

Rev. Dr. Steven Jungkeit

The First Congregational Church of Old Lyme Text: Matthew 28: 1-10

April 5, 2026 Easter Sunday Worship Service

### **“On the Way to Galilee”**

A few years ago, after we were through with our Easter services and after I had gone home, our family gathered around the table for Easter dinner. I felt good about the morning, and I asked my parents how it had seemed to them. “It was great,” my mom said, “but the sermon sure was long.” Mothers have license to say such things. And so I trust you’ll forgive me this morning if my comments are a little shorter than in years past. You have my mother to thank for that!

But I also follow a pattern laid out in the Gospels themselves. The descriptions we find of the resurrection of Jesus are spare in the extreme. They give us just a handful of details, which we preachers tend to mine on Easter Sunday. There are the women, who show up at the tomb first. There is the angel. There is Mary Magdalene, gazing at Jesus through her tears. There is Peter, who enters the tomb of the risen Christ. There is the curious threshold separating life from death, and the alluring suggestion that it does not always entail a one way passage between the two. And there is the angel’s puzzling instruction, found in two of the four Gospels, including the one we read for today, to return to Galilee, for that is where the risen Jesus will meet his friends.

It’s this latter detail that I’d like to linger on. Why doesn’t Jesus just meet the disciples where they are? Why doesn’t he show himself to the twelve in Jerusalem, the way he does for the women at the tomb? Do we not like to say, after all, that Jesus, or God, meets us wherever we happen to be on life’s way? So why not visit the rest of his friends in precisely the place they most need him to be - then and there, in Jerusalem?

It may be that the Gospel writers are indicating that the risen Christ will be discovered in the places where his ministry was carried out. I’ve preached that Easter sermon once before. But I have come to think that there is another reason. The distance between Jerusalem and Galilee is about 70 miles, and traveling on foot, it might have taken anywhere from three days to a week to make the journey. It’s thus a kind of pilgrimage that the disciples are forced to make, a journey about which we have no information whatsoever. Perhaps it was therapeutic to make that walk, not unlike those who set out on a long journey after undergoing a difficult life change. Perhaps it gave them time to think, time to talk, time to pull themselves together. Maybe it opened a different kind of space in their heads and hearts, different from everything they had experienced in Jerusalem. Strange to say it, but the angel’s instruction, first and foremost, is that in order to experience the risen Christ, the disciples must go for a long walk.

Though I've not been privileged to do it myself, I understand from those who have that the Pilgrim Way to Santiago de Compostela in Spain is populated by many who are walking through their sorrow or their pain. If they are not processing sorrow, often, pilgrims along that path are negotiating a major life transition. Somehow, the simple motion of having to place one foot in front of the other can have a calming effect upon the soul. And so pilgrimage can be a component of what it is to arrive at new life when something else has died. When faced with our own life transitions, we do well to remember the angel's instruction: go for a walk; go on a journey. Leave this place behind.

But I suspect there's something more fundamental still about the angel's words. What had occurred in Jerusalem was shattering and, to employ a much overused word, traumatic. Perhaps the angel's instruction was God's own way of moving the disciples away from the site of their pain and suffering, in order to restore them to a different kind of life. It is as if God, through the angel, was saying, "I've got to get you out of here. Because otherwise you'll keep rehearsing this awful event over and over again in your soul. And so beat a hasty retreat, so you don't get stuck in this torment."

We know from research that those who suffer overwhelming events - and who among us does not at some point or another - often do get stuck there, trapped in a kind of repetition compulsion. Too often, the abused becomes the abuser and the victim becomes the victimizer because of that dynamic of repetition. That has to do with a basic, but not entirely trustworthy instinct within us, which hopes that this time, or this time, or this time, a different outcome might be achieved, different than the original wounding event. That's often true for those who have experienced harm at the hands of another, but it's just as true for those who are grieving, or carrying wounds - and again, who among us does not carry wounds within? A death, a rejection, a humiliation or a slight - these can become sites of emotional entrapment from which we never move, from which we never emerge. They are, if you will, our Jerusalem.

The angel's word comes to us in order to say, "It's time to leave this place. It's time to set this behind you. You've got to turn away from whatever it is that has stolen life from you; you must walk far away from what has robbed you of your vitality; you must put some distance between yourself and all that has hurt or diminished you. You've got to get out of Jerusalem and get yourself to Galilee. Because while an angel may find you in that darkened space, and while you may be given a glimpse of Jesus there, he's waiting for you elsewhere.

Which then raises the question of Galilee itself. If, for our own protection and growth, we must sometimes walk away from the site of our loss; if, for the sake of our souls we must get out of the cycles of damage that keep us trapped; if for the sake of our very humanity we must turn our backs on the places of crucifixion in our lives, where precisely are we to go? Where does Galilee exist, and how are we to find it?

It's not a place you can locate on a map, not really. As I imagine it, Galilee would be any place in which human decency and care and healing were practiced. Consider all that happens within that locale in the Gospel narratives. It's the place where hungry people are fed. It's the place where people who cannot see clearly receive vision. It's the place where a man's friends tear off a roof in order to get him to Jesus, who then provides healing. It's the place where those who are socially isolated - because of sickness or purity codes - were drawn back into community. It's the place where storms are calmed, and where Peter learned that he could walk upon the chaos of the seas. It's the place where human beings are loved and embraced, and where they learn to trust in the goodness of their own humanity once again. These are the places we're tasked with finding. These are the places we're tasked with creating.

One of my favorite of Toni Morrison's novels is called *Home*, a slim and tender story about a man named Frank Money, making his way back to Georgia in the 1950's after being discharged from the army. He is carrying his own burdens born of the things he saw in combat, and he is worried that his sister Cee is in some kind of trouble back in Georgia. Moving from the Pacific Northwest, Frank makes his own kind of pilgrimage to a home that never felt like home to him. When he arrives there, he discovers that indeed, Cee is in trouble, having been confined and then subjected to medical experiments that left her terribly damaged. They retreat to their home community, a place they had once shunned as narrow and small minded, and they discover there a group of women who know the art of healing. Slowly, the women knit Cee, and also Frank, back together with their ministrations.

Morrison writes, "Although each of (Cee's) nurses was markedly different from the others...their similarities were glaring. There was no excess in their gardens because they shared everything. There was no trash or garbage in their homes because there was a use for everything. They took responsibility for their lives and for whatever, whoever else needed them. The absence of common sense irritated but did not surprise them. Laziness was more than intolerable to them; it was inhuman. Sleep was not for dreaming; it was for gathering strength for the coming day. Mourning was helpful, but God was better and they did not want to meet their Maker and have to explain a wasteful life. They knew He would ask each of them one question: "What have you done?" What they do is to create the space of Galilee for Frank and Cee, after their own experience of Jerusalem had left them shattered.

Let me bring this right up to the present. I don't know how many conversations I have had over the past year with immigrant friends, Jewish friends, Muslim friends, Black and Latino friends, LGBTQI+ friends, European friends, all of whom are saying, "It may be time to get out of here." For those who are not white, for those who are not straight, for those who are not Christian, and for those who do not have citizenship, the danger and the pain of this, our own Jerusalem, has become far too great. Witnessing the very modern crucifixions happening all around them, many have begun to heed the angel's words.

Of course, that presumes a level of financial independence, to say nothing of a worldly wherewithal, that many of us, myself included, do not possess. Which means that we must find or make our Galilees much closer to home. People of faith and conscience have been making home brewed Galilees for a long time now. I think of Solentiname, Nicaragua, where the images on our walls were produced in the early 1980's. There, a small group of poor rural peasants supported one another amidst the terror of the Somoza regime in that country, reading the Bible, creating art, engaging in lively discussions, and holding all things in common. They created their Galilee. I think of Koinonia Farm in Georgia, where some young people from this congregation will be traveling in a week or so, a place where Black and White folk lived together in open defiance of Jim Crow segregation in the 40's, 50's, and 60's, and where a radical vision of hospitality is still practiced today. At Koinonia, they have created their Galilee. I think of the churches and the neighborhoods of Minneapolis this past winter, whose members and residents accompanied children to school and delivered groceries to those frightened to leave their homes. They created their Galilee in Minneapolis.

And I think of us here in Old Lyme, humbler by far, but no less emboldened by the angel's instruction on Easter morning. In a time in which we're all sick to death of the Jerusalems unfolding around us, let this be our Galilee. When we've grown weary of the boasts and the doublespeak of our leaders, may this be a place where truthful words are spoken - may this be our Galilee. When we've become disgusted with the endless warmongering and one more killing campaign directed against the Muslim world, may this be a place where words of peace are spoken - may this be our Galilee. When we've become unnerved by all the isolation and anti-intellectualism and submersion in our screens, let this be a place of human and humane connection - let this be our Galilee. When we've become disheartened by the casual cruelty toward other human lives, or the sheer indifference and the will not to know, may this be a place demonstrating love and care for all of our neighbors - may this be our Galilee. If you haven't been a part of things here at FCCOL, and if you're seeking an oasis of sanity in a desert of distractions and deceptions, well, I would like to believe that FCCOL can become your Galilee too.

I've been watching, and my mom is getting restless. It's time to close. And so let us heed the angel's instruction, and begin our pilgrimage toward Galilee, singing Hallelujah as we go.