



## **WORSHIPPING AT HOME**

*with UCC Westerly  
during the Covid-19 outbreak*

**May 17, 2020  
5<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Eastertide**

□ Create a small worship space in your home anywhere. Add a candle, a bible and perhaps a lily or daffodil or tulip to get that Easter feel.

□ If you are doing this on your own, settle into your worship space around 9:30am on Sunday and begin. Make your list of prayer concerns. Then sit in silence and let your mind calm down. When you reach the Prayer Time in the service, aloud or just in your own mind, ask God to bless each of the persons and situations on your list. End with the Lord's Prayer in whatever words are most comfortable for you.

- If you are joining in the prayers during the Facebook Live broadcast, before worship take a few minutes to send them to me via text, email or Facebook message. It is helpful for me to receive them at least 20 minutes before the service begins.
- A reminder I will be streaming our worship service on Facebook Live beginning at 9:45am. You can still access it even if you are not on Facebook by going to the church website, [www.uccwesterly.org](http://www.uccwesterly.org), and clicking on the Facebook icon on the homepage.

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### **Light your candle as a reminder of God's presence with you**

#### **Gathering Music – “Jesus Shall Reign”**

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**CALL TO WORSHIP** [Excerpted from “Showing Up”, a poem by Carrie Newcomer appearing in her book *A Permeable Life: Poems & Essays*, 2013, p. 16]

You  
Are holy  
And sacred  
And utterly unique.  
There are gifts you were born to give.  
Songs you were born to sing  
Stories you were born to tell.  
And if you do not give it,

The world will simply lose it.

### **OPENING SONG – “Be Thou My Vision”**

[WORDS: Mary E. Byrne & Eleanor H. Hull; TUNE: SLANE; Copyright 1995 by The Pilgrim Press, . All rights reserved. Reprinted under ONE LICENSE#A-734569]

1. *Be now my vision, O God of my heart;  
Nothing surpasses the love you impart –  
You my best thought, by day or by night  
Waking or sleeping, your presence my light.*
2. *Be now my wisdom and be my true word;  
Ever within me, my soul is assured;  
Mother and Father, you are both to me,  
Now and forever your child I will be.*
3. *Riches I need not, nor life’s empty praise,  
You, my inheritance, now and always;  
You and you only are first in my heart,  
Great God, my treasure, may we never part.*

**UNISON PRAYER OF REFLECTION** [from Korea, *The United Methodist Hymnal*, ©1989, p. 366]  
**O God, just as we look into a mirror to see any soiled spots on our face, so let us look to you in order to understand the things we have done amiss. We are like a reed shaken in the wind; we are inexpressibly weak. Leave us not to ourselves, but dwell in our hearts and guide our thoughts and actions. Amen.**

### **SCRIPTURE READING**

**Morning Message**

*Now What?*

Acts 1:1-11

Rev. Ruth

### **A TIME OF PRAYER**

Pastoral Prayers

Silent Prayers

The Lord’s Prayer in whatever words are most comfortable for you

### **OUR RESPONSE TO GOD**

Acknowledgement of Gifts & Offerings\*

\*Doxology *“Praise God from who all blessings flow; Praise Christ all creatures here below; Praise Holy Spirit, Comforter; One God, Triune, whom we adore. Amen.”*

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### **CLOSING SONG – “God Who Stretched the Spangled Heavens”**

[WORDS: Catherine Cameron; MUSIC: William Moore, © 1967 Hope Publishing Co., All rights reserved. Reprinted under ONE LICENSE#A-734569]

1. *God, who stretched the spangled heavens, infinite in time and place,  
Flung the suns in burning radiance through the silent fields of space,*

*We your children, in your likeness, share inventive powers with you.  
Great Creator, still creating, show us what we yet may do.*

2. *Proudly rise our modern cities, stately buildings, row on row;  
Yet their windows, blank, unfeeling, stare on canyoned streets below,  
Where the lonely drift unnoticed in the city's ebb and flow,  
Lost to purpose, lost to meaning, scarcely caring where they go.*
3. *As each far horizon beckons, may it challenge us anew,  
Children of creative purpose, serving others, honoring you.  
May our dreams prove rich with promise, each endeavor well begun.  
Great Creator, give us guidance till our goals and yours are one.*

## **ANNOUNCEMENTS**

### **A PRAYER OF BENEDICTION**

*May the Light of God surround you, the Love of God enfold you, the Power of God protect you and the Presence of God watch over you. May you always know and treasure in your heart that wherever you are, God is already there waiting. Amen.*

## **PASSING OF THE PEACE**

### **Music as the Service ends – "Sing Praise"**

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## **SCRIPTURE READING**

### **Morning Message**

*Now What?*

Acts 1:1-11

Rev. Ruth

This text we just heard from the Book of Acts is the story of what is known as the Ascension of Jesus into heaven. Acts is the only book in the New Testament which describes it specifically as taking place with the apostles as eye witnesses forty days after the Resurrection. It is briefly referenced other places in the Gospels, most notably at the very end of Mark and also at the end of Luke. Common among all these references is that the disciples, now known as apostles, were there to witness it. Another interesting twist in Luke's version is the appearance – or re-appearance – of the two men in dazzling white clothes who also greeted the visitors to the empty tomb on Easter morning. This time they appear alongside the apostles as they are watching Jesus rise into heaven. And these two messengers from heaven did not remain silent. No, they accosted the apostles whose eyes were turned heavenward: "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven."

You might be wondering right about now why the disciples suddenly went from being called disciples to this new nomenclature of being apostles. Excellent question! Fortunately, it has a simple answer. A disciple is someone associated with Jesus during

his earthly life, following him around and participating in his activities including teaching and healing. A disciple is also someone invited by Jesus to function in that role. An apostle is a person who was selected by Jesus to be an eyewitness to his life and work, including his resurrection and now, his ascension. The apostle's work is to tell everyone what he has known and witnessed and experienced of the Risen and Ascended Christ *personally*. He or she is literally an ambassador for Christ, a purveyor of the good news of the Gospel. We should note here that Acts is officially known as the Acts of the Apostles and it was written by the same person who wrote the Gospel of Luke. Scholars now believe it was intended as one work, in two volumes. However, it never appears in any ancient manuscript in that way. Acts is intended as an historical account of how the apostles (formerly Jesus' earthly disciples) kept Jesus' work alive and growing in the first century after his death/resurrection/ ascension. Important to know, however, is that the Apostle Peter is the primary focus of the first half of Acts with little mention of the others. The adventures of Paul, who called himself an Apostle, make up the second half of the book of Acts. All this is worth noting as the entire purpose of Acts is to tell the story of how the Christian church came to be.

Also important to note is that Acts and indeed the Gospels are intentional in their implication that all of Jesus' disciples cum apostles were men. Not surprising since men were the ones writing the stories. However, we must understand that women disciples and even apostles were just as important to the survival and expansion of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Just because their stories in doing so do not survive in the same annals as the men does not mean they weren't there. All it means is that their presence was not noted in writing, not unusual in this overwhelmingly patriarchal society. Feminist biblical scholar Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza argues for this reason that when reading the texts of the Bible – Hebrew or Christian – we should always assume women are present unless the text specifically states they were not. So, were women present as Jesus ascended into heaven? Entirely likely, despite the angelic exhortation to the “men” of Galilee. After all, Mary Magdalene was known as the apostle to the apostles and it was she who is the only person to appear in all four accounts of the Resurrection. Are we really to believe she was not present in this moment as Jesus leaves the earth for his heavenly home forever?

What interests me most about this story, though, is not who was or wasn't there. What interests me most is what Jesus himself said to the apostles just before he ascended to heaven. The men had just asked him a question: “is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?” This must have been another one of those moments when Jesus just wanted to beat his head against the wall because these guys **STILL** didn't get it. They had just seen him killed by crucifixion then buried only to rise again. Then they had spent the next 40 days with him as he traveled around the countryside showing people he was indeed resurrected, or so the text says. But it doesn't say anything about him raising an army to overthrow the Romans. It doesn't say anything about him taking this time to give the apostles specific and detailed instructions about what to do as they established and expanded the way of life one was to live as a follower of God as Jesus had revealed it to them. Nope, all the text says is that they followed him

around as he spoke about the Kingdom of God. So, when they asked him if now was the time he would restore Israel to its former fortunes, he had to have been irritated. But, Jesus being Jesus, he answered their question in a way he thought might help them. He said, “it is not for you to know the times or the periods that the Father sets.” In other words, “no, it’s not time for that.” But then he continues, “you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses.” Jesus tells them that restoring the glory and majesty of the ancient kingdom of Israel is not for them to worry about. Instead, he has something else for them to do. They are to be his witnesses. That’s all he says before he disappears into heaven leaving them behind to get chastised for standing around by two angels.

So, I’m guessing at this moment they must have been thinking, “now what?” Okay, Jesus came into our lives, upended them completely in every possible way and then he died, came back and told us we were to be his witnesses – and then he left again. No detailed instructions about what they were to do, how they were to be his witnesses or why it mattered. Just do it, Jesus said. Do what? They had to ask themselves. Do what? How? When? Where? But, thank goodness, they at least had the why. They knew that much as a starting point. They were to be his witnesses because they were the only ones who could. They were the only ones who had seen what they had seen, experienced what they had experienced, done what they had done as they stayed by Jesus’ side for three years. They were the only ones who could do this work of witnessing about Jesus, what they had learned from him and how it changed everything they knew about God. What Jesus taught them changed everything they thought they knew about what it meant to live in covenant with the living God who acts in history. So, this is where they started. First they reminding themselves of all they had learned and experienced at Jesus’ side, of how much he had loved them and they him. From there they figured out the how – start telling other people who didn’t know about Jesus what they had seen and experienced and learned. That’s when the timeline became pretty obvious – right now because right now was all they had. The where was a little tougher but even that they soon figured out – anyplace they could get to by foot or by sail or even by camel.

I wanted us to stop and consider this experience of the disciples cum apostles as they wrestled with their own “now what” moment in the immediate aftermath of Jesus leaving them for good, literally on a stairway to heaven. Actually it was a cloud, but maybe it looked like a stairway... Anyhow, I wanted us to pause a moment with this story for the simple reason that it is a powerful example of just what God is inviting us to do as we feel stuck in the aftermath of this Coronavirus pandemic that has upended every aspect of our lives. The similarities are many! We never saw this coming, just like the disciples didn’t think Jesus would die as he did, never mind being resurrected. Then, just when they got used to him being back, he left again, this time for good. And we were just getting used to being in lockdown when the agitation to reopen ramped up and chaos was unleashed. Who do we believe – the epidemiologists and infectious disease experts or the economists? Do we really need to wear masks and stay six feet away from everyone? What about the job losses? What about the stock market? I want

to be safe but I don't want a recession or, God forbid, a depression! What are we supposed to do? NOW WHAT?

Again, the apostles show us the way forward. We tell each other the stories of Jesus who taught us first and foremost to love God and love each other, caring for the least of these as the best way of showing how much we love God. Or, put another way in Covid 19 terms – wear your masks and keep your distance. We remind ourselves and each other that God is with us every moment of every day, whispering to us, “I have called you by name, you are mine. I will not leave you comfortless nor will I leave you all alone. I will never abandon you.” Now what? Easy! We're what. Dear ones, we are the best answers to our own dilemmas when it comes to the pandemic or any other challenge that comes our way, as long as we remember and live grounded in the knowledge that each of us are precious to God, each of us matter to Jesus, each of us has access to the power of the Holy Spirit. It is this Holy Trinity of wisdom, strength and power that leads us forward no matter what. Dear ones, that means we can handle whatever comes our way. Get thee behind me, Coronavirus! We got this... Amen.