

## ***“Peace Be With You”***

United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT  
April 27, 2025 – A Sermon for Sunday Morning Worship  
The Second Sunday of Eastertide  
Text: John 20:19-31

I’m always an early riser and yesterday was no exception. I found myself fully awake at 5:30am, lying in bed trying to decide if I should try to go back to sleep or if there was something I wanted to do while the house was still quiet and the day still young. It was then that I remembered the Pope’s funeral was being televised beginning at 4am and I ran upstairs to see how much of it I could still catch. I am so glad I did. As one would expect of a papal funeral, this one was incredible but not because of all the Vatican splendor. This one was memorable and deeply meaningful precisely because of its simplicity. Pope Francis was a Jesuit who rose from humble beginnings in Argentina to become the Bishop of Rome and thus Pope, the head of the entire Roman Catholic Church. Upon being elected Pope, the then Cardinal Jorge Mario Bergoglio, took the name “Francis” in deference to St. Francis of Assisi with whom he shared much even though his order was Jesuit and not Franciscan. Pope Francis took seriously his vows of poverty, chastity and obedience. Thus, he wanted none of the papal trappings when he was elected Pope and lived, not in the luxurious papal apartments at the Vatican, but in a humble and simple apartment in a nearby convent. In death he had been very specific about what he wanted and that was to have his funeral mass celebrated in St. Peter’s Square, directly in front of St. Peter’s Basilica. This was so he could be with the people he so loved as his life was celebrated and the mass sung for him, just as it would be for any other devout Catholic at life’s end.

I didn’t catch the service from the beginning, but I did manage to be there to witness my favorite part of the requiem mass for a pope – the chanting of the Litany of the Saints. This magnificent prayer presented in the form of a Gregorian Chant dates back to the 3<sup>rd</sup>

century. It invokes the intercession of the saints, angels and other holy figures including the Virgin Mary, Joseph, Mary Magdalene, Saints Peter and Paul and many more. The precise list of saints in the chant changes depending on the occasion which means the list at the Pope's funeral was most likely long and extensive. The prayer ends with requests to God for mercy and deliverance. It is, quite simply, magnificent.

To me I find it quite humbling and indeed sacred to hear this chant which so beautifully recalls all those whose early faith in Jesus forms the foundation on which our own faith today is built. The fact that I am not Catholic does not diminish for me either the beauty or power of this prayer. I would actually argue the opposite is true since most of these ancient fathers and mothers of the faith are also our Christian ancestors. That did not change because of the Reformation. Mary and Joseph, Mary Magdalene, Peter, Paul, Stephen – all of them whom we read about in our Bibles are included in this beautiful and powerful chant. For me it recalls all that we have in common with other Christians in every time and place. Yes, we have theological differences on many topics none of which are insignificant, but in the final analysis – God, Jesus and the Holy Spirit – those we have in common. It is sad to think that even this commonality has never been enough over the millennia. But let us not forget that it is human differences of opinion on what something means or symbolizes or what is sinful and what isn't that have led to the divisions which keep Christians separate from each other. These differences are what Pope Francis devoted his life to bridging. We would all do well to follow his example.

Part of our Scripture reading from John this morning recalls this very Litany of the Saints prayer. It's origins can be seen clearly in the Risen Christ's response to Thomas during one of the Resurrection appearances John records. You may recall from the reading this morning that Thomas was not present at Jesus' first resurrection appearance to the other disciples. When he learned of it after the fact,

Thomas said that he would not believe what they told him was true unless he himself could see and put his fingers into the marks of the nails on Jesus' hands and the place in his side where the Roman spear pierced him. As we know from the text, Jesus did return and confronted Thomas about his words, saying, "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe." Thomas, suitably chastened, simply replies to Jesus, "My Lord and my God!" And then what does Jesus say? "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe." Many of those who have come to believe are recalled in the Litany of the Saints. The Litany is therefore a celebration of all those who have not seen but believed in the Risen Christ, whether or not they appear in that one very edited list or not. The Litany of Saints celebrates all of us, you and me. This is something Pope Francis understood to the core of who he was, something so many others don't understand at all.

I also want us, this morning, to reflect together on another phrase in this morning's Scripture reading and this is one we hear and even repeat together all the time. "Peace be with you." These are the first words Jesus says to the disciples when he appears to them in the upper room where they gathered after his crucifixion. Since we often read this text on the Sunday after Easter, we just sort of assume this encounter takes place several days after his resurrection and his encounter with Mary Magdalene and the others at the tomb. But, if we read carefully, we see that it is in fact the evening of that same day. In other words, this first encounter with the disciples – at least some of them – happens on Sunday evening. And let's face it, the disciples had been through a lot by that point.

Last week we imagined what the women who followed Jesus had done prior to that early morning encounter with the Risen Christ as we reflected on how they even knew where to find the tomb where Jesus had been laid. We realized this happened because the women had never left Jesus's side. They were there when he was arrested and

tried by Pilate, albeit outside the walls of the imperial palace. They were there for the long trek to Golgotha, for Jesus' being nailed to the cross, for his tortuous death and for his removal to the tomb thanks to the kindness of one man. They were there; they never left. The disciples, however, could not say the same. They all scattered the moment Jesus was arrested. So, from Thursday night, after Jesus' arrest in the garden, until his burial in the tomb on Friday night, we don't know where the disciples were.

We do know that by Sunday at dawn they were mostly back together, we assume in the upper room in Jerusalem. We can assume this simply because they were able to run to the tomb without too much difficulty when, in John's Gospel at least, Mary Magdalene runs to tell them that someone has opened the tomb. This also means that it is reasonable to think that Mary Magdalene and some of the other women were also staying with the male disciples in the same place since she knew where to find them. Once she shares her scary news of the empty tomb with them, Peter and "the disciple whom Jesus loved" immediately run to it. Finding it empty except for the graveclothes, they return to where they were staying leaving Mary Magdalene alone in the garden crying. This is when she encounters two angels in the tomb and then Jesus himself. After this, she does as Jesus tells her to and goes to tell the disciples what she had seen and experienced.

We do have some vague idea of where some of the disciples were from when they scattered in fear on Thursday evening to when they come back into the story on Sunday night. For example, we know Peter followed the guards as they brought Jesus back to the Temple authorities after arresting him. We know this because this was where Peter was confronted about knowing Jesus, denying him three times in the courtyard outside the building where Jesus was. We also know Judas immediately regretted his actions and was trying to make things right unsuccessfully. According to legend he died shortly thereafter. His death is recorded as happening in a number of gruesome ways but the key fact is his death. This leaves 10 of the

original 12 unaccounted for in these hours of their absence from Jesus' side.

But where were they in those in-between hours? Had they been in the crowds too, following the procession up to Golgotha, bundled up so they couldn't be recognized? It's possible. Or had they been too scared to do anything but hide in the countryside until things cooled down? Also, possible. Perhaps some continued hiding while others followed at a distance. Whatever the case, they all seemed to be drawn back to that upper room at one point, that last place where they had been with Jesus together, sharing a meal and enjoying his company. Of course, his story about the bread in the middle of the meal and the extra cup of wine at the end were confusing, but still. Such happy memories to hold on to in these sad and confusing days. What was it Jesus had said to them? That the bread should remind them of all the meals they had shared together, all the conversations they had enjoyed together, all they had heard and learned and experienced during their time with him. And the wine? Yes, he said the wine should remind them that he loved them enough to bleed and die for them so that they would be able to go on without him. Wait a minute! Had he known this was going to happen? Was all this somehow part of the plan for this moment? It certainly was beginning to look like it was, at least to the disciples and the women.

And what does Jesus say when he finally comes to them in the upper room once more? "Peace be with you." Peace be with you! Of course that's what he would say! Jesus knew better than anyone what they had been through. Jesus knew how terrified and confused they had been. Jesus knew they had scattered because they just didn't know what else to do. They realized now that he had known what was coming and they didn't. Jesus understand that too. He knew they were feeling terrible because they had run away. He knew they felt like they had deserted him. Maybe not as crudely as Judas had but they had deserted him nonetheless. Jesus knew they felt just awful about everything so what does he say to them in that moment he first comes

back to them: “Peace be with you.” Don’t feel bad about how you reacted, he seems to be telling them. You did what anyone would have done. I know that. It’s not a problem. I still love you and you are still my chosen to carry on my message to the rest of God’s people.

This is when Jesus does something very unusual and something often overlooked. John says Jesus “breathed on them and said, Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.” This is confusing to us who usually associate the disciples receiving of the Holy Spirit with Pentecost. Yes, that does happen. But so do several other little moments when Jesus shares and empowers them with the Holy Spirit. This moment is understood as Jesus encouraging and emboldening them to move ahead with the work he needs them to be doing. He is with them always, as he promised he would be. They are not alone, even now as they experienced his death and have witnessed his resurrection. They are ready to move ahead, and this is what he wants them to do.

Peace be with you. Ordinary words anyone could say to anyone else, theoretically. Yet we know they are not ordinary at all. These are the words with which Jesus greeted the disciples when he first encountered them after the resurrection. These are the words with which he let them know he forgave them for running away as the power of the empire came for him. These are the words he uses to encourage them forward into the world to continue his work for God, except now without him there as he had been.

“Peace be with you.” The words we speak to each other as each Sunday service here ends. Simple words. Powerful words. May we hold them in our hearts even as we speak them to each other. And in the hearing and speaking of them, may we renew our spirits and find our courage and strength so that we too may be whoever it is Jesus needs us to be in this moment in time. Peace be with you. What else is there to say? Amen.