

## ***“Morning Has Broken”***

A Message for Sunday Morning Worship on October 4, 2020  
United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT  
Text: Mark 16:1-4

As we enter the 10<sup>th</sup> month of what has been an extraordinarily difficult, challenging and overwhelming year in more ways than any of us want to recall, I think we are all in deep need of what this hymn reminds us is God’s great gift to us each morning -- God’s recreation of the new day. This promise of the new day always dawning is why “Morning Has Broken” has always been a hymn that touches my heart powerfully every time I sing it. I have always loved this hymn. As a little girl sitting next to my mother in church, her beautiful clear soprano voice brought the lyrics of this hymn alive for me, even when we sang them on a cold, dark morning. It was in that same church when I was 16 that I preached for the first time ever in my life, and we sang this hymn just before I climbed into the pulpit. That’s how it made its way on to my list of “lucky” hymns, the ones I included in the liturgy on Sundays whenever I preached as a young student, as a lay person, and later as a Commissioned Minister of Education and Family Life. And, of course, it is another of those hymns I love so much I have to keep track of when we sing it to make sure I don’t include it in worship too often!

Peter and I even had this hymn included in our wedding service. Nothing unusual about that on the surface, except that we were married at 6:30 in the evening. My mother thought I was nuts, but the organist was a friend from college and he would have played anything I asked him to. He went on to become a cardiac surgeon in Cleveland, by the way. So, why did I want this hymn about the morning played at my formal evening wedding? Because it is the most beautiful sung prayer about new beginnings I have ever encountered. “Morning has broken like the first morning; blackbird has spoken like the first bird.” We wanted to begin our marriage with family and friends singing this blessing of our new life together.

I chose the Easter story from the Gospel of Mark for our scripture lesson to connect with this story for obvious reasons. I mean, when Christians sing about morning breaking like the first morning, it has to be about Easter, right? I mean, don’t we think of Easter dawn as the foundation of the Christian life, the moment in time when everything

changed because of the empty tomb as the sun's rays broke open the dawn on that uniquely wonderful day? It seems like this hymn should be about Easter, right? It's not. Easter had absolutely nothing to do with the reason this hymn was created. I admit this surprised me, another one of those amazing facts I am learning through this sermon series!

This hymn was commissioned by the editor of an anthology of hymns called *Songs of Praise* which was published in 1931. As he was putting the anthology together, he realized the collection needed a simple hymn whose sole purpose was to give thanks to God for each new day. He reached out to Eleanor Farjeon, an English poet and children's book author. The resulting poem/lyrics, as well as many of her other books and poems, were inspired by her own life in the village of Alfriston in East Sussex in the English countryside. Once the poem was completed, it was set to a Scottish Gaelic tune called "Bunessan". This poem is undoubtedly Farjeon's best known work but she went on to become a very successful and highly regarded children's book author. She won the annual Carnegie Medal from the Library Association in 1955 and was the first winner of the international Hans Christian Andersen Medal in 1956, both of these for her children's books. To this day the Eleanor Farjeon Award for Children's Literature is presented annually by the Book Circle, a society of publishers. Farjeon also wrote "People Look East!", a lovely Advent Carol set to the tune of an old French melody. ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Morning\\_Has\\_Broken](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Morning_Has_Broken))

Even with all her accolades and even with the lovely lyrics and simple tune, this hymn might well have faded into obscurity like so many other beloved hymns were it not for one little thing. It was recorded by Cat Stevens in 1971 and became a hit, reaching number six on the US Billboard Hot 100 in 1972. It also hit number one on the easy listening chart in 1972 and number four on the Canadian RPM magazine charts. The song became so identified with Cat Stevens that he was sometimes given credit for writing it. He certainly made the hymn recognized internationally, ruffling a few feathers in the process. For one, his producer told him he could never get away with recording the song for the album on which it debuted because at 45 seconds in length, it was way too short. Stevens solved this problem by coaxing keyboardist Rick Wakeman to write an instrumental piano overlay to the song which stretched the performance length out to just over three

minutes. Unfortunately, a dispute erupted with Wakeman over the lack of both credit and payment for his work on the piece. Stevens eventually resolved the dispute and Wakeman expressed publicly how beautiful he thought Stevens' arrangement was and that he was pleased to have been part of it. ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Morning\\_Has\\_Broken](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Morning_Has_Broken)) So, how's that for a story about a seemingly ordinary little hymn! It was a billboard hit, for heaven's sake! It hit the charts during my senior year in high school and I can still remember arguing with my non-church friends who insisted there was no way this song was a hymn. Proof once again that God has a sense of humor!

Back to our previous discussion, then, about the fact that this hymn is most definitely not a description of Easter morning even though it seems as though it should be. Given that fact, why have I chosen to reflect on it through the lens of Mark's version of that first morning when the tomb was discovered to be empty? This goes back to what I said as I began this message this morning – after all we have endured in this year of 2020, I don't know anyone who isn't in deep and profound need of "God's recreation of the new day." Folks, we need a do-over, big time. What a year it has been. A pandemic that seemed to come out of nowhere that led to a shutdown that no one expected to last more than a few weeks and now is stretching into its 7<sup>th</sup> month. Economic disruption leading to unemployment and we haven't even touched on the catastrophic interruption of the education of our children and youth. Add to this the vitriolic nature of all things political and it becomes clear just how much we need to reclaim that joyous feeling of morning breaking "like the first morning." We crave that clean slate for a new beginning! We want to leave behind all the anger and frustration and scary moments of which there has been far too much as the weeks have come and gone. We are stuck in a limbo we never saw coming and now we can't seem to escape it. We can't even sing in church right now so how are we supposed to offer our "praise for the singing" as our "praise for the morning?"

Dear ones, let's remember how the women were feeling as they hurried along the road leading out of Jerusalem in the deep darkness of the hour just before dawn. Their faces still stained with the tears of Friday, they hurry as fast as they can, carrying the precious ointments that will

allow them to anoint the body of their beloved Jesus. After all, the sabbath was beginning as they finally got him down from the cross at Golgotha and over to the tomb that had been donated by Joseph of Arimathea. There was no time to prepare the body then. All they could do was lay his bruised and blood-stained body in the tomb and whisper their promises to return at first light on the day after the Sabbath. And so they did. But as they hurried along, they remembered they were going to face a big problem when they got there. A huge disc-shaped stone had been rolled along the groove in front of the tomb's entrance to seal it shut. It was a massive stone and they knew it was very unlikely they would be able to move it themselves. But, they kept going with a "we'll worry about that when we get there" attitude. They arrived, and found the stone had already been moved. Well, how about that.

Here's the thing about this story that we find echoed in this beautiful hymn. First, as the women hurried along, they had no idea they would encounter a situation that would change the history of the world forever. They had no idea they were about to encounter a morning like no other they could imagine. They were just grief-stricken friends and family going to tend to a loved one lost in the most horrible way possible. Second, they knew they were going to encounter a seemingly impossible obstacle to what they intended to do. "Who will roll away the stone?" they asked each other as they hurried along in the darkness. They had no idea. But they kept going and soon found out that God had rolled away the stone. God recognized what their problem would be before they did. God anticipated their needs and responded even though their whispered prayer – who will roll away the stone? – was hardly a prayer at all. Dear ones, this is the definition of what it means for God to recreate the new day! Eleanor Farjeon's beautiful hymn reminds us that with God every day is a new day. Every day is a do-over. Every day is another opportunity to praise God for what God is doing in our lives when we pause to recognize all those moments. Too often we rush right past those God moments in our lives without seeing them or recognizing them. We miss the lilting song of the blackbird God sends to brighten our days. We don't celebrate the sweet new fall of rain or the glistening dew on the early morning grass. We don't see God's footsteps in Creation all around us as we rush to get to the next

place we have to be, the next thing we need to get done from our to do list. We literally miss God's recreation of the new day because we are just not paying attention.

Dear ones, we need to pause and celebrate the promise, hope and possibility of each new morning. We have never needed the promise of morning breaking like the first morning more than we do right now. Everywhere we look we find uncertainty and confusion, even chaos and downright deception. We will not find our way through this mess if we only rely on our own instincts. We will not be able to "rise above" or "just keep swimming" or "soldier on" or whatever other euphemism you want to throw out there if we only rely on ourselves. That's what got us into this mess in the first place – thinking we knew better than God about so many, many things. Sinful human arrogance brought us to this moment but – and here's the really amazing part – God still loves us. God still believes in us. God still sees a future for us that is grounded in hope that better days await and we are only just beginning to recognize what is possible. Dear ones, we are at the center of God's recreation of each new day. That hope and possibility is right there if only we will reach back to God as God reaches out to us. God knows where all those heavy stones are in your life, stones you need help moving out of the way to whatever situation you face in this moment. God will reveal to you the way to move that stone, IF you invite God into the midst of whatever it is you are struggling with. That's the key – if you want to be a part of God's recreation of each new day, you have to let God into the mix and the mess that is your life. You have to trust that God will help you figure out a way to move that stone.

Dear ones, this great gift of God alive and active in your life is yours for the taking. Dare to claim the words of hope and new beginning in this hymn as your mantra for each day. Find that old Cat Stevens song and add it to your iTunes or buy the CD through Amazon and belt out this song like your life depended on it -- *Mine is the sunlight! Mine is the morning! Born of the one light Eden saw play! Praise with elation, praise every morning, God's recreation of the new day!* Sing it with all your heart, dear ones, because it's true. Amen.