



WORSHIP AT HOME

with UCC Westerly
during the Covid-19 outbreak

July 12, 2020

□ Create a small worship space in your home anywhere. Add a candle, a bible and perhaps a small summer bouquet!

□ 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 30 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, and clicking on the Facebook icon on the homepage.

□ **A reminder that I will be on vacation** as of tomorrow, returning on Monday, July 27. While I am off, kindly be in touch with the Deacon of the Week with any pastoral concerns or emergencies. The Deacons will know how to reach me if necessary. Materials for worship for the next two Sundays (July 19 & 26) will be mailed out next week.

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

Gathering Music – Variations on "Jesus Love Me"

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CALL TO WORSHIP [adapted from *Touch Holiness*, Duck & Tirabassi, Eds. P. 95]

This is a new day, a gift of Christ given to us.

It is a day to put aside all fear, to leave doubting behind, and to take courage in God's loving call.

We will embrace this new day and set ourselves upon the path God places before us.

OPENING SONG – “I Love to Tell the Story”

[WORDS: Katherine Hankey & MUSIC: William G. Fischer; © Public Domain. Reprinted under ONE LICENSE#A-734569]

1. *I love to tell the story of unseen things above,
Of Jesus and his glory, of Jesus and his love.
I love to tell the story because I know 'tis true;
It satisfies my longings as nothing else can do.
Refrain: I love to tell the story, 'twill be my theme in glory,
To tell the old, old story of Jesus and his love.*
2. *I love to tell the story; more wonderful it seems
Than all the golden fancies of all our golden dreams.
I love to tell the story, it did so much for me;
And that is just the reason I tell it now to thee.
Refrain*
3. *I love to tell the story, for those who know it best
Seem hungering and thirsting to hear it like the rest.
And when in scenes of glory, I sing the new, new song,
'twill be the old, old story that I have loved so long.
Refrain*

UNISON PRAYER OF REFLECTION [adapted from *Touch Holiness*, Duck & Tirabassi, Eds. p. 103]

God of the sojourners, we ask your presence with us on our journey through life. Help us to be faithful to your ways of love and grace. Keep us from helpless despair. Give us the power to be make your love known, even in this world that seems bent on anger and hate. With your courage in our hearts, we will walk the road ahead together. Amen.

SCRIPTURE READING

Morning Message

Beachcomber Jesus

John 22:1-14

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 – “Leaning on the Everlasting Arms”

[WORDS: Elisha A. Hoffman & MUSIC: Anthony J. Showalter; © Public Domain; Reprinted under ONE LICENSE#A-734569]

1. *What a fellowship, what a joy divine, leaning on the everlasting arms;
What a blessedness, what a peace is mine, leaning on the everlasting arms.
Refrain: Leaning, leaning, safe and secure from all alarms;
leaning, leaning, leaning on the everlasting arms.*
2. *O how sweet to walk in this pilgrim way, leaning on the everlasting arms;
O how bright the path grows from day to day, leaning on the everlasting arms.
Refrain*
3. *What have I to dread, what have I to fear, leaning on the everlasting arms?
I have blessed peace with my Lord so near, leaning on the everlasting arms.
Refrain*

ANNOUNCEMENTS

A PRAYER OF BENEDICTION –

“Brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable – if anything is excellent or praiseworthy, think about such things” and let them guide your life each day, grounded always in the love of God, the peace of Christ and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit. Amen. (adapted from Philippians 4:8)

PASSING OF THE PEACE

Music as the Service ends – *United in Faith*

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### ***Beachcomber Jesus***

A Message for Morning Worship On Facebook Live, July 12, 2020

United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT

First preached on April 3, 2016

Text: John 22:1-14

I am about to date myself, and no doubt some of you too. How many of you remember the movie *Beach Party* with Annette Funicello and Frankie Avalon? (pause) It was the first of a series of what became known as the *Beach Party* movies of the 1960's. These movies were wildly successful even as there were incredibly simple. All centered on the boyfriend/girlfriend relationship between Funicello and Avalon who found themselves embroiled in various adventures all centering around life in the surfer culture of the California beaches. When we watch them today the innocence of the era they captured forever on film is so far removed from today's realities that it can be difficult to believe life was ever really like that. And perhaps it wasn't. But in some ways it was. Boyfriend and girlfriend just hanging out at the beach, the girls in modest

bikinis, at least by today's standards, and perfect hair and the boys in simple swim trunks also with the requisite perfect hair. Funny thing about the hair. It never changed no matter if they were surfing, falling into the water, playing volleyball or just sitting. That hair was immovable and impermeable. Sort of like our memories of that long ago time.

I loved these movies when I was a kid and dreamed of somehow adopting that California beachcomber lifestyle. I fantasized about being best friends with Annette or her TV counterpart, Gidget. Remember that show? Sally Field's first foray into acting was as the tiny girl surfer who always managed to solve all sorts of teenage problems from the back of a surfboard. Amazing. These girls became the ideal for so many of us who grew up with them in the 1960's. We wanted those beach bunny bodies. We wanted that perfect, immovable hair. We wanted those cute, unusual names. I distinctly remember asking my mother and dad at one point if I could change my middle name from "Ann" to "Annette" and then just drop the Ruth. To their credit, they didn't slam that door shut as they could have. I distinctly remember my mom saying, "maybe someday." I took that as a yes and immediately attempted to get my friends to start calling me Annette. It didn't work. "Ruthie" I was and "Ruthie" I remained, my dreams of being beachcomber Annette fading away.

I'm telling you all this because I want you to understand that when I read this morning's story from the Gospel of John about Jesus cooking out on the beach, I bring all these beachcomber memories of my youth with me into that story. Truth is we all bring all of who we are with us anytime we engage with the biblical text. None of us are blank slates when we encounter the Scriptures and that's very important to remember. Each time we approach a biblical text – any biblical story – we bring our own memories and experiences with us and they become the lenses through which we see and hear the story. So, in a very real way, there are several contexts in play every time we engage with the Bible for study and reflection. The first context is the one the text is grounded in and focused on explaining or addressing, whether in story form, or as poetry or prose. The second context is the one in which that text was written down and edited. In other words, as pen was being put to paper, what was happening in the world of the scribe recording the words of the text. Then the third context, and the one we so often forget about is our own context. What about us and our lives and our way of being in and interacting with the world do we bring with us into our reading of and reflecting on the meaning of the biblical text?

So, as we consider this wonderful story from John this morning, we begin by realizing the first context of the story, the one in which it is grounded. This context tells us in no uncertain terms that this is an account of a Resurrection appearance of Jesus. We also recognize this is a uniquely important one because it combines a resurrection appearance with a miracle story. The second context, the context of the life of the scribe or writer putting pen to paper to record the story, would have been within a unique community of followers of Jesus, most likely based in Ephesus. John, the latest of the Gospels, is different from the other Gospels in many ways, not the least of which is the

long speeches it attributes to Jesus. This text would also have been written down as the followers of Jesus were starting to realize that Jesus was not coming back right away, so they needed to figure out what this meant to their lives and their faith in a violent world increasingly hostile to them.

Finally, we come to the third context of engaging with this text – our own. Who are we as we encounter, study, reflect on, wrestle with this text? I’ve already explained part of my context as someone whose beach memories are powerful and undeniable. I suspect all of you, living so close to some of New England’s most beautiful beaches, also have powerful and meaningful beach memories. How do those beach experiences, those beach memories enter in to your encounter with this wonderful story?

As we engage with this text, I invite you to take a moment and imagine you are on your favorite local beach doing what you most love to do at the beach. Perhaps you’re just sitting there with a good book, people watching. Perhaps you’re diving into the waves or body surfing. Perhaps you’re walking alone or with a friend. Perhaps you’re picking up sea shells or sea glass. Whatever it is, you are doing something that feels comfortable, that feels good, especially in the wake of a jarring experience of some sort. Like this Coronavirus situation we all have been living through for over four months now. Now, imagine that walking toward you on the beach is a guy dressed like anyone would be on the beach. Nothing unusual about his appearance per se and yet something is very different about him at the same time. As he comes closer, you realize he’s Jesus. You just know it. You also know it doesn’t make sense that it’s Jesus, but in this moment, that doesn’t matter. Are you with me? That’s the context you bring to this story, or the one you can bring if you take the time to add a little imagination to your encounter with the Bible – and that, dear friends, we should *always* do!

Now that we have our imaginations a little more engaged, let’s look at the story together. First, there’s the disciples. The text says there are seven of them, some named, some not. Note, if you will, another appearance of the unnamed Beloved Disciple. This Beloved Disciple is never named anywhere in Scripture and scholarly debate on who it might be comes up with several possibilities. Whomever the Beloved Disciple was, he is once again the first person among the seven to recognize Jesus as Jesus. But it’s Peter who, quite typically, over-reacts once the identity of Jesus is pointed out to him. He quickly pulls on some clothes (apparently fishing naked was the norm), jumps into the water and splashes his way up on the beach to Jesus.

Just before all this happened and before anyone had recognized him, Jesus calls out to the men from the shore asking if they had caught any fish. They told him “no,” so he tells them to cast the net to the other side of the boat. As soon as they do, they haul in a huge catch of 153 fish. This is the point at which the Beloved Disciple recognizes Jesus, shouts it out and Peter jumps into the water. When they all make it up on the shore they realize Jesus has a charcoal fire going with some bread baking for them. He asks them for some fish to cook as well. When the food is ready, Jesus says to them, “Come and have breakfast” which they did. And that’s where the story ends.

I LOVE this story. Perhaps it all those happy *Beach Party* movie memories. Perhaps it's the humanness of Jesus in this story. Perhaps it's because this story is just so vivid in its description of this incredible encounter between the Risen Christ and the disciples in the most unlikely of locales. Jesus is so real in this story and so are the disciples, and that's actually the whole point. The entire intent of this story is to convince the hearer, the reader, of this story that Jesus was a real, live human when he cooked breakfast for the disciples on the beach. He was not a ghost, belief in which was common at the time. He was not a vision or an hallucination brought about out of the profound grief of the bereft disciples. He was Jesus, as he had always been, with one exception. He was now the Resurrected Jesus who had defeated death itself thanks to the power of God. That's the whole point of this story and that is its significance to us.

But how? Why? Scholars have debated this for almost two millennia, going all the way back to St. Augustine in the 4<sup>th</sup> century. And in all their efforts to understand the how and why of this story they have literally picked it apart. They pondered about the significance of the Beloved Disciple once again recognizing Jesus first. They've made excuses for the naked Peter who had to pull on some clothes before jumping into the sea to get to Jesus. They have spent enormous time and energy pondering the significance of the enumerated catch of 153 fish. There must be significance to that number, they reasoned, and they did their darndest to come up with one using mathematical theory and numerology. They've argued about whether or not Jesus blessed the bread and fish before he called the disciples over to eat and someone just forgot to mention it. Biblical scholars have literally pored over this text to parse out its meaning for themselves, and for you too, if you will let them.

And that, for me, is the key point of our reflections together this morning. That point is this. YOU must make this story your own if it is to be part of how your faith acts to transform your life and your faith. And not just this story, but all the stories of the Scriptures. You must love the Bible not as a sacred object in and of itself but as a diary and roadmap of the faith of generations before you who have wrestled with the same questions about God and Jesus that you have. You must get to know Jesus not as a sacred being sitting next to God in some heavenly throne room, but as a real person who cooked fish on the beach for his friends when he knew they were confused and hurting.

This is why we examine the resurrection appearances of Jesus. They are invaluable in helping us to see and understand how they assist us to develop and deepen the faith God gifts us with *if and when* we are ready to receive it. Beachcomber Jesus is just one Jesus you can encounter in the scriptures. You can experience the others as you read the Gospel texts. These wonderful stories, which are *our* stories, prepare us for the simple task Jesus gave to the disciples when he greeted them outside the empty tomb on Easter morning – “Go and tell.” Go and tell others what your faith means to you. Go and reveal to others the difference knowing Jesus has made in your life. That is our task. That is our challenge. That is our life, as followers of the Risen Christ. Are we up to it? Dear ones, there is no better time than now to find out. Amen.