of the past, but the rear of the ship is not where churches, or their members, belong. Others might point out that many pulpits and churches are now located in other parts of the ship – below the deck, for example, in some private quarter, where congregations can attend to matters of their own private spirituality and piety – studying the Bible, offering prayers, singing hymns, attending potlucks. That too, the private quarters, is an important place, but below deck is not, primarily, where pulpits, to say nothing of churches and their members, belong. Still other observant readers might suggest that many pulpits and churches do remain on the top deck, but while they don’t retreat to the rear, they also don’t exactly stretch out toward the horizon either. Instead, they cluster in the middle of the deck, where they won’t be tossed this way or that. On the pressing moral issues of the day, they stay neutral. When the waves swell around the sides of the ship, they seek a place where the movement of the waters won’t touch them. Spiritual Switzerlands, they call themselves. The middle of the deck can be a helpful place at times, for God knows that sometimes we need to find the middle with one another. Still, it’s not the principal place that churches, or their members, are called to go.

Of course, it’s easy to make light of other communities for where they place themselves on the great ship of the world, but we’d do well to say that the entire scene describes our community too, to say nothing of our individual lives. We too are afflicted by the temptations to head to the rear of the ship, or below deck, or to the middle. We too get caught in the trap of nostalgia, or a private piety concerned with ourselves alone, or the middle mind where little of substance can be spoken. We too hear the angel’s words, that Jesus has gone ahead of us, but just as often, we’re much like the male disciples in Mark’s Gospel – locked in an upper room. We too shrink from the edge, out there where Jesus lives, way out ahead of us. But if Melville is right, to say nothing of the angel in Mark’s Gospel, the edge, hovering out at the brink, where the waves and the swells might reach us, is precisely where we’re called to be. That’s true individually and collectively. I’ll say a word about each.

I believe that in our personal lives, Jesus has gone on ahead of each of us, to show us the way we need to follow. It’s different for us all, but I’m confident that in your life and mine, Jesus is calling us to the edge, where growth, and where resurrection life await us. Sometimes that has to do with the big things in our lives, like when we need to make a decisive change. But just as often the edge appears in the small things of life. Last year, because of the pandemic, I began driving Augie to school every day and then picking him up as well, in order to avoid the bus. After school I would let him play with his friends. While I waited, parents milled around and talked, but I didn’t know anyone, and so I began bringing a book to read while I waited. At one point, it was Augie who said to me, “How come you don’t talk to the other parents? Do you not like them?” “Well, no,” I said, “it’s just that they already know one another, and I don’t want to intrude.” Plus, I kind of liked having some extra time to read. He thought for a little bit, and

then said, “I think you should talk to them. That’s what you tell me to do.” And so, I did. I introduced myself, and it wasn’t long before I had made a whole lot of new friends. It was my own edge at that moment, and I needed someone – in this case my then eight-year-old son - to nudge me out of my circle of comfort, out there where something good, like new friends, might reach me.

“He is going ahead of you,” the angel tells the women, just as those very same words speak to us today. Where is your Galilee, in which you will find the risen Jesus? Perhaps, like me, it will come from just introducing yourself and beginning a conversation. Perhaps it involves a major life decision, about where to live, about who to live with, about what to do with your days, about who you wish to be in the world. Perhaps it involves rebuilding broken relationships, or just getting yourself through the days with your dignity and hope intact. Whatever it is you’re going through, I wish to affirm for you that Jesus is going ahead of you to clear the way, to make a path that is just for you.

Let me now say a word about this place, and what we’ve been through during this past year and a half. We’ve been called to push out toward the edges, where none of us were entirely comfortable. But I think Jesus has met us there. When we found our way online, and could only see one another by way of the tiles on a screen, I think Jesus was there. When we met outdoors, sometimes huddled under blankets, I think Jesus was there. When our deacons and trustees made countless calls to our members to find out how they were doing, Jesus was there. When we were asked to think deeply about racial injustice in the world, and to deepen our relationships with our black and brown neighbors, we did so. We’re still doing that, and Jesus was, and is, there. When our Trustees, and later our board of Missions, noticed how organizations that depend upon the outreach of places like FCCOL – places like Habitat for Humanity and the Homeless Hospitality Center - needed financial assistance sooner rather than later, they went out on a limb and disbursed a portion of our mission budget early. They pressed to the edge, and Jesus was there. When it’s felt difficult and lonely and we simply needed to forge ahead, we have done so in the company of one another, and Jesus was there. I want you to know how proud I am of this congregation, for remaining as strong and as vital as we have during this difficult time. That’s because of you. Your support, your encouragement, your financial gifts, your ideas, your time, your dedication – it made all the difference this past year. Because of you, we’ve pressed ourselves onto the prow of the ship, where we’re called to be, and Jesus has met us there.

But our work isn’t over. Not by a long shot. Now is a time of rebuilding. It’s a time to regroup and regroup, to push out to the edges, where Jesus has gone, and where Jesus will meet us. We’ll do that when refugees arrive from Afghanistan. We’ll need all the help we can get, and I’ll be calling on you to lend whatever support you can give to that effort. But there’s another way that we’re being called out to the prow of the ship, and I’d like to share it with you now.

One of the great challenges that Covid has laid bare in our state and in our region has to do with precarious housing. You’ve heard me speak at length over the years about the dearth of affordable housing units in our town and in New London County. It’s a problem that plagues ordinary working people, but it disproportionately affects black and brown populations. Lost

wages during the pandemic has only exacerbated that fact. Stable housing remains an urgent need in our cities and towns.

Two organizations have been out at the prow, making a difference in our region. Hope Partnership recently completed their project in Essex, 17 beautiful, and affordable, apartment units at Spencer's Corner. We eagerly await the day that a suitable parcel of land is found here in Old Lyme, so that a project at last be realized on this side of the river. I thank God for the dedicated people at Hope, who bring such projects to life.

The other organization is familiar to most of you: Habitat for Humanity. They too are making a substantial contribution to providing stable housing to working families in our region. At this moment, Habitat is building a small subdivision of 10 homes in Norwich, most of them small ranch homes that people who have dreamed of homeownership will be able to call their own. It's a big build – 10 homes at once – but the city of Norwich, together with Habitat for Humanity, pushed out to the prow of the ship, and they've made it happen.

Here at the church, we've opened conversations with Habitat about how we might pursue something along those lines here in Old Lyme. Two lots were recently deeded to the town, to be used for the purpose of affordable housing. Our hope is that before long, the way will be clear to build on those lots in partnership with Habitat. And I would love for this community to play a role in those builds. It need not be limited to us alone – in fact, it would be better if there were a whole coalition of organizations and individuals who participated in that effort. I imagine it as something akin to that scene in the film *Witness*, with Harrison Ford, where the Amish all join together for a day in order to build a barn for a neighbor. But I also imagine it as the continuation of work that this congregation began long ago, with Habitat builds in South Africa, and closer to home here in East Lyme (it was Phil and Judy Simmons who made a piece of their property available for that build!). That's the sort of goodwill and spirited energy that I would have us help to generate here in Old Lyme as this possibility gradually takes shape.

As a kind of rehearsal for that project, Habitat has invited us to spend a day working on the Norwich project, in order to gain a vision for what might come to pass here in our town. On Saturday, October 16<sup>th</sup>, they've written us into the schedule. You don't need to have any building skills – I don't! But I'll be there. And I'd love for a whole bunch of you to join me. What you do need is the capacity to get excited about what Habitat is doing to meet the housing needs in our area. What you need is a willingness to catch a vision of what might take place all over southeastern Connecticut. What you need is a willingness to find yourself out there at the prow of the ship. It's where you stand a chance of encountering Jesus.

That's but one way that our church is being called out to the prow as we rebuild after a difficult year and a half. There are other ways too. In our worship, in our music, and in our care for one another, we're being called to the prow. In our study and reflection, and in our justice work, we're being called to the prow. In our mission partnerships and in our Sunday School, we're being called to the prow. You've brought us through a difficult season, and for that, I, we, are all grateful. But we can't be at the prow without your continued support. Your time, your vision, your enthusiasm, your encouragement, and yes, yes, your financial contributions, enable us to be who we are. When you open your pledge cards in the mail, I hope you'll fill them out and return

them. I hope, if you're able, that you consider increasing your pledge this year. And if you've never pledged before, I hope you might be willing to do it this year, as a way of helping this congregation to be at the prow of the world. In so doing, you help us to discover Jesus all over again. For he has gone ahead of us, in order to prepare the way.

I close with the words of our final hymn, "We Would Be Building": "We build with you, O grant enduring worth, until your promised realm shall come on earth."