

“THERE YOU ARE!”

Sermon preached by Rev. Dr. Mark Hostetter

The First Presbyterian Church in the City of New York
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Scripture: John 20: 19-31 and 1 Peter 1: 3-9

Good morning, my fellow hunker-ers and shelter-ers! Welcome to this Second Sunday in Easter, this Earth Day Sunday. I am so grateful to be with you this morning.

Today's scripture is the familiar story of doubting Thomas. On the day after Easter, the disciples were telling Thomas about having seen the risen Jesus, but Thomas had his doubts. He hadn't been with the disciples earlier when they all saw Jesus. "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe," Thomas demanded.

So one week later, they're all gathered in a locked house. Jesus came among them, and straightaway he went over to Thomas. Jesus told Thomas to put his finger in his hands, to reach out his hand and put it in his side. But Thomas never actually does reach out and touch Jesus. His response to Jesus' offering that kind of proof was instead more like instantaneous recognition, recognition that blew away any doubts he may have had. Thomas yells out with sure recognition, "My Lord and my God! There you are!" Thomas didn't actually need the scientific proof, the personal touch confirmation that Jesus was still alive. He just needed to recognize Jesus, to see his God, and Thomas cried out, "Oh, there you are!"

Not only in these days right after Easter, not only in these days of sheltering-in-place, but how often do we see something or someone in this world and shout that same revelation as we search for God. "Oh, there you are!" When we see the kindness of medical staff or grocery workers, literally keeping us alive. We see the face of God. "Oh, there you are!" When we catch a glimpse of fellow First Church-ers, when we take our daily safe-distancing walks by the river or around the park. "Oh, there you are!" When we hear stories of extraordinary hope in the face of grief and despair. And when we see the delivery people on bikes and in their brown UPS uniforms or carrying their sacks of mail. We see the face of God. "Oh, there you are!" When we treasure the love of family and friends now forced to live closer together than anyone ever bargained for, or when we connect through Zoom and FaceTime. We see the face of God. "Oh, there you are!"

Just like Thomas, we see God in the most unlikely places: in the face of suffering, and in places where hope cannot help but emerge. God is present and active in the world, and in our lives. All we need to do to see it is to keep our eyes open, to shout out, "Oh, there you are!"

This year 2020 is the 50th Anniversary of Earth Day. That's pretty amazing, really, but also a little depressing too, that these efforts to care for our planet have been 50-years in the making. Prior to this crisis, the national church themed this Sunday: "The Fierce Urgency of Now." Care for the earth is indeed urgent, and action is so desperately needed to stop the flooding and the starvation and the extinction that is already happening as a result of our collective ostrich-like ignorance, and selfish inaction. Yet this pandemic has seemed to put these things, even such important ones, on a back burner. One more unfortunate collateral casualty of this disease. But who knows, if we don't take our care for the earth seriously, maybe this severe life we're now living is an early indicator of our lives to come if we don't respond to the fierce urgency of now.

We can change our future. When we hear about the blue skies, long hidden, in places like Delhi or Beijing or Los Angeles during this pause in human activity, we see how quickly God's saving grace can transform. We New Yorkers can't really comprehend how anyone could *not* take their responsibility for caring for the earth seriously. And as biblical Christians, we know our job is not to "save" the earth – that's the salvation of all creation that God has promised through Jesus Christ – but rather to care for what has been entrusted to us as God's people, of stewards of creation. Our focus on caring for creation is based in hope: the hope – the promise – that God has given this wonderful world for us, and for generations and generations to come.

There's an old proverb that's familiar to us all, but we may not realize that it's actually an African proverb, from the Kikuyu people of Kenya. It says, "You must treat the earth well. It was not given to you by your parents. It is loaned to you by your children." It's a proverb that has made its way into our collective social conscience, from the National Park Service to Disney stories.

My family and I have been "hunkered down" as they say at our house up at the Presbyterian Camp in Holmes NY, a place so close to the heart and soul of this congregation. We've been blessed to be able to take our exercise in these neighboring acres, and we can't help but feel a sense of belonging to God in creation, to see God in the rocks and trees, in the lakes and trails. "Oh, there you are!" Speaking of trails and hikes, we've taken so many daily hikes on this Day 34 of our hermitage here in the country, that we have in fact covered every single trail, some more than once. Yellow trail, orange trail, white trail, red trail, even the blue trail that winds around the 5-mile camp perimeter. Only the swampy purple trail is left – as we're waiting until things dry out a bit.

We've seen the day-by-day changes of the season, as winter has turned to an emerging spring. A spring trying to burst through, although we had snow earlier in this past week, and morning temperatures are more likely than not still in the 30's. But on those hikes, we've seen first the skunk cabbage shoots emerge, and let me tell you, they're alien looking. Go ahead and look up a picture on the internet, it's sort of like a pitcher plant kind of blossom, something that seems like it came from "Little Shop of Horrors." And they seem to be everywhere. The skunk cabbage can emerge so early, even from frozen ground, since its biology of budding actually heats up its surroundings by 15 degrees. At least for this science nerd, I think it is pretty awesome. And then, days after skunk cabbage is first seen, then the forsythia blossoms; then the fiddleheads of the ferns emerging from their wet soil; and then the greening buds of the understory.

How can these flowers bloom? How can these buds emerge? How can spring continue on its usual course? Why aren't they, too, keeping indoors? Haven't they seen Governor Cuomo on YouTube? Shouldn't the world, shouldn't all of creation stop its usual routine, just as our own routines have been put on pause?

Yet maybe there is something comforting about how creation continues despite our human preoccupations. And, at least for me, I can't help but see hope, I can't help but see God. "Oh, there you are!"

At dinner every night, we go around our meal table and we talk about our activities of the day, and we try to say what we're each grateful for. Call it a spiritual practice, or D-I-Y family therapy, whatever – it does get us to focus on our blessings, the bright spots of our days, those shimmers of hope, those moments when we can say, "Oh, there you are!"

Just as those skunk cabbage buds break through when winter hasn't yet released its grip, in these times of crisis and trial, we look for those signs that reveal to us the joy that is always at the center of where God can always be found. Our verses from Peter today talk about this. Listen again:

“In this you rejoice, even if now -- for a little while -- you have had to suffer various trials. . . . Although you have not seen God, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and rejoice with an indescribable and glorious joy.”

I mentioned at one of our daily church staff meetings that Dick Avery, of Avery & Marsh church music fame, had recently passed away. Their 70's-style music was at the same time folksy and uplifting, reflecting the hopefulness and the candor of the time, with a little activist edge to it. It was fun to sing their songs in church, or around a campfire with Dick and Don. They were always up at Holmes Camp, since they were the minister and the organist of the Port Jervis Church in Hudson River Presbytery, just an hour away from Manhattan. I've told you the story before about how I remember them looking up and commenting at the star-filled milky way of stars one evening, reflecting on God's awe. As we paused in that awe-filled moment we were all feeling, as we gazed into the infinite, Don cocked his head back and exclaimed: “Oh, it's all so gaudy!”

Avery and Marsh always did get the theology right though, in their lives and in their music. It cried out – Oh, there you are! “Every Morning is Easter Morning” was their trademark hymn, and on this Sunday after Easter we can shout that one out. And somehow the words of their song “We are the Church,” written 50 years ago, rings so true in our current day and our current situation:

“The church is not a building; the church is not a steeple. The church is not a resting place. The church is a people.”

It is a strange time for humor, a strange time to try to be funny, with so much disruption and loss and trauma and hurt surrounding us all. But I have to admit, my family longed for the return of “Saturday Night Live,” those moments of comic relief, and we tuned in to their virtual relaunch for the familiar smiles of their silliness.

As you all know, I love to tell jokes from the pulpit, and with a sense of caution in the back of my mind, I looked through an old book of my grandfather, a preacher too – an old book with a title “Jokes for All Occasions,” copyright 1921. I thought, how bad could those be, collected so soon after the devastating Spanish Flu pandemic just a year earlier? So I found one under the category of recognition and mistaken identity, our meditation topic for today. So here goes:

The new pastor was coming to call, and the mother gave her 5-year old daughter Emma some instructions. “If he asks your name, say ‘Emma Jane.’ If he asks how old you are, say ‘five years old.’ And if he asks who made you, say that God made me.”

So it turns out that the pastor did ask just those three questions in that order, the first two which Emma replied correctly. “My name is Emma, and I am five years old.” But when the minister asked the third question as to where she came from, Emma hesitated for a moment, and then said: “Mama did tell me . . . but I've gone and forgotten the man's name.”

So as we go about our new routines of isolation and survival, our experiences of grief and of joy, I try to keep my eyes open for moments where I catch a glimpse of God. Those moments when my soul can cry out in hope, “Oh, there you are!” As we find, through our faith, as we try to find in each day, a bit of gratitude, a bit of hope, and a bit of joy.

[Benediction]

I leave you with this benediction written by an unknown Celtic author. The Celtic people had their origins near the Black Sea around the time of King David, 1000 B.C., and then traveled to central Europe and the Pyrenees. Finally, around 400 A.D., they brought Christianity to Ireland and Scotland, combining their reverence for the earth and all creation with a deep and abiding love of Christ. This familiar blessing is entitled The Blessing of Light:

May the blessing of light be on you, light without and light within. May the blessed sunlight shine upon you and warm your heart till it glows like a great fire, and strangers may warm themselves as well as friends. And may light shine out of the eyes of you, like a candle set in the window of a house, bidding the wanderer to come in out of the storm.

May the blessing of rain be on you, to beat upon your spirit and wash it fair and clean; and leave there many a shining pool where the blue of heavens shine, and sometimes a star. May the blessing of the earth be upon you, the great round earth.

May you ever have a kindly greeting for people as you're going along the roads.

And now may God bless you, and bless you kindly.

Amen.