

Steve Jungkeit  
The First Congregational Church of Old Lyme  
Text: John 20: 1-18  
April 12, 2020  
Easter Sunday

Exiting the Tomb:  
Easter in the Time of Corona

In the heart of old Jerusalem, pilgrims and tourists often make their way to the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, an enormous stone edifice said to be built on the site of the tomb that Jesus was placed in after his crucifixion. Within the church itself, there stands another stone edifice inside of which is the tomb itself. People from all around the world line up at that stone sarcophagus, and take turns going inside to witness the place where Jesus might have been buried. I've done it myself, though I have my reservations about the whole enterprise. These days, if I'm leading a group through the old city, I tend to stay outside the church, refraining from going in at all.

I do so for a number of reasons. I have my doubts that it's even possible, let alone worthwhile, to determine the site of Jesus's burial. But even if something important did happen there, I'm convinced that the real story began outside of the tomb. In other words, the point of the story doesn't reside inside the Church of the Holy Sepulcher. It resides outside of it and away from it, in the world all around those cavernous walls. After all, when the women in the Gospels first appear at the tomb, they're turned away by an angel, who wonders why they're looking for one who is living in a place of the dead. He's not here, the angel says. He's gone ahead of you, into Galilee, which is to say, to the places he enacted his work all along – healing people, feeding them, comforting those in mourning, and bringing what had been lifeless back to life. And so I stay outside of that church of the Tomb, because I believe it's outside, away from it, that faith is enacted.

Ever since Covid-19 became a daily reality for us all, we've been living within the space of a tomb, though each of us in our own way. For some of us, this moment feels intensely claustrophobic, and we can feel the walls of our homes, to say nothing of the walls of our lives and of our relationships, pressing in against us. For some of us it's a tomb of isolation, while for many people right now, the tomb has piled unimagined responsibilities upon us. Some people, I know, are adjusting to a life of social distancing quite well, while others of us are chafing at it, beginning to test the limits of what it means to be in quarantine. The tomb has exposed our collective vulnerabilities, of body, of mind, of economy, and of social infrastructure. It's brought the sky down low, and we're all of us wondering how long we can last, and when we'll be able to emerge from this tomb once and for all. The good news is that we will. There is life after this experience, after this tomb. But when we do emerge, I hope we'll emerge somewhat differently, having used this time to grow, and to affirm, or reaffirm some basic truths about our humanity, about our world, and about the commitments inherent within our faith.

And so today, in keeping with the conviction that whatever Easter means, and whatever resurrection means, it will be out there, in the world where all of you are, I thought I'd go in search of it. Instead of preaching a sermon to a camera in an empty

Meetinghouse, I began to imagine visiting sites around us that reveal the effects of the tomb, but that also contain the promise of resurrection, the promise of new life.

Let's go explore a few of them. They're all around, but I want you to notice them this Easter.

### Coffee's Country Market, and a Heart for Frontline Workers

The first stop on our tour of sites of potential resurrection is a very familiar one to those of you who live in Old Lyme. It's Coffee's Country Market, a place that many of us love. But let it be a stand in for every market that's managed to keep its shelves stocked and its doors open. Let it be a symbol for the food distribution networks that are miraculously intact. And let it be an icon for all the places where workers keep showing up, so that the services that people depend upon won't be interrupted.

In towns all around us, people have been placing hearts on their doors expressing thanks to all of the frontline workers putting themselves at risk – the doctors and nurses, yes, but also the bus drivers, the check out clerks, the delivery operators, everyone out there keeping the world running. Has it ever been more evident how dependent we are on all those folks? These are all jobs that are rightly deemed essential. But you know what? While it's not true for everyone, and while I know Coffee's takes care of their employees, there are a good many places where those essential jobs pay wages that are shockingly low. And it's shocking because those workers are, without any hyperbole, putting themselves at incredible risk right now. The federal minimum wage is still \$7.25 an hour. The minimum wage in CT is currently \$11 an hour. And while your checkout clerks and stockists and delivery people might be making a little more, it's far too little considering what they're doing for us all right now. So let's keep making hearts thanking them. We should do that. But you know that screen that comes up when you check out of stores, asking if you want cash back? Say yes. And get an extra \$20 or \$40 at checkout, and simply tell the person helping you out that it's for them. And in addition to making those hearts and being generous at the register, let's commit to doing what we can to raise the minimum wage to a living wage, so that essential isn't simply a euphemism for expendable.

That's our first icon of resurrection, moving out of the tomb and toward a renewed life: finding a way to truly honor the people that are keeping us all alive right now.

### Resurrection in the Science Lab

Our second Easter icon will strike some of you as unlikely. We're in a scientific laboratory right now, specifically Fred Behringer's lab on Halls Road in Old Lyme. And while it might seem that the sorts of stories told around Easter are at odds with science, in my series of visual icons of resurrection life, science is indispensable. You see, part of the tomb we've been living in has to do with the way science has too often been dismissed or suppressed in public life. Climate science has been ignored, various industries have gerrymandered and fabricated scientific truths to protect their economic interests, and a whole alternative science, called creation science, has been invented as a

means of propping up a literalist reading of the Bible. But it's also true that denials of scientific expertise have allowed Covid 19 to spread more rapidly.

And so my hope is that one of the ways we'll emerge from this crisis is with a newfound respect for the scientists among us and the knowledge they convey. I hope that emerging from the tomb of this crisis will involve heeding scientific warnings, and allowing our economies to be shaped by our best scientific knowledge, rather than the other way around, which is to say, allowing the economy to dictate just how seriously we treat scientific knowledge. That's not an argument for scientific or technological fundamentalism, which can be just as narrow as religious fundamentalism. But it is a plea to take scientific research and expertise far more seriously than we have.

And so let this scientific laboratory be another icon of the resurrection life that we're invited to participate in not only at Easter, but all of the time. Now is the time to elevate the sciences in our public life.

### White Gate Farms: Plants Can Save Us

In John's account of the resurrection, we find a surprising scene: the disciples find Jesus on the shore of Galilee, cooking breakfast for them. Food is a powerful symbol of what Easter is all about. But it's also a powerful symbol for the new life that could emerge as a result of this tomb that we're dwelling in.

For our next icon of new life, I wanted to take you to White Gate Farms, in East Lyme. And I wanted to show you this basket of filled with all sorts of fresh greens, and vegetables. I'd like to suggest that this too is a powerful sign of the new life that's available to us. I know, it might seem like an improbable thing to say in an Easter sermon, but it's a powerful, if inconvenient, truth, that many of our deadliest diseases are related to the foods that we eat. Heart disease, brain diseases like stroke or Alzheimer's, digestive cancers, to say nothing of other forms of cancer, diabetes, high blood pressure, liver and kidney disease – these are responsible for the mortality of hundreds of thousands of people every year. And there's a mountain of evidence suggesting that eating mostly plants is the best way to prevent and also to treat many of those chronic diseases. Not only that, we know that eating plants, especially greens, helps to boost your immunity. When I've gone to the grocery store lately, I've noticed that a lot of people seem to know that instinctively. They're buying out the fresh produce. That seems new, and I hope it suggests a sea change in the way we eat.

Not only that, there's another mountain of evidence to suggest that food production is the single greatest contributor to climate change, surpassing even the transportation sector in terms of pollution and waste. Growing plants, cultivating plants, eating plants – this is one of the best means available to us of renewing life, and renewing the planet. Might that be one of the ways we emerge from this tomb? Did I mention that Jesus was mistaken for a gardener when the women at the tomb first encountered him?

Let White Gate Farms, and all of your gardens, be an icon of the new life that plants open before us as a life possibility.

## What If You Had To Do This Without a House?

Here's another icon that demonstrates both the tomb, and the possibility of resurrection inherent in this moment. We're in front of the Homeless Hospitality Center in New London, which on any given day services upward of a hundred people who deal with housing insecurity. If you have a home to be in right now; if you have food available to you, including the means to purchase and then prepare it; if you have heat and electricity in your home, consider yourself fortunate. Now imagine what it would be like to go through this crisis without those luxuries. Unfortunately, that's what far too many people in our region are going through. Some of those folks have been able to shelter with relatives. But others are here, or in local hotels that have remained open in order to help provide shelter. The Homeless Hospitality Center is doing heroic work in the age of Covid-19, but it also reveals another dimension of the tomb we're experiencing.

One of the largest and most pressing needs we have in Connecticut, but really throughout the entire country, is for affordable housing. In a recent study, it emerged that Connecticut was second only to Mississippi in terms of allowing affordable housing to be built outside of high poverty areas. That has the effect of making Connecticut one of the most segregated states in the country. But it also means that our region doesn't have the housing that it needs to support the people who most need it. That's part of the tomb we're living in.

Might it be that emerging from the tomb into a new kind of life will entail renewed efforts to build affordable housing in places like Old Lyme and Lyme, in places like Old Saybrook and Essex, and in towns like them throughout our region? Might that be a part of what it means to leave the tomb, and to enter a kind of resurrection life?

## Healthcare for Everyone: An Easter Plea

Right now we're standing outside an emergency room in New London, one that stands ready to treat an influx of patients when and if the virus spreads to eastern Connecticut. Like hospitals everywhere right now, it's a site where ordinary people are exhibiting extraordinary courage in caring for people who are sick.

But it also exposes another aspect of the tomb that we're inhabiting. Many of those most vulnerable to the disease are low wage workers who can't shelter in place, and who don't have access to health care. But it's not only low wage workers – it's a whole swath of the American population who don't have, or can't afford health care. Those who have lost jobs, those who are between jobs, the homeless, asylum seekers, and many others – the resources that are available in a place like this simply aren't accessible. To put a finer point on it, we're learning that the virus is affecting African American populations, to say nothing of other structurally disadvantaged populations, with particular ferocity.

If this crisis is teaching us anything, it's that we're all of us vulnerable to this outbreak. We're all scared of it. We're all protecting ourselves from it as best we can. Living as we all are in this tomb, now is the time to renew our efforts to make sure that everybody – no matter their income level, no matter their citizenship status, no matter what – has access to the kind of care represented by a place like this. To emerge from the

tomb with our humanity not only intact, but strengthened, would allow us to sense our interconnections with other people, and to take the well being of others seriously.

And so let this be another icon of the resurrection life we're called to, as we confront the tomb, and learn how to emerge from it. Let this be a renewed plea to provide healthcare to everyone. Everyone.

### Duck River Cemetery, Old Lyme<sup>1</sup>

There are so many other sites of new life, or potential new life, that I wish I could show you right now. If I had time, I would have showed you a home, which in our confinement, might, could, serve as the site of renewed commitment to those in our care, even though I know the way can be hard. I would have showed you an example of the flourishing of art and culture, as people make this time of quarantine into a moment of creativity. I would have showed you a forest trail, as many people have used this time to rediscover and connect with the natural world all around us. I would have showed you a river, demonstrating the power inherent in the natural world to heal and recover from damage. There are possibilities of resurrection life all around you, and I hope you spend time finding them, and building on those capacities.

But I do have one last thing I want to show you. It's the Duck River Cemetery here in Old Lyme, which is a potent symbol of the mortality that we all of us experience. This is a time in which our mortality has drawn close, perilously close, and it's left a lot of us shaken. We expend an enormous amount of energy denying our mortality, hiding from it in fear. Perhaps that fear is another part of the tomb that we're living in. Perhaps emerging from that tomb would involve a deeper affirmation: that we're born into God's love, that we live in and through God's love, and that we return there as well. It's that conviction that allowed St. Paul to write "oh death, where is thy sting, O grave, where is thy victory." It's that same conviction that allowed him to write that there is nothing in heaven or on earth, not even death, that can separate us from the love of God. If God isn't a word you're comfortable using, then just call it Love: there is a love that sustains and holds us, a power greater than death itself, enabling us to do impossible things. It's a commitment to that kind of love that enables doctors and nurses to do what they're doing right now. It's a commitment to that kind of love that enables people struggling for human rights to overcome insurmountable odds. It's that commitment to love that allows us to confront the principalities and powers in the world that keep us apart. It's that commitment to love that's going to enable us to get through this moment of crisis, taking care of one another as we do. It's that conviction that nothing can separate us from the love of God that enables us to sense in this moment ways that we might emerge from this tomb with renewed possibilities of life. It's that conviction that enables us to say on Easter morning, "Hallelujah."

In just a moment, we'll make our way back to the Meetinghouse, and the Hallelujah Chorus will ring out, as it must on this day. As the chorus rises, let us remember, with the St. Paul, that "nothing in heaven or on earth can separate us from the love we have known." And to that we can only say...Hallelujah. Christ is risen. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> I'm grateful to my friend David Good for suggesting this segment when we spoke earlier in the week, and for prompting many of its themes!