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The First Congregational Church of Old Lyme

Texts: Dante's *Inferno*, Canto 33; Luke 23: 39-43; Luke 24: 1-5

April 9, 2023

Easter Sunday

### An Aperture of Light

Look for the aperture. Look for the tiny openings that afford a little light. Dwell on those. Stay with those. Your soul might depend upon it.

That's one of the lessons that is apparent at the conclusion of Dante's journey through hell, the *Inferno*. Most of you know that on Maundy Thursday, three days ago, a number of us gathered here for a complete read through of that text. It opens on Maundy Thursday, and continues into Good Friday. On Thursday night, the dome of the Meetinghouse was lit with red flames. From outside, a spooky red glow emanated from the windows of this place, making it look like New York City in 1984, after Zuul had possessed Sigourney Weaver. Canto by canto, readers took us through knotty lines of text describing the private and public hells that many people cling to - anger, resentment, envy, bitterness, and deception, to name but a few. And then, at about 12:40 in the morning, some five hours and forty minutes after we began, the reading concluded with these words: "we emerged once again, to see...the stars." A cheer went up when those words were spoken. In part, that's because those of us who remained to the end were relieved just to be done! We were tired and ready for bed, but also a little exhilarated to have made it through such a monumental work. But the cheer had another meaning as well. After lingering for so long in the claustrophobic enclosure of hell, with all of those memorable, if also tragically self-involved characters, it felt good to encounter even tiny pinpricks of light at the end of the journey. They signify rebirth. They signify new life. They signify hope. They signify the resurrection entailed by Easter Sunday.

I concede that hell, and the *Inferno*, may seem a strange place to begin an Easter sermon. But it is no more strange than starting with Golgotha, where Jesus was crucified, or the tomb in which he was later laid. Hell, Golgotha, the tomb - these are the preconditions for Easter. These are the predicates upon which any consideration of Easter must be built. Remove those elements, and you have a mere rite of spring, with bunnies, flowers and jelly beans. I like rites of spring as much as the next person. But the Christian narrative asks us to go deeper. It takes seriously the very real Golgothas and tombs that erupt in the world, and sometimes in our own lives. And it instructs us on how and where we might find those hidden apertures of light that do break in, even in our darkest moments. "There's a crack, there's a crack in everything," Leonard Cohen sings. "That's how the light gets in." That's what Easter is about.

My own offering for the morning shall consist of three stories, three moments where a small aperture of light suggests the hidden and healing presence of God in an otherwise hopeless situation. Consider it a triptych, those medieval paintings with a hinged door that opens to reveal a central image, flanked by two others on each side panel. In one image, that light goes unrecognized, to catastrophic consequence. In the other two, it is seized upon, and it makes all the difference. What each image in this triptych discloses is that resurrection, if such a thing exists, most often arrives obliquely, slant-wise, as something closer to a riddle than an answer to a predetermined question. They disclose that if something like resurrection is to be real, it will require some work on our part. The images I wish to show you, in my words, suggest that if

resurrection is to be found, it will require our active participation, in much the same way that the reports on Easter morning required the early disciples to make something of the fact that Jesus was reported to be alive. If those rumors were to be more than another piece of interesting information, they had to work out its implications, which is to say, to make it real for themselves.

Let us unfasten the clasps, and swing open the panels of our triptych. To our left, on the side panel, is a scene found at the conclusion of Dante's *Inferno*, just before Dante and Virgil emerge from the tomb of hell to see the stars again. It depicts a man and his children, trapped in a tower. The door has been nailed shut, sealing off all light, save for tiny pinpricks of light through which the sun shines by day, and the moon by night. The man, you might know, is Count Ugolino, one of the most celebrated figures within the *Inferno*. Ugolino had notoriously connived with an Archbishop, Ruggieri, and the two had sold their entire city down the river for their own personal gain. Then they turned on each other. In the year 1288, when Dante was 23 years old, Ruggieri conspired to trap his one time friend, now rival, in a tower, letting him and his children slowly starve to death. What results is a scene that Dante uses to convey the worst of the human condition. Trapped in the tower, Ugolino seethes with rage, a boiling hatred that, upon death, sends him careening to the bottom of the universe. There, he spends eternity locked in a forever embrace with his rival, Ruggieri. Their bodies encased in ice, Ugolino gnaws on the skull of his adversary, a perverse and gruesome reversal of the words of Jesus just before his death: "take, eat, this is my body, broken for you." In death as in life, Ugolino is given his heart's true desire: an all-consuming revenge.

It's not exactly the fare of Easter sermons, I know, but I want us to see something important in this panel of Ugolino in the Tower of Hunger.<sup>1</sup> In Ugolino's own words about his ordeal, "a small aperture in that Mew (or Tower)...had shown me several moons already." Later, the aperture is mentioned again, when Ugolino states that a "little ray (of sunlight) had entered our dolorous prison." What we need to understand then, what we need to see, is that Ugolino's darkness was not absolute. There were pinpricks of light, of a literal variety, but of another form as well. Throughout his story, there are small reminders of the Passion narrative, reminders that, had he been able to perceive them, might have saved Ugolino, if not in body, then certainly in spirit. For example, after the doors of the tower are nailed shut, Ugolino descends into a stupefied silence. One of his children then asks, in words that reflect Christ on the cross, "Father, why do you not speak?" Later, another of his children spies Ugolino biting his hand in frustration, and believes he is consuming his own flesh. Again, in words that reflect the self-sacrifice of Jesus, the child offers himself instead. Each of those moments suggests that even in the hell of that tower, some trace of God was still present, a trace that might have directed his course. Whereas he might have offered forgiveness to his adversary, as Christ did on the cross, Ugolino seethes inside. Where he might have offered care for his children in those terrible moments, he descends into the darkest corners of his own soul. Where, in imitation of Christ's final words, he might have said, "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit," Ugolino cloaks himself in fury, a rage so strong it carries him into eternity.

You don't need to believe in a literal hell, or to enter a Tower of Hunger to sense the terrible and seductive lure of Ugolino's story. Who among us doesn't carry some buried resentment somewhere? Who among us doesn't replay a moment when we have felt bruised or humiliated, scorned or rebuked, imagining some kind of retribution? Who among us doesn't

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<sup>1</sup> In what follows, I am drawing on insights contained in *Undiscovered Country*, by Peter Hawkins (New York, Seabury Books, 2009), pgs. 31-38. The book is a written form of Hawkins' Beecher lectures, delivered at Yale in 2008, where each of three lectures are devoted to Dante's hell, purgatory, and heaven.

fantasize, at least from time to time, about the wicked or the unjust finally receiving a glorious comeuppance? Linger in that space for too long, and it becomes its own Tower of Hunger, a factory for the manufacture of toxic spiritual and emotional vapors. What Dante seems to be telling us is that in our moments of darkness - and they come to us all - we must deliberately seek out the apertures of light that are available. He is advising us to hold fast to them. In Ugolino's case, that would have meant sensing the hidden presence of Christ in the Tower, and thus enacting what Christ himself enacted at the end - forgiving his killers, offering care to those around him, commending himself to God. Such are the possibilities afforded to us by Jesus himself. Ugolino can see none of it.

It's time now to direct our gaze at the central image of our triptych. It is Jesus himself hanging between two thieves. One of those thieves taunts and berates Jesus, telling him, sarcastically, to work some magic to get them out of their fix. The second thief comes to the defense of Jesus, telling the first that, while they, the thieves, deserved their fate, Jesus had done nothing wrong. "Remember me when you come into your kingdom," the second thief says, which occasions Jesus to respond with those immortal words, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise."

Those of you who make it a habit to come here know how much I esteem the essayist Rebecca Solnit, especially her book *A Paradise Built in Hell*. It's an examination of how individuals and communities sometimes discover the very best of themselves in the midst of disasters. Whether in the San Francisco earthquake of 1906, the Halifax explosion of 1917, or closer to our own time, the immediate aftermath of 9/11 or Hurricane Katrina, Solnit shows how, as often as not, people do not revert to their worst selves when freed from ordinary constraints. Instead, they seem freed to offer the best and truest parts of who they are. Often - not always, but often - people become creative, altruistic, other-oriented, improvisational, and collaborative prior to the interruption of the disaster. Often - not always, but often - there's a spike in compassion, generosity, and open-ended trust as people work to accommodate others. Often, though not always, the disaster mysteriously shakes people loose from their privacy, from their solipsism, from their self-regard, freeing them to live purposefully, and with a sense of mutual concern. Often, in the midst of a disaster, people have a way of sensing the aperture of light, and of moving towards it.

I think that's exactly what happens to the second thief in our center panel. You see, I've come to think that the paradise that Jesus refers to is enacted then and there - on the cross. For all we know, it continues after his death, but I don't want speculation about that to prevent us from seeing what it is that happens in that scene. The second thief finds the aperture of light, and he seizes upon it. Instead of bitterness or enmity in that moment, he chooses the way of Curtis Mayfield - he tries a little tenderness. Instead of self-justification, clinging to his own sense of righteousness, he tells the truth about himself. Instead of a taunt, he chooses, of all things in that moment, friendship. And you know what? Despite his nakedness, his dignity is restored. Despite the ebbing flow of his life, his personhood is strengthened. Despite the alienation inherent to that scene, a genuine and life affirming human connection is forged. It is a sign that the resurrection had already begun, was already being practiced. It is a sign that, whatever the word finally means "paradise," in the biblical sense, was then, was there, even in the midst of the disaster. That scene, the interaction of Jesus and the second thief, occupies not only the center of our triptych. It is the definition, par excellence, of what it means to sense the aperture of light, even in a moment of duress.

Moving now to the right side panel of our triptych, we come to a personal scene. In it, you'll see a hospital room, with some twenty or thirty people gathered in a circle. They're holding hands. Some are weeping. They're trying their best to pray. I'm the one speaking the words, but all the people gathered in the circle are the ones doing the work.

Let me tell you about that circle, and how I came to find myself there. It was the summer of 2008, 15 years ago. I was finishing up my doctorate, while also completing the final requirement for ordination, which was to spend a summer doing hospital chaplaincy. And so for just a few months, I found myself at Griffin Hospital in Derby, a little town between New Haven and Bridgeport. It was a quiet hospital that afforded me time to write on evenings and weekends. It was a good assignment.

One day in July a young man was brought in. He was twenty or twenty one years old. He had been a dental student with a bright future, but a combination of binge drinking and the inattention of those around him at school thrust him into a coma. Shortly after that, no brain activity at all could be detected. It was random, and totally unthinkable. For the next two weeks his parents and grandparents, siblings and cousins took over an entire floor of the hospital. They were a close-knit Polish Catholic family, and so they prayed and prayed for a miracle, but none was forthcoming. None, at least, of the sort they desired. In time, the doctors gently helped them to understand that the most humane course of action was to remove the life support. That's when a delicate and tender subject was tentatively broached. Would they consider organ donation? Their son could potentially save a handful of other lives if they would be willing to agree. It was their aperture of light. They considered. They prayed. This was their Golgotha. This was their Tower of Hunger. It was their tomb. But they found the aperture. They seized upon it, and they assented.

I was the one on call the night that life support was removed. I could see the machinery of it all moving for days, and I knew it would fall on my night of the rotations. I dreaded it, even as I was fascinated by what was happening around me. That day, I watched as the organ donor team made their preparations. It was extraordinary. In about five or six different locations around the country, sick and dying individuals were receiving calls. Get ready, they were told, you shall have a new heart. Get ready, they were told, you shall receive a new kidney. Get ready, they were told, you shall receive a new liver, a new lung, a new pancreas. Even as I observed the surgical team at Griffin being assembled, I was told that similar teams were being assembled in other parts of the country, waiting for the exact moment they would be needed.

I tried to sleep in the early evening, but I couldn't. Just before midnight, I got dressed again, and slowly walked to the young man's room. It was like going to witness an execution. I couldn't stop myself from trembling. When I entered the room, that huge and grieving family was already gathered there, and when the time came, the nurses gave me a signal. And so we gathered into a big circle. We joined our hands and we prayed. We prayed that God would, that God had, received that young man into his care. We prayed for courage in the coming moments, and for strength in the days to come. We prayed for all of those who were about to receive new life because of this death. We prayed for things we didn't even know how to name. I said amen. The nurses began to remove the machinery, and the bed was rolled out of the room. It was rolled down the hallway, and then up a ramp and through a connector toward the surgical unit. I stayed with the young man as long as I could, praying as we walked. "Into your hands, O Lord," is what I prayed. "Into your hands, we commend this precious life." Then the doors to the surgical unit were closed. The family went home. In time, the helicopter took off, and in more time still, sleep found me.

But it didn't find me for a long time. That was because I felt that I had been in the presence of the holy that night. It was because I felt that I had been invited into something that was unspeakably awful, but also something that was impossibly good, all at once. It was one of the moments in my life when God felt unquestionably present, and when Jesus felt both real, and very near. "This is my body, broken, given, for you," Jesus said. Those words came true that night in a way I had never imagined.

I'm a minister today, at least in part, because of that night. Next to what I experienced on that terrible night, all the books I had read, all the words I had labored to produce, the degree I would soon earn - they all felt like ashes. I had seen a family struggle in their own Tower of Hunger. I had seen them look toward the aperture. And I saw Jesus himself entering the situation by that tiny aperture, which is all the room he needs.

Friends, when the world feels dark, look for the aperture. When you feel enclosed in a claustrophobic corner, look for the pinprick of light. It's how Jesus gets in.

Let *that* be our hallelujah. That *that* be our amen, as we close the panels, and fasten the latch on our Easter triptych.