

## ***Shock & Awe***

A Sermon for Morning Worship on Easter Sunday

United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC

April 21, 2019

Text: Luke 24:1-12

An extraordinary thing happened during our Palm Sunday Symbols service last week. You probably didn't notice it. I don't know how you could have, really, since it was just the tiniest little moment. But when it happened, it jarred me in a way that doesn't happen very often. For those of you who were here, you will recall that one of the most dramatic moments of that service is when Bethany Foster, who was doing the reading on Jesus' betrayal by Judas for 30 pieces of silver, walks to the altar and dumps out a bag of coins. It's loud and noisy and very powerful. And, this year, one of those coins – this one as a matter of fact (*hold up coin*) – rolled off the altar, down the steps and right up to me and bumped into my foot. It was an odd sensation and, at first, I had no idea what had happened. I knew something had bumped into my foot but had no idea what. And, given our previous history with church mice attending worship now and then, I was half afraid to look. But I did, and there on the floor next to my foot was this coin, face up. Wow. What are the chances that coin could bounce off the table in such a way that it cleared the steps and rolled directly to my foot, tapping it every so slightly, yet noticeably? I can't even imagine.

Immediately after the service I asked Bethany if I could hold on to this coin temporarily explaining briefly to her what had happened and how it had caused me to rethink my plans for this Easter sermon. She graciously allowed me to borrow it so I could show it to you and here it is again (*hold up*). So, what was it about this tiny little event that happened, literally in a milli-second, that so jarred me that I rethought my Easter sermon plans? Well, in that fraction of a second, I had this overwhelming sense, an impression really, of how our society has condemned Judas for his greed for millennia and yet greed still surrounds us all every day. I was struck in that moment about all the ways in which we are more like Judas than we want to ponder, or admit.

Now, I know that is a shocking thought. Of course, it is. It shocked the heck out of me last Sunday. Let me be clear, I don't mean to imply we are like Judas in the sense of taking money to betray someone innocent of any wrong-doing, as Jesus was. What struck me in that moment was how large the disconnect is between what we say we believe as Christians and how we live our lives. None of us – and I do include myself in what I am saying – none of us intentionally put distance between how we live our lives here in one of the richest countries in the world and our faith in Jesus. It just sort of happens. It happens because money and the accumulation of wealth are at the forefront of virtually everything that happens in our society. This core value – the

accumulation of wealth as primary – drives everything we encounter each day. Our educational system is set up to teach young people how to become employable one day in order to earn money and contribute back to the economy. Our health system is at the center of so much moral and political divisiveness because of the costs involved in getting and keeping people healthy. Our housing system is one that applauds people who own multiple homes and criticizes those who find themselves homeless. Even our food distribution system relies on low wage workers at every level from those who pick the fruit and vegetables to those who cash us out at the grocery store and then put away our carts when we leave them in the parking lot. Wealth and money and the privilege that accompanies it are facts of life, just as is the economic injustice that enables the system to function.

If you doubt what I'm saying, just think about all the television commercials you see every time you turn on the TV. Wealth management, insurance of all sorts to protect your investment in what you own – car, home, etc. confront us daily. And what about the cars, furniture, jewelry and medicines so expensive that they want to convince you that you have to have them before you even know the price. Let me stop right here to note I am not saying you shouldn't want nice things and be willing to work hard for them and you should absolutely enjoy them when you have them. What I am saying on this Easter Sunday, dear

friends, is that we must still take note of how far we have come from the empty tomb of Jesus on Easter in time and in distance, and remember that we have brought Judas with us, every step of the way.

Just as I was pondering all of these rather depressing thoughts this past week, I started to see notices popping up on my phone and laptop of the fire at Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris. Honestly, occurring as it did during the beginning of Holy Week, it felt in that moment positively biblical in its impact and import. When I found a news report to watch, I slipped into the same reaction people around the world were experiencing at the very same moment – shock and awe. This magnificent cathedral – one of the oldest in the world – filled with incredible art work including the famous stained-glass windows and sculptures I had always dreamed of seeing – was being destroyed by fire as I watched. I wondered if my chance to see them was gone forever. I can only imagine how terrifying it was to be there and watch it burn, going up so fast that it was unbelievable. My thoughts soon turned to the clergy – an archbishop and three priests – who serve as the ministerial staff at Notre Dame which is a functioning congregation, a fact often overlooked as so many folks just think of it as a repository of art and history. Or, most folks did until that awful moment when the spire collapsed in the midst of the conflagration. That’s when the thousands of people gathered

outside did something extraordinary – they began to sing hymns and to pray.

What's so extraordinary about that, you might think. If something like that happened to our church and we were here to see it, we'd do the same thing. Yes, you would, because you care about this church on a personal level. You care about this church because of its connection to your life and faith in an intimate way. You care about what it is that we do here in worship each week and all the ministries of caring we engage in together. Of course, you would gather to sing and pray in the event of such a horrible tragedy as an all-consuming fire. But, dear friends, Pawcatuck is not Paris and the United States is not France. What made that moment so awe-inspiring for those of us who understand the culture there is that France is one of the most intentionally secular countries in the world. Its constitution provides not for freedom OF religion but instead freedom FROM religion. This is because France was wracked by religious wars for 200 years following the Protestant reformation. Thousands were killed in the name of one theological doctrine or another. So, when the France we know today started to take shape in the aftermath of those horrific wars, the government was determined that never again would religion be so prominent and powerful as to cause war in their country. Freedom *from* religion then became a hallmark of life in France. The government even assumed ownership of all the old,

historic religious sanctuaries of the various faith traditions – such as Notre Dame – and tightly regulated the opening of new churches, synagogues and mosques. This environment, this culture in which religion and religious faith of any kind is greeted with suspicion first, suddenly gave rise to an entire city lapsing into prayer and song in those moments when Notre Dame burned. It was a spontaneous reaction of shock and awe to the unthinkable event being witnessed. They people didn't know what else to do. As I watched, I found myself wondering if many of the people even knew the prayers or the words to the hymns. No matter. They picked it up from the people around them and the voices grew louder and stronger. It was simply extraordinary. In that moment, I knew I was witnessing a resurrection of faith in a most unlikely place. In that moment, Easter and its message of hope became real to me in a whole new way.

Now, as you probably know, it didn't take long for the Judas coinage attitude of the world to catch up to the situation. Within days of the fire literally billions of dollars were donated to rebuild Notre Dame. Ironic in this is that just the week before the Cathedral had gone begging for funds for the renovation work that caused the fire in the first place. The fund-raising team heard a lot of "no's" for all sorts of reasons, I'm guessing. And then the fire happened and all of a sudden, the money was there – their coffers full to overflowing. How bizarre.

But, the Judas coinage attitude didn't end with that strange turn of events. It continued around the world as, all of a sudden, some folks started to become outraged that all this money was being given to rebuild this church when there were so many other needs for this kind of financial support for tragic situations all around the world. I saw posts, many of them from UCC colleagues of mine, decrying all the money suddenly flowing to Notre Dame when Flint, Michigan still needed clean water and black churches burned down through arson in the South still awaited rebuilding. Others decry the lack of funding for refugee camps and famines. Everyone, it seemed to me, was screaming a collective – “Hey! Wait a minute! What about us! We deserve of a billion dollars too!” I'll be honest, this reaction shocked and disappointed me. While true in many respects, it seemed so disrespectful of the genuine grief the cataclysmic fire at Notre Dame induced. Yet the questions raised are valid, I admit.

So, what does all this have to do with Easter you might be wondering. And well you should. Hopefully I can explain. Easter is the foundational event of the Christian faith. Jesus' death, burial and resurrection are what make Christianity, Christianity. Even the day of the week on which we worship – Sunday – is linked to this one event. In our Christian faith, as we understand it in the United Church of Christ, every Sunday is a “little Easter.” Every Sunday is intended to be a reminder of Jesus and the

miracle that God created when the tomb was empty and the angels gave the good news to the women saying, “he is not here; he is risen.” The significance of this moment can not be understated because the resurrection of Jesus after such an ignominious death is God’s vindication of Jesus and all that he had done during his earthly life to teach and heal and minister to the folks at the margins of society. The resurrection is God’s validation of what Jesus taught and what is still a core belief for us here in this church today – that everyone matters to God. Everyone is equally beloved of God. And, most especially, that all things are possible with God. All things – new life in the wake of unbelievable pain and destruction; forgiveness in the aftermath of sin of every type imaginable; light shining into the darkest places – all these things are possible with God. And Easter Sunday is our celebration of those realities for us as followers of the Risen Christ.

Dear friends, we ARE the Easter people of Jesus. We are destined by God, called by God, to confront all the problems we encounter in life each day – unmitigated greed, environmental emergencies as the world’s climate changes, anger and fear generated by people who some see as too different from them. We -- *YOU ARE* the Easter people – the people of the empty tomb and the messengers of God who tell everyone that new life is always possible, that new beginnings await us if only we take the time to



look for them, and that hope never dies. This is the message of Easter. Today is our new dawn of the Resurrection of Jesus bringing us each of us to new life, new hope, new possibilities.

Dear Friends, on this Easter Sunday, may the shock and awe of encountering the Risen Christ fill your hearts with joy and lives with light and hope. Amen.