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The First Congregational Church of Old Lyme
Texts: John 20: 1, 11-18; John 21: 15-19
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Easter Sunday

“What Died Didn’t Stay Dead”

By way of preamble, I’ll open with words that were spoken sometime after midnight on Maundy Thursday, heard by the thirty or so who remained to the end of Dante’s *Purgatorio*. Mount Purgatory is a hospital for the healing of old wounds. It is a school in which one learns how to love. By the time he gets to the top, Dante the Pilgrim has dealt with many of the things that have hindered his ability to love. But he is still, somehow, cloaked in sorrow. Beatrice, his beloved, awaits him at the top of the Mountain, and noting his sorrow, she chides him: “How did you dare approach the Mountain?” she asks. “Do you not know that here people live in joy?”

I’d like you to hang on to those words. We’ll come back to them, for they have to do with the progression of this morning called Easter. For here at last, we are given license to be joyful.

Even so, such joy is not easily won. It is something for which we must labor, and sometimes wait, a truth that the Easter story makes plain. And so let me begin again, this time with the words of a more contemporary artist, words that help to name the sorrow and the mystery built into this story. Here are the words:

What died didn't stay dead
What died didn't stay dead
You're alive, so alive

I should've asked you questions
I should've asked you how to be
Asked you to write it down for me.

More than a few of you, I’m guessing, knew immediately the origin of those words. They belong to Taylor Swift, and they were written about her grandmother, Marjorie, in a song that bears her name. She’s brought the song to life marvelously on her Eras tour. The song is buried deep on an album released at the height of the pandemic, and so I confess I hadn’t really noticed it until my daughter Sabina shared it with me. It packs a wallop, and it takes us right to the heart of what it is that we’re here to ponder this morning: how something, like an event, or how someone, like a grandmother, or a friend, maybe like Jesus himself, refuses to stay dead.

Most of us, I think, know what that’s like. We’ve lost people. A parent or a grandparent that we depended upon for stability or strength, is suddenly gone. A spouse or a friend with whom we’ve spent the years of our lives is suddenly lost to us. A teacher or a spiritual guide grows sick, and then drifts farther and farther from the shore of the living, becoming ever harder to reach. We know what it’s like to lose the people we love.

But I think more than a few of us have had the experience that Taylor Swift names as well: the conviction that, in some inexplicable and mysterious way, those we have lost are still with us. I have heard people speak about the dreams they’ve had after a loss, in which they’ve been visited by the one they loved, and how they have been, thus, reassured. I have heard people speak about the appearance of animals - a

bird that pecked at a windowsill, for example, that conveyed to the one left behind that their loved one was still with them. And I have felt for myself, as some of you surely have, the nearness of those I have loved when a hymn is sung, say, or when I have returned to a particular place that is laden with memories. In such moments, there comes upon me, and upon others I have known, the abiding conviction that, somehow, that person is close by, right there. And I have felt, as many of you have felt, a presence. It's not the same as having the person next to you in a bodily sense, but neither is it an absence. It is, truly, a presence.

If you were to ask what I think Easter is about - and you are here, which means, at least implicitly, that you are asking, even as I am asking - but if you were to ask, I would say that Easter morning, the resurrection of the one called Jesus, is an amplified and intensified version of that phenomenon that Taylor Swift captured so well. It is the ongoing conviction that what died didn't stay dead. Easter is, further, the sense of urgency that came in the aftermath of the death of Jesus, in which first one, then two, and then several of the disciples sat in a daze with all the memories of Jesus, thinking, "I should have asked him questions, I should have asked him how to be, asked him to write it down for me." Eventually, one or the other of them does write it down, only not in the way we would expect. They tell the story slant, as Emily Dickinson would have said. They tell it with the mystery intact, and in such a way that we too are invited to enter the story. It becomes a story of Jesus's resurrection, but of ours as well.

What strikes me every time I read the resurrection narratives is how hushed they are, how whispered in their tones. It is almost as though they are conveying a secret that they do not quite know how to share, and even that they do not know how to write. What's more, each of the Gospel accounts seems to block the kind of instinct that many latter day Christians have brought to the stories, which is the wish to know what actually happened on that morning, and to claim it with some kind of rational certainty. But that's not what the Bible gives us. We're not inside the tomb with Jesus, for example, when he regains consciousness. Why wouldn't the biblical writers depict that? So too, we're not given to see the angel rolling away the stone. Why wouldn't such an event be shown directly? If it were a film - and I'm sure something like this has been done - there would be triumphant music as Jesus gets to his feet and then walks out of the tomb, as if he were a boxer standing up just before the final count.

But that's emphatically *not* what the Bible does. I think that's because the Bible is trying to tell us that the resurrection is a different kind of event. It's not the kind of event that could be captured on an iPhone. You'd never be able to see it on TikTok or Facebook or Youtube. Nor, for that matter, is it the kind of event that could be described in detail by a talented narrator. Instead, it takes the form of something like a fugitive encounter, a forceful but fleeting experience that cannot easily be shaken, like a half remembered dream, or the trace of a song whose melody you cannot quite recall. It is the hint that the surface of reality contains untold possibilities, swirling beyond our perceptions, swirling beyond our language. Within it all, there is the conviction that an encounter has taken place, that there has been a presence, with a Someone, and that it cannot be ignored.

Several such encounters are narrated throughout the Gospels. There is, of course, the Emmaus story, where an unrecognizable man walks alongside two grieving disciples, a man those disciples later come to believe must have been Jesus. There is the story of Thomas, who touches the wounds of Jesus. And there is the story of Mary Magdalene in the garden, and Simon Peter encountering Jesus on the shores of Galilee. I'd like to linger for a time with the latter two individuals, and their respective encounters with that Presence, for they help us to imagine just what this thing called resurrection might be about.

First, Mary Magdalene. Tradition has it that she was a prostitute, but nothing within the biblical text warrants that judgment. Indeed, it's hard not to feel the misogyny of the early Christian tradition circulating within that legend. What the texts do say is that she had seven demons within her, which Jesus cast out. She was, in other words, severely troubled, but something about her encounter with the man from Nazareth restored her to herself. Whereas the male disciples fled at the time of Jesus's arrest, Mary

Magdalene, along with several other women, gather at the foot of the cross, refusing to abandon the teacher they had loved. They form a circle of care around the dying Jesus, accompanying their friend even up to and through a grisly death. It is said that women helped to prepare the body of Jesus with spices after he had been removed from the cross, and we can surmise that Mary Magdalene was among them. And then we discover that Mary was the first to arrive at the empty tomb, the first to tell the others, and the first to see the risen Christ.

The encounter in the garden is a compressed and highly stylized story, and it seems to convey a powerful inner experience. In it, we find that it is a voice that reaches into Mary's shadows. "Mary," the gardener says, and that is when she is able to perceive that she is in the presence of the living Christ. It's significant that earlier in John's Gospel, Jesus had said that the Good Shepherd calls his sheep by name. Can it be an accident that it is only when her name is spoken, when she herself is addressed in the core of her being, that she understands who it is that is before her?

Who can say what truly happened to Mary Magdalene. For all we know, it went down exactly as it is reported in the text. But I believe it's more likely that the story represents an existential awakening in Mary's life, in which she realized that the voice who had once spoken into her darkness, the one who had calmed the chaos of her life, was still capable of finding her. I believe that voice is speaking still, to each one of us, from out of the dark corners of our lives. When we are addressed in the depths of our individuality, something of the living Christ finds us. When a friend looks into our eyes and sees us for who we truly are, something of the living Christ finds us. When we are given the freedom to be who we most truly are, I believe it is the living Christ who is addressing us. It is a moment in which what died - within Jesus, but also within us - didn't stay dead.

And then there is the story of Peter. His is the story of a heartbroken man. It is the story of an unheroic man, one who failed to live up to his highest ideals. When the time of crisis came upon him, he caved. When the time of testing arrived, he showed himself a coward, choosing to preserve his own well being, rather than being identified with his friend, Jesus. When the mob comes to arrest Jesus, the stories say that the disciples (the male disciples, anyway) all ran away, and hid themselves. Later, we're told that Peter actively denied knowing Jesus, which causes him to weep bitterly. Peter stands for each one of us, whenever we have not lived up to our ideals. He stands for us, when fear or cowardice has frozen our ability to act. He stands for us, whenever we have failed to uphold the ones we love, whenever we have acted in ways that betray the trust that has been invested in us. I have, from time to time, felt something like Peter. Maybe you have too.

I believe the scene on the shore of Galilee is a compressed and symbolic story of something that unfolded for Peter over a period of time. It is something so true that it could only be conveyed in symbols, in a story. The essence of the story is that Peter is asked by Jesus three times, whether he, Peter, loves him. To which, of course, Peter responds, yes. Then feed my sheep, Jesus tells him.

Again, it may have happened exactly as it is written. But I suspect that beneath the story itself, there lies another kind of experience. It is the experience of a man who, sitting with the enormity of all that happened, and facing into his own catastrophic failure, began to recall the stories that Jesus told, especially the one about the loving father who had two sons. One son was ungrateful and demanding, squandering his share of his Father's property, after which he was forgiven. The other brother was dutiful, responsible, and also not a little resentful. In the story, the Father explains that what he really has to give is love and forgiveness, not property or wealth, and that such things cannot be divided and measured out - they are infinite. I imagine Peter sitting with that story that he probably heard Jesus tell dozens of times, along with others like it. I imagine poor Peter turning the tales of Jesus about the radical love of the one he called his "Abba," his Father, over and over in his mind.

And then I imagine something happening to Peter, coming upon him like a mighty wind, with the force of a revelation. Like a flood washing over him, he realizes that the bottomless forgiveness that Jesus had told stories about, that he had seen Jesus had practice, was actually meant for him too. And when that happened, I like to believe that it was as though his friend was present to him all over again, telling Peter that he forgives him, telling Peter that he still loves him, telling Peter to take care of all of the lost and lonely ones that Jesus himself cared so much about. It was as real as if Jesus was right there, like he could reach out there on the beach at Galilee and touch him. And then the moment was over, just like that. But it was enough. Enough so that Peter could live out of that sense of radical grace and forgiveness. Enough that he carried forth that message of grace, telling the world about what had happened to him. Enough that he could live up to his nickname, the Rock, the one on whom everyone else could depend and fall back upon when things got rough.

Mary hears a voice that speaks deep into the shadows of her soul. Peter discovers a forgiveness that restores his dignity. But where does that leave us, we who are navigating our own losses and failures? Where does it leave us, we who are trying to hold onto what is lasting and true, when so much of what we love slips out of our grasp? I cannot presume to say for you. Perhaps, like Peter, for some of us it involves the work of forgiveness - the giving of it, or the receiving of it. Perhaps it involves the restoration of a relationship that seemed to be dead. Or perhaps, like Mary, it involves listening for the people, and noticing the locations, in which you feel known and loved for who you most truly are. Or maybe that still lingering Presence of the One from Nazareth shows up in other ways. For the young people here thinking about questions of vocation, perhaps it means asking not what you could do to make lots of money, but asking what you could do that would make a difference. For those in a draining and soul killing job, it could mean changing course, in order to find something more life giving. For the person whose years are winding down, it could mean connecting deeply with your children, or grandchildren. For those who are sickened by the spectacle of bodies and rubble in Gaza, perhaps it could mean getting involved, and finding new ways to demand not only a ceasefire, but a lasting and a just peace. Finally, for those of us who are coming to terms with the loss of one we have loved - and I know that this Easter, there are many - it means trusting that somehow and in some way, what dies doesn't stay dead. It means giving thanks to God for the love and light we have been given in our lives, and for the ways in which we have been shown how to live.

I return at last to Dante and Beatrice at the summit of Mt. Purgatory. "How did you dare to approach the mountain?" Beatrice asks. "Do you not know that here people live in joy?" Might it be that we too can live into those words? I don't know that it's possible to live without some regrets or sorrows. We all have them. But I do believe that joy is possible in the midst of it all. When we hear the voice speaking our name, and when we sense the possibility of grace, yes. But it applies to us as a community too. We find that joy when we enact anew the words of Jesus, "Blessed are the peacemakers;" when we remember his instruction that "inasmuch as you have done it to the least of these, you have done it to me;" when we allow this to be a community where children are affirmed in all of their unique individuality, and where those of us who are a little or a lot older can experience something like grace; and when we can, in some mysterious but real way, sense the presence and proximity of all those we have loved who have gone before us, drawing near to say, "I'm proud of you. Keep going. You're doing great." We find that joy when we sense the Presence beside us and within us of the One called Jesus, who whispers our name in the depths of our being. In such moments the peace that passes all understanding reaches us, and a joy that the world cannot give finds us.

What died didn't stay dead. What died didn't stay dead. He is alive. So alive. Amen.