**March 3, 2024**

**Third Sunday in Lent**

**“Beautiful Law”**

**Psalm 19**

Today in the United Church of Christ, we celebrate both Amistad Sunday and the first day of UCC Women’s Week. As we honor the heroes of the Amistad, we remember the captured people of African descent who spoke up and fought for freedom for themselves and those who would follow. During UCC Women’s Week, we give thanks for the women who, long before most congregations would ordain women into ministry, offered lifetimes of service, wisdom, justice work and leadership to local congregations and the wider church.

The Oxford Dictionary defines intersectionality as the interconnected nature of social categorizations such as race, class, and gender as they apply to a given individual or group, regarded as creating overlapping and interdependent systems of discrimination or disadvantage.

On this day, a day to celebrate and honor the accomplishments of women and people of African descent, take a moment to celebrate the 2023 election of Rev. Dr. Karen Georgia Thompson as the first woman woman of African descent to be elected to the UCC’s highest office, the office of General Minister and President.

“Rev. Thompson is the third woman nominated for the post, after the Revs. Yvonne Delk (in 1989) and Barbara Brown Zikmund (in 1999), but the first to be elected. A Jamaican immigrant, Thompson is the third person of African descent to serve as leader of the denomination.

‘Today, United Church of Christ, we created a first together,” she said after the vote. “It won’t be the last first.’”\*

Jesus calls us to explore intersectionality, those boundary places where social categories like race, class and gender meet and merge. Rev. Dr. Thompson has bumped into those places all of her life. Now, her leadership will provide new ways for the United Church of Christ to understand our place in the intersections of intersectionality.

\*https://www.ucc.org/karen-georgia-thompson-becomes-first-woman-to-lead-ucc-in-historic-vote/

**March 10, 2024**

**Fourth Sunday in Lent**

**“No Matter What”**

**Psalm 107:1-3, 17-22**

Only a portion of Psalm 107 is suggested for the reading today by the lectionary committee. But the psalm in its entirety is worth studying. Each verse reminds the reader of those who have, in moments of extremity, called upon God. The suffering of refugees, the imprisoned, the hungry and enslaved is told, bookended by the miracle of God’s saving power that has visited those who suffered. What response can there be the overflowing gratitude of grateful hearts?

Today, many UCC congregations will receive the One Great Hour of Sharing offering. Like the psalmist generations ago, our hearts break at the suffering around us. And as humans capable of holding many emotions at once, we also feel deep gratitude in situations where we see that suffering has been alleviated. Like the psalmist in those moments, we join with multitudes in offering the overflowing gratitude of our hearts back to God.

Today, One Great Hour of Sharing is one way we can co-create with God in shaping a compassionate and just response to the suffering in our nation and world.

<https://www.ucc.org/giving/ways-to-give/our-churchs-wider-mission/one-great-hour-of-sharing/>

“One Great Hour of Sharing (OGHS) special mission offering of the United Church of Christ involves you in disaster, refugee/immigration, and development ministries throughout the world. When a disaster strikes or people are displaced or made refugees by violence or extreme poverty, you are part of the immediate response and of the long-term recovery.

Through OGHS you engage in holistic development programs including health care, education, agriculture, food sustainability, micro-financing and women’s empowerment. Because the UCC relates in mutual partnership to churches and organizations through Global Ministries and worldwide response & recovery networks, your contributions to One Great Hour of Sharing put you in the right place at the right time for the relief, accompaniment and recovery of the most vulnerable. You meet immediate needs and you address the underlying causes that create those needs in the first place.”

**March 17, 2024**

**Fifth Sunday in Lent**

**“Deep In Our Hearts”**

**Jeremiah 31:31-34**

*The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah*. Jeremiah 31:32

One of the distinct features of many United Church of Christ conferences, associations and congregations compared to other faith communities is their commitment to become Open and Affirming (O&A). O&A is a stance of radical welcome to LGBTQIA+ people. Because church communities have historically been places of hurt and exclusion, it is even more imperative that churches who are Open and Affirming take a strong and public stance.

A little over a year ago, the ONA Coalition welcomed a new executive director, The Rev. Katrina Roseboro-Marsh. According to a UCC news story that came out at the time,\* She is the first Black woman to head the coalition. “I am honored and excited for this opportunity,” she said. “I realize how important my selection is, and I recognize the magnitude of what this opportunity will mean for the LGBTQIA+ community. I accept this challenge because the coalition has laid the sturdy groundwork to make its next steps forward in reimaging and revisioning, with regeneration as a goal.”

Roseboro-Marsh has more than 16 years of experience as a clinician. Her particular focus has been working with clients who identify as LGBTQIA+, as well as those who also identify as African American with an active religious and/or spiritual practice.

“We are excited to welcome Dr. Katrina to our team because of her unique voice, energy and experience,” said search committee chair and Coalition Leadership Team member the Rev. Derek Terry. “With the current attack on queerness in schools and communities across the country, we feel an obligation to protect and ensure the rights of the LGBTQIA+ community.

Terry added that “while some work to erase the experiences of BIPOC people from the pages of history books,” Roseboro-Marsh will “increase our advocacy work through an intentionally more intersectional approach.”

Roseboro-Marsh is ordained clergy and holds ministerial standing with the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) and the Fellowship of Affirming Ministries. She is married to the Rev. Tana Roseboro-Marsh; they reside on the east coast with their Morkie, Xola Darling Roseboro-Marsh.

\*<https://www.ucc.org/new-ona-director-global-ministries-exec-among-recent-hires/>

**March 24, 2024**

**Palm / Passion Sunday**

**Sixth Sunday in Lent**

**“Into Jerusalem”**

**Mark 14:1 - 15:47**

Today is Palm Sunday, the first day of the Holy Week that culminates in the passion and resurrection of Christ. The path of Holy Week is strewn with symbols to remind us of how Christ’s ministry, mission, suffering and new life continues to be reflected in the ministry, mission and suffering of God’s people today.

Take some time to sketch, journal about or pray the following words, visual symbols of this time. Which already have meaning to you? Which do you want to find out more about, either through reading and research or in contemplation and prayer? Which do you need to set aside as less meaningful for you, for this season at least?

* + - Donkey
		- Beautiful alabaster jar
		- Crown of thorns
		- Women disciples
		- Cross
		- Men disciples
		- Loincloth
		- Chalice
		- Overturned table
		- Robe
		- Rock
		- Washing bowl
		- Bread and Cup
		- Place of the skull
		- Torn cloth
		- Blood
		- Coins
		- Sponge
		- Rooster
		- Evening
		- Morning
		- Tomb
		- Angel

March 31, 2024

Easter Sunday

“Now What?”

Mark 16:1-8

The gospel story this morning begins with two women setting out to perform a routine task. These women, along with their companions and good friends have had a most disconcerting week. First they saw Jesus - the one who is to them teacher and healer and leader - welcomed into the city of Jerusalem, only to see the crowd and those closest to him turn on him, and then to witness his excruciating death. Now these two women – these two Marys – are heading toward the tomb to perform the distressing but necessary task of anointing the body of their friend who has died. A difficult task, yes, but a routine one.

Coming to the tomb to complete their task they find not, as they had expected, the heavy stone and the body of their teacher but instead a young man in white, an angel who gives them instructions that the text tells us they are too frightened to repeat.

Although some verses were added later, most scholars agree that the gospel of Mark originally ended here.: "So they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid." Not only does this verse fail to provide proper narrative closure, writes preacher Tom Long, it also lurches to an awkward grammatical stop. A more literal translation would read, "To no one anything they said; afraid they were for..." It is almost as if the author of this gospel of Mark had suddenly been dragged from his writing desk in mid-sentence

Perhaps they were afraid because they realized in seeing the impossibly heavy stone moved easily away, in seeing the empty space where the dead body they had come to anoint was supposed to have been should have been that Jesus really was who he said he was. He was not only a teacher or a healer or a leader and their friend, but the Christ. And if that is true, and they really are going to follow him, it means the Marys’ lives are going to be anything but routine from now on.

So, for a while they said nothing, as this new reality took root in their souls. But they couldn’t keep silent forever. We know that, because although those two first witnesses said nothing to anyone, here you are on Easter morning twenty centuries later and half a world away, telling their story It was a story too powerful, too holy, and too good to keep silent.

Happy Easter! This is your story now! And that awkward ending? It’s not the end. It’s just the beginning.

**April 7, 2024**

**Second Sunday of Easter**

**“Marks of Faith”**

**John 20:19-31**

<https://www.ucc.org/science_and_technology_network_page/>

Today you are invited into the story of Thomas. Whether it is new to you or very familiar, take a few moments to read his story in the book of John. Sit with one or more of these questions. What words, phrases, or ideas jump out at you? What seems comforting? What is unsettling? What about this story stands the test of time? What part of this story seems better left in the past? What is God calling you to, using this story?

 Although he is sometimes called “Doubting Thomas,” the disciple’s willingness to ask questions does not show doubt but in fact its opposite; curiosity and a deep desire to experience the risen Christ using all of his senses. This post-Easter impulse, to deeply know the risen Christ however one can, is at the heart of the United Church of Christ’s Science and Technology Network.

The Network is guided by the Pastoral Letter on Faith and Science, an epistle that turns twenty-five years old this year. Some issues, like the rise of the use of AI, for example, and a more global awareness of the seriousness of climate change, are new. But the questions the Pastoral Letter on Faith and Science asks are just as salient today as they were two and half decades ago.

As you were invited into the story of Thomas, take some time to read or re-read the the Pastoral Letter on Faith and Science. You can find it online at https://www.ucc.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/pastoral-letter-on-faith-and-science.pdf

As you read, ask yourself the What words, phrases, or ideas jump out at you? What seems comforting? What is unsettling? What about this letter stands the test of time? What part of this letter seems better left in the past? What is God calling you to, using this letter?

**April 14, 2024**

**Third Sunday of Easter**

**“Christ Among Us”**

**Luke 24:36b-48**

Luke 24: 41-43 *Yet for all their joy they were still disbelieving and wondering, and he said to them, “Have you anything here to eat?” They gave him a piece of broiled fish, and he took it and ate in their presence.*

Dear Brother Jesus, Dear Christ now Risen -

We are always asking you for things, it seems.

Someone wants healing from illness.

Someone needs freedom from addiction.

The nations cry for peace.

The groaning planet sighs for relief.

For these we pray in our requests,

We pray also that we will recognize

You when you give us these things - healing, freedom, peace, relief.

But hey there Jesus, hey there Christ now Risen,

Here is how we will actually-factually recognize you.

One day, You will come to us.
We’ll be sitting together,

(probably wondering aloud where you’ve gotten to now)

and there you’ll be.

You’ll say, “Do you have anything to eat here, siblings?”

That day, you might be in one of your

disconcerting disguises, brother Jesus.

You might not smell good or speak our language.

You might not look like us or think like us.

But this is how you let us know

That we can recognize you.

Because you will ask us, like this,

“Don’t you have anything to eat here?”

And all we will be able to say is yes, yes, yes.

And then, Oh! It’s you!

April 21, 2024

Fourth Sunday of Easter

“Enfolded by Love”

John 10:11-18

Today is sometimes called Good Shepherd Sunday. In an increasingly urban culture, Shepherd can be a difficult metaphor to grasp. But, for some ministers, the metaphor of shepherd is very powerful, precisely because their work with livestock helps inform their ministry.

When she was asked what about ministry and shepherding crosses over, Catherine Foote (who describes herself as retired from ministry, but still shepherding) checked in from England, where she had traveled to participate in sheep dog trials.

“Ha!” she wrote, “Well, that would be just about everything! But I would say it has kept me aware of the everyday, ordinary diligence and joy of ministry. Sheep need to be fed, every day. Watered, every day. Tended, every day. And if I stop to notice, the work brings me joy, every day.”

Although she’s not a shepherd, Jackie Hibbard of Dancing Spirit Equine Facilitated Learning and Coaching and associate pastor at community UCC Boulder works extensively with animals and their connections to humans. She checked in about her work with horses. “Horses have helped me learn so much about myself and my leadership style. I could talk about this for paragraphs, but Two simple learnings are: they help me know when I’m not being clear and when I’m not fully present. I am a better minister and listener, because of what horses have taught me.”

Think about the relationships you have had with animals. How have those relationships deepened your relationship with God and with your sense of calling and vocation?

April 28, 2024

Fifth Sunday of Easter

“Abiding in Love”

John 15:1-8

“We are aware that there has been increased violence against indigenous women and transgender persons. Our increased awareness of these issues that disproportionately affect women will impact our response as global advocates.” –Rev. Dr. Karen Georgia Thompson

On this Break the Silence Sunday, churches can raise their awareness of gender-based violence by participating in Thursdays in Black.

\*Thursdays in Black grew out of the World Council of Churches (WCC) Decade of Churches in Solidarity with Women (1988-1998), in which the stories of rape as a weapon of war, gender injustice, abuse, violence, and many tragedies that grow outward from such violence became all the more visible. But what also became visible was women’s resilience, agency, and personal efforts to resist such violations. Join Wider Church Ministries, and our partners, in the campaign by doing the following:

### Pause

Pause for a moment of silence on Thursdays at noon your local time to remember and honor those who have died at the hand of sexualized or gender-based violence.

### Pray

Pray with us:

We stand with invisible victims of sexual and gender-based violence.
We see you. We hear you. You are not forgotten.

### Post

Post your prayers, photos, or inspirations on social media using the hashtags #ThursdaysinBlack, #UnitedChurchOfChrist, and tag us.

If you or someone you know is in an abusive relationship, please seek help immediately. You can call the 24-hour National Domestic Violence Hotline at 1-800-799-SAFE (7233).

\*<https://www.ucc.org/what-we-do/wider-church-ministries/thursdays-in-black-campaign/>

**May 5, 2024**

**Sixth Sunday of Easter**

**“Friends Together”**

**John 15:9-17**

John 15:9-11 *As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commandments and abide in his love. I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.*

Great Thanksgiving Communion Prayer for Rural Life Sunday

The Lord be with you. **And also with you.**

Lift up your hearts. **We lift them up to the Lord.**

Let us give thanks to the Lord our God. **It is right to give our God thanks and praise.**

Dear God, Creator of all things.

Long ago, in the very beginning, you knelt down and scooped a handful of dirt from the ground. You looked at the handful of dirt and you knew it could live. And so you formed us, not crawling upon the face of the Earth, but intimately connected with Her.

In all times and places, your people have looked at the soil and, having first given thanks for what that soil can bring forth, have then planted seeds, tended and sown.

The result of that gratitude and hard work is laid before us now on this table. Wheat and water, ground and risen, became bread. Grapes, painstakingly crushed, became juice/wine. Like Jesus, who gathered with his friends on that holy night long ago, today we give thanks for the elements before us, and for the lands and people that produced it. We sing with gratitude as your people have sung across the lands and the generations,

Holy, holy, holy Lord, God of power and might.

 Heaven and earth are full of your glory.

Hosanna in the highest!

Blessed is the One who comes in the name of the Lord.

Hosanna in the highest!

May 12, 2024

Seventh Sunday of Easter

“Guided in Prayer”

John 17:6-19

Although for many people, Mother’s Day is a day of joy and celebration, for others it is a time of confusion, pain or frustration. Some churches try to honor all the emotions of this day by offering an alternative service around Mother’s Day that acknowledges the difficult feelings that this day might bring up. An emphasis on ritual and contemplation can be very healing for those incapacitated by the emotions of this day.

One such ritual allowed participants to move around to various stations in the room. At each station was a quote about the painful disconnect that Mother’s Day holds for some people. Participants were encouraged to respond to the quote with the activity at the station. After some time had passed, the participants gathered to share whatever had come up for them, with some profound moments of healing and insight shared.

If you would like to create a container for a service like this, that honors the difficulty of this day, here are some stations that might be helpful

Art such as mandala or simple origami: Sometimes the healing needed is beyond words. Provide this space as a place to respond from that place beyond words.

Writing: You may want to provide pens and paper. The writings could be kept by the participants or ritually burned.

Prayer candles: Invited participants to light a candle from another flame, reminding them of the capacity for light to grow when it is shared.

Water: Provide a bowl of salt water, as a reminder of tears. Invite participants to say a short blessing and release a stone or glass bead into the water.

In so many settings, “negative” emotions are unwelcome. If you and your community decide to create a ritual like this, you may be surprised at the response you receive, as you demonstrate that you are safe place “no matter who you are or where you are on life’s journey.”

May 19, 2024

Pentecost

“Spirit for All”

Acts 2:1-21

Acts 2:1-4 *When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place. Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting.**They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them.*

Today many churches will receive the Strengthen the Church offering.

The Strengthen the Church (STC) Offering reflects the shared commitment of people across the United Church of Christ to cooperatively build up the UCC. Conferences and the national setting equally share the gifts given by members and friends through their local congregations. The funds raised support leadership development, new churches, youth ministry, and innovation in existing congregations. By your generosity to this offering, you build up the Body of Christ.

As God calls our congregations to be the church in new ways, your generosity will plant new churches, awaken new ideas in existing churches and develop the spiritual life in our youth and young adults.\*

It’s especially poignant to receive the Strengthen the Church offering on Pentecost, the day in which God’s presence as wind and fire was heard, felt and seen by all those gathered. As winds of the Spirit swept over the waters in Genesis beginning Creation, the winds of Spirit sweep over people creating community anew.

On this day, we remember that we are co-creators with God of the reign which is to come. Pentecost reminds us that we are never alone in this co-creation. Both those within our church walls and those without can be vessels of the Holy Spirit, and when we speak, we will be heard and understood. And the promise of Pentecost is that the Holy Spirit does not just fill us with words, but also incites us into action on behalf of the divine.

Look around! What work is the Holy Spirit ready to do through your community? How might the Strengthen the Church offering be a part of that work?

\*https://www.ucc.org/giving/ways-to-give/our-churchs-wider-mission/strengthen-the-church/

May 26, 2024

Trinity Sunday (1st Sunday after Pentecost)

“Mysterious Encounter”

John 3:1–17

Maybe you don’t think of friendship all that often, but friendship is a truly radical act. Friendship has no real purpose. Friends choose each other, without blood ties, without, as the scientists say, “the imperative of procreation,” often outside the bounds of geography. And yet even though friendship has a sort of ambiguous status in our culture (we both diminish the relationship of friendship “it’s nothing serious: they’re just friends” and uphold it, as in “he has many acquaintances, but few friends”), most of us seem to yearn for it.

Theologian Sallie McFague says of the relationships in our lives: “one does not choose one’s parents, and even falling in love seems to have a kind of destiny about it, but friends choose to be together…your mother desires your existence, and your lover finds you valuable, but your friend LIKES you!”

But don’t confuse LIKE with ALIKE. Because the alchemy that brews the mysterious metal of individuals into the pure gold of real friendship is not necessarily commonality. It’s not necessarily about looking at each other, so much as it’s about looking ahead in the same direction. A lot of times, it’s having a task or goal that you can work on together that helps cement a friendship bond – the mission project, the facilities work day, the book club.

Trinity Sunday is today. It is one day when we pause to marvel that our God is both One and Three. It is one day to remind ourselves that our God is a God of relationship, of friendship that creates and flourishes in a dance of delight and Divine love.

What if it’s on purpose that everything was created out of this Holy Love Dance? What if how God is created – three, one, whirling, creating, loving - is part of the plan of things? What if friendship is how it all started, how it all is sustained? What if friendship (that ambiguous but somehow important word) is what God wants of us, what God has called us here for now? What if God has that radical friendship love for us, has had it since the beginning?

Look around you. Perhaps you are sitting with friends right now. How do these friends show you more about God’s work in the world?