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The First Congregational Church of Old Lyme
Texts: John 20: 1, 11-18, 19-22
April 20, 2025 Easter Sunday

“Hello From the Other Side”

As on Easter's past, I'd like to begin by returning us to Maundy Thursday, and to the long night many of us spent reading Dante's *Paradiso* together. It's an impossible conclusion to an impossible poem, and it frequently eludes the descriptive powers of the poet. Over and over again, Dante tells us in the *Paradiso* that language fails to convey the sheer overwhelming goodness he encounters as he journeys toward God. “Just as the dreamer, after he awakens, still stirred by feelings that the dream evoked, cannot bring the rest of it to mind, such am I,” says Dante, “my vision almost faded from my mind, while in my heart there still endures the sweetness that was born of it.”

That's a good place to begin on Easter morning, for Dante's dilemma is shared by the preacher, and perhaps by each of us. It's easy enough to describe the fires raging around us in our world, the infernos. In a way, it's not all that hard to describe what it is to heal from a catastrophe, as in the *Purgatorio*. But when it comes to describing something that's unqualifiedly good, something that is unreservedly beautiful, joyful, and life affirming, well then, quite often words fail us. Even in Scripture, the words are spare. And so how are we to speak on Easter morning? What language can we give to this event that seems both outlandish, and yet, seems so very very good at the same time - this encounter on the far side of death? Say a prayer for all those tasked with speaking of such things.

Most recently, it was a song that helped me to imagine my way into this theme. And it was the song - one that surprised me, frankly, for I had long known it and it didn't hold any particular meaning for me - it was the song that helped me to put language around what I think the stories of Easter are trying to convey. Here are the lyrics:

Hello from the other side
I must have called a thousand times...
But when I call
You never seem to be home.
Hello from the outside.

The words are Adele's of course. As far as I can tell, the song from which they come, “Hello,” has no direct relationship to Easter, or to faith, really. It's about someone far away trying to rekindle an old relationship. But not long ago, that song nearly overwhelmed me, and I felt sure then, as I am sure now, that it captured something of the power of Easter morning. It's a story I'll tell you in just a little bit.

But what if - what if resurrection was a call, somehow, from the other side - the other side of death, say? What if it was a call from the other side of our troubles? What if it was the call of faith, from the other side of our sorrows? What if it was a call, perhaps from Jesus himself, from the other side of our pain, our frustration, our fear? If nothing else, Easter grants us license to wonder and to imagine, and so just for a moment, try to imagine: what if there were those, both living and dead, who somehow exist on the other side of those fears, on the other side of our despair? What if there was a membrane of

perception that separated us from those who have crossed over, and what if, at certain moments, that membrane grew thin, and became porous, so that we could hear them calling to us - to reassure us and to help us, and to guide us? What if those voices, and that of Jesus foremost among them, were saying to us, "I know it's hard now. We know the way is dark. But we stand here on the far side of Being to offer the courage and strength you need to get through, for we are with you. I am with you," Jesus says. What if?

Say there is a call - from God, from Jesus, somewhere from within Being itself. But then what if, as often as not, we're just not home, spiritually speaking, emotionally speaking, to receive the call? What if we can't even perceive that the membrane is there, still less that, in certain times and places, it grows thin for our benefit, so that we might hear the call?

Friends, I believe that Easter is our attempt to hear that call from the other side of Being, and to answer it. I believe that Easter is God's own way of saying to each and every one of us: "Hello. Hello from the other side."

That's something of what's happening in all of the Easter stories, as I read them. Over the years, I've become less and less interested in the sorts of questions routinely asked this time of year in places like the *Times*, or on the magazine racks at supermarkets. "Easter: Fact or Fiction?" the headlines read, as if these stories can be boiled down into those two easy dichotomies. It's a silly question. Imagine reading a great poem - let's say by Dante (because we've been talking about him) or by Rilke, or by Emily Dickinson. How obtuse it would be to read the *Paradiso*, or the "Duino Elegies," or "My Life Had Stood, a Loaded Gun," and to say, ok Emily: your poem - fact or fiction? Or, to switch metaphors, how absurd it would be to listen to a soaring piece of music - let's say Bach's "Mass in B Minor" for the sake of argument, and to think, OK J.S., is this music based on fact or fiction? It would be a foolish question, because it would be a confusion of categories. These stories of resurrection are closer to a great poem exploring the depth and mystery of the world, exploring the imponderables of the human heart, than they are to news reports. They're closer to a symphonic score, or a strangely familiar song drifting through an open window to convey something that had been unthinkable. Imagine these stories, then, as a greeting from beyond, as if from the other side of Being itself, saying "Take heart. Have courage. Keep going. I am with you. Hello."

Consider Mary in the garden. And consider the disciples later that night, huddled together in that locked room. They are grief stricken. They are fearful. They are traumatized by the loss of a friend, and by the failure of a vision. In that burning and incendiary moment of loss, one by one, they each have experiences in which the membrane or the boundary separating the living from the dead, grows thin. It enabled them to see to the other side of their sorrow and confusion, and to sense the presence of their friend. In that terrible aftermath, it enabled them to feel held by a love that would not let them go, and to feel emboldened to continue the work that Jesus had begun. In the Garden, a mysterious stranger who does not, evidently, look like Jesus, says, "Mary," and it delivers a shock of recognition, making plain that the friend who had died was, impossibly, right there. Hello from the other side.

And in the locked room - which signifies the space of the disciples' hearts and imaginations, and perhaps our hearts and imaginations as well - the One they had lost is somehow suddenly there, present, perhaps the way some of you have felt the presence of one you have lost, perhaps the way some of you have felt the presence of a stranger standing with you in a dark moment, a stranger who may be none other than

Christ himself. “Hello from the other side,” he says, which is to say, hello from the other side of the catastrophe, from the other side of the disaster, from the other side of the sorrow of a Good Friday world. All along, Jesus had been trying to reach them. Now, at last, they are home to receive the call.

Might these stories be conveying something not simply about what once happened to a small group of people in first century Palestine, but rather about the very condition of the world, the very condition of our lives? Perhaps it is that Something or Someone is trying to get our attention, and perhaps it is that too often, we’re simply not home to receive the call. In *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, the poet William Blake puts it thus: “If the doors of perception were cleansed,” he writes, “every thing would appear to humanity as it is, Infinite. For humans have closed themselves up, till they see all things thro’ narrow chinks of their own caverns.”

Sometimes that’s exactly what it’s like to be trapped within our routines and obligations - we begin to see things only through the narrow cracks of our own inner caverns. Sometimes, that’s what it’s like to inhabit the 21st century: we see the world through a prism of Red or Blue, say, failing to recall that that rubric was only invented 25 years ago by Fox News. We see through the crack of our assumptions about how an economy ought to run or how we think people *ought* to live. Such caverns prevent us from encountering the expansiveness of the world, the sanctity of other people, and the Infinite within ourselves.

But there is a call, one that stands ready to blow our hearts and our imaginations wide open. It comes to us as an invitation from the other side, from the outside, as it were, to open us toward the infinite.

I’d like to speak very personally now, if I may. Something a little like what I’m trying to describe happened to me down in Cuba last month, when members of this congregation traveled there to learn from the people of that country. One morning in Santiago, I had the opportunity to sit with a practitioner of Ifa, a deeply learned wisdom tradition that originated thousands of years ago in West Africa. Ifa is a way of hearing from God, and I have wished to learn more about the tradition for a long time. It is, essentially, a system of prayer, one that invites its adherents to be in relationship not only to God, but also to the many ancestors - both personal and cultural - that have shaped us. And so the ancestors were invoked. And then *my* ancestors were invoked - *my* grandparents and great grandparents. I spoke about many things with this man, this learned ritual expert, and there were moments, quite honestly, that I was astonished by what he said, wondering, “how do you know this about me?” And then, at one point in the midst of this very intense conversation, a song drifted through an open window, in Cuba, where scarcely anyone speaks English, where I don’t think I heard an Anglophone pop song ever, except this once. You already know the words that I heard:

Hello from the other side
I must have called a thousand times...
But when I call
You never seem to be home.
Hello from the outside.

It didn't sink in all at once. It didn't mean anything right away. But as the day and the night progressed, and as I joined this man for a ritual ceremony that extended into the following day and night, I began to feel nearly overpowered by the way those words entered my consciousness. Hello from the other side - of a religious expression that Christians, and especially Protestant Christians, have treated with disdain. Hello from the other side - of a people subjected to some of the worst abuses in the history of the world. Hello from the other side - of the curtain, of the veil, separating the living from the dead. The membrane grew thin; the boundaries became porous, and I hovered at the brink of tears for the entirety of those two days, and more.

Perhaps what brought the tears was the sense I had of being surrounded by those I have loved and lost - my grandparents, but also members and friends from this community - David Good, Travis Harden, and countless others we have lost in recent years. It was as though they had all gathered around to offer greetings, to offer support, to offer encouragement and care: Hello from the other side, they said. In that ceremonial space, my attention was heightened, and I was enabled to receive the call.

Most of all, though, I felt Jesus there. The living Christ who stands before the world as if across an open threshold, calling from the other side, assuring me, assuring us, that we have not been lost or forsaken within the dark caverns of our perception. It was Jesus standing foremost among them all.

This is, I well know, a difficult Easter for many of us. We carry a heap of burdens, probably too numerous to name. Even so, let me name a few. There is, among other things, the trashing of the rule of law and of the Constitution. There is the forced disappearance of immigrants and a so called "anti-woke" and anti-DEI campaign that amounts to a willful move toward resegregation. Within the next week, according to some sources, an executive order targeting immigrant and human rights organizations is likely to be issued, threatening financial penalties or prison for those who provide aid to undocumented peoples. There is, I know, a palpable fear among the LGBTQI community, and especially among those who identify as trans. There are those among us who are afraid to leave the country, for fear of not being allowed back in. Even for those of us who may go more or less unscathed by such assaults upon decency, there is a powerful existential dread that is now binding us. These are the tombs around which we weep. These are the locked rooms in which we are huddled. These are the caverns in which we are trapped.

To those of us who carry such fears and burdens, I wish to say on this Easter morning: take heart. We have the Law and the Prophets. We have Moses and Miriam. We have Isaiah, and Jeremiah, and Ezekiel. We have the Gospels and above all else we have Jesus.

But not only them. We have all of the ancestors, we have all of the freedom fighters, we have all of the poets and the artists and the wisdom keepers, all of them standing on the other side to give us the courage and the vision that we need. Martin Luther King and Malcolm X are there, Dante and Blake and Emily Dickinson are there. Ernesto Cardenal and Dorothy Day and Toni Morrison are there. David Good and Travis Harden are there. Your people and my people, having now been freed to see and to taste the Infinite that binds and holds all things - they are all there. They stand on the opposite side of this great looming chasm of history now before us. They stand there to guide us, to encourage us, and to chasten us, lest we retreat into cowardice, lest we slump into indifference. Foremost among them all is the risen Christ, who says to us: keep going, hold fast to what is good, for I am with you.

Maybe I'm a gullible fool. Maybe I'm an incorrigible dreamer. Say what you will. But my prayer is that this ritual space called Easter might heighten your attention. My prayer is that across the chasms, or outside the dark caverns and locked rooms in which we find ourselves, we might sense the risen Christ, along with everyone else who has gone before us, coaxing us into ever greater works of love and justice. My prayer is that this Sunday will be about so much more than the pageantry of an annual tradition. My prayer is that it will be an opening, leading toward a genuine encounter with the one who greets us from the farther shore of Being, in order to show us the way.

"Hello from the other side," comes his message, drifting in, as if from an open window. May we be home to answer the call.