

Lakewood Congregational Church,

A Congregation of the United Church of Christ

Sunday, March 29, 2020

An Order of Worship to be followed in your home,
along with our worship video or on your own

Preferably at 10:00 a.m.



Welcome and Announcements

When you begin your in-home worship service, pause to center yourself and then hold your palms towards the computer screen or to your heart and imagine the energy of connection. Think of many of the people you love at Lakewood Congregational Church, and feel their hearts connected to yours.

Say, “Good morning! May the Peace of Christ be with you.”

- We are taking many steps to guide our community in this anxious time but everything is so fluid right now and we’re working to develop our role within the efforts of the wider community. If you do not receive the emails from our church office and would like to, please email Karen at karen@lcc-church.org.
- Please join us on Facebook at Lakewood Congregational Church at 11:00am on Sunday morning for Facebook Live Coffee Hour.

Offering and Contribution Collection

This service will not include a set-aside time of offering, so we want to remind you now that we do hope that you will continue to fulfill your pledges during this time. Financial gifts are always welcome, and our church feels the call to respond to the needs around us as they arise. Financial stability allows us to do so more effectively. So, let us give generously of our time, talent, treasure to further the work of God in our community.

You can do so in the following ways:

- Writing and mailing a check to Lakewood Congregational Church, 1375 W. Clifton Blvd. Lakewood, Ohio 44107
- Texting STEWARD to 44-321
- Sending a gift through your bank’s online bill pay
- Call the church office at (216) 221-9555 to discuss other options

Let us worship God.

Prelude

“Beautiful City” from *Godspell*

by Stephen Schwartz, Performed by Audrey and Julie Warren

Call to Worship

Leader: The prophet asks: Can our soul-weary bones live again?

People: O God, you know!

Leader: We ask: Can we dance again after mourning, loss and grief?

People: O God, you know!

Leader: The gift is sure and unmistakable:

People: God’s breath poured out as new life for weary souls!

Leader: Let us celebrate the gift of God’s new life,

People: And come to worship God in laughter and dancing!

Hymn

JESUS CHRIST

Luke 24:13-32

231 Sing of One Who Walks Beside Us

F Dm Gm Dm Am Gm7

1. Sing of one who walks be - side us and this day is
 2. We have walked with him as strang - ers through the jour - ney
 3. Ris - en one, stay with us, raise us, once a - gain the

B \flat 7 Dm C Dm C B \flat 7

liv - ing still, one who now is clos - er to us
 of the day, and have told him of the vi - o - lence
 night is near. Dine with us and share your wis - dom,

Am B \flat 7 C F F Dm7

than the thoughts our hearts dis - till, Christ who once up -
 that has swept our hope a - way. He has of - fered
 free our hearts from ev - 'ry fear. In the calm of

B \flat 7 Gm7 B \flat 7 Am7 B \flat 7 Gm7 C

on a hill - top, raised a - gainst the power of sin,
 words of com - fort, words of en - er - gy and light.
 each new eve - ning, in the fresh - ness of each dawn,

F Dm C Gm7 Am B \flat 7 C6 C F

died in love as his own crea - tures cru - ci - fied their God and Friend!
 Did our hearts not blaze with - in us as he broke the bread this night?
 if you hold us fast in friend - ship we will nev - er be a - lone.

WORDS: Ralph Wright, 1989, alt.
 MUSIC: Attr. William Moore, 1825; harm. Charles Anders, 1969, alt.

HOLY MANNA
 87.87D

Words © 1989 GIA Publications, Inc.; harm. © 1978 Lutheran Book of Worship,
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Prayer

Compassionate God, the wind of your Spirit is the very sign of life for all who long for you. One breath from you and we are rescued from the arid valley of dry bones, given muscles and sinews and joy with which to praise you, and filled with the holy hope you grant to all your faithful children. Let our whole lives be filled with the life-breath of the Spirit, that what has lain dormant may burst into bloom, and what looks to us to be death may be revealed as but sleep before the emergence of new life.

Let's hold a moment of space here together to name the prayers that are on our hearts:

God hold these petitions and hold us, bring us closer to one another and allow us to feel the ways our hearts are connected, and then let us join in the prayer our Savior taught us:

The Lord's Prayer

Our Father, who art in Heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy Kingdom come, Thy Will be done on Earth as it is in Heaven. Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors, and lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil. For thine is the Kingdom, and the Power, and the Glory forever. Amen.

Readers' Theatre: John 11: 1-45

NARRATOR (M)

Mary, Martha, and Lazarus were siblings who were dear friends with Jesus. They lived in Bethany in Judea, just a couple miles east of Jerusalem. Jesus recently had been in Jerusalem to celebrate the Jewish Festival of Dedication, which today is called Hanukkah. But some of the leaders in Jerusalem, who felt Jesus undermined their power, threatened to stone him and kill him. So he and his disciples left Judea and traveled more than 20 miles east to the Jordan River, near the place where John had baptized Jesus.

While they were there, a message suddenly came from Mary and Martha: Lazarus was gravely ill. Jesus, however, didn't immediately leave. He waited two days, then called his disciples to gather around.

JESUS (J)

Let's go back to Judea.

DISCIPLE (A)

What?! We can't go back there. They'll kill you!

JESUS

People who walk in the day don't trip, because they can see the light. But people who walk at night stumble around because they have no light.

DISCIPLE

What on earth does that mean?

THOMAS (E)

I don't know, but let's go with him so we can die by his side.

NARRATOR

So they set off on their long journey. But by the time they arrived in Bethany, they found many other people had already come there to grieve: Lazarus had died four days earlier. Once his sister Martha heard Jesus was in town, she went to meet him.

MARTHA (E)

Jesus, if you had been here, my brother wouldn't have died.

JESUS

Your brother will rise again.

MARTHA

Yes, I know he will rise again, to life in heaven.

JESUS

Listen to me: I am both the life in heaven and the life on earth. Everyone who holds that in their heart, even if they die, will live. Everyone who truly lives and believes will never die. Do you believe this?

MARTHA

Yes, I do.

NARRATOR

Martha then went to talk to Mary.

MARTHA

He's here.

NARRATOR

Mary quickly got up to go find Jesus. Her friends thought she was going to Lazarus's tomb to grieve, so they followed her. When Mary saw Jesus, she fell at his feet.

MARY (A)

Jesus, if you had been here, my brother wouldn't have died.

NARRATOR

Jesus saw that she and all of her friends were sobbing and crying. Tears welled up in his eyes.

JESUS

Where have you laid him?

MARY

Come and see.

NARRATOR

Jesus began to cry, just like everyone else.

MARTHA & MARY

Look at how much he loved Lazarus, too.

NARRATOR

They all started walking to the tomb. Martha came and joined them. When they got to the place where Lazarus was buried, they all began to cry again, including Jesus. The tomb was a cave covered with a stone.

JESUS

Roll back the stone.

MARTHA

No, Jesus, he's been dead too long already! The smell will be so terrible, I don't know if I can take it.

JESUS

I thought you said you believed me. Come on, roll the stone back.

NARRATOR

So they did. Jesus looked up.

JESUS

Thank you for hearing me. I know you always hear me.

NARRATOR

He took a deep breath, then he spoke in a loud voice.

JESUS

LAZARUS. COME OUT.

NARRATOR

Everybody looked at the dark opening of the tomb. They waited, holding their breath. Then, to their utter amazement, Lazarus — the man who had been dead for four days — appeared, all wrapped up in his burial garments. Everyone rushed to him and untied the cloths. They all laughed and embraced each other. Some of the people snuck away in fear to tell the leaders who hated Jesus what had happened. But many others found themselves believing Jesus and his message.

Message

**** We've included this transcript, word-for-word, for the benefit of people who do not have audio access on their computer. Please keep in mind that it is written in the way it's spoken, so the grammar/sentence structure may feel a bit awkward to read. Even so, this feels like the best way to communicate to as many people as possible.*

Prayer: God may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, for you are our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Oooooo I wonder if any of you have been Mary or Martha this week: They both said, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." Oh we watch those statistics tick right on up in our nation, in our world, and I wonder if anyone else has had that thought cross through their minds: "Lord, if you had been here..."

I want to name again, really define for you, that when I talk about grief in this time and in any time, I am not restricting that definition to the physical death of people we love. Grief is wide and it is broad.

Grief is the loss of opportunity, the loss of relationship, the loss of normalcy, and right now grief is the loss of the world as we knew it. We're also collectively experiencing something really painful right now called "Anticipatory Grief." It's a feeling that is very common in caregivers of people with dementia or a dire diagnosis. This is a type of grief we feel when we know that something painful is down the road, but it hasn't quite reached us yet, and this is perhaps the first time in any of our lifetimes that our planet has experienced a collective sense of anticipatory grief. From the deepest, most primitive parts of our minds,

we are anticipating something bad, and it has broken our sense of safety, and we are a grieving people.

“Lord if you had been here, my brother would not have died.”

Lord if you had been here, those numbers on the curve would not be going up.

Lord if you had been here, we would have no shortage of personal protective equipment.

Lord if you had been here, I wouldn't have had to close my business.

Lord if you had been here, I wouldn't have to figure out some kind of strange quarantine custody plan with my children.

Lord if you had been here...

Jesus responds to this indictment twice. The first time, to Martha, he says, “your brother will rise again.” The center of our faith as followers of Christ, right? The promise that whatever we lose, whatever we grieve, whatever has passed away from this world, God has the power to enter in and redeem in ways far beyond our understanding.

Your brother will rise again.

The numbers on that curve will go back down.

Our hospitals and those who work in them will rise to the occasion

Our businesses and our economy will rebound in new and maybe even more beautiful ways.

Our children will grow emotionally and spiritually because they are weathering this storm with us.

Our relationships with our neighbors, with our friends, with our families, will be born again in new ways.

Your brother will rise again.

Jesus responds to this indictment twice. The first time, to Martha, he says, “your brother will rise again.” The second time, he responds to Mary. Jesus wept. He saw Mary weeping, he saw the Jews who were with her also weeping and Jesus wept too. This is the shortest verse in both our Hebrew scriptures and the New Testament. The New Revised Standard Version is a little longer-- Jesus began to weep. Here he is, with them in their grief.

He knows better than anyone about God's ability to enter in and redeem every situation that is put in front of us, and still he weeps.

In both of his responses, to Martha and to Mary, the root of my faith calls me to believe that God is always and everywhere in the business of making us more fully and abundantly alive. (Also, in another sermon on this text I might elaborate on the fact that Jesus has actually been there all along, by the power of the Holy Spirit, and they were perhaps looking in the wrong direction and didn't recognize his presence). But here in this moment Jesus as the incarnation of God, stands in the grave of his friend and cries with others who are crying too.

One of my favorite writers, Debie Thomas, wrote on her blog this week: “When Jesus weeps, he legitimizes human grief... Yes, resurrection is around the corner, but in this story, the promise of joy doesn't cancel out the essential work of grief. When Jesus cries, he assures Mary and Martha, not only that their beloved brother is worth crying for, but also that they are worth crying with. Through his tears, Jesus calls all of us into the holy vocation of empathy, co-suffering, and lamentation.”

At the beginning of Lent, when quarantine was far from our minds, I sent a letter to the congregation inviting everyone into the Lenten Season with us... into our worship series on Looking for Love in All the Wrong Places. I never know how many people read those letters, so maybe you already read it, but if you did it was during an entirely different era, so I'm going to read a bit of it to you again now. I wrote:

The prophet Maya Angelou, may her memory be a blessing, said that love always liberates. She spoke of having her first baby at 17 years old, and when she told her mother she was leaving the home to raise her baby on her own, her mother said, "Okay but you can always come home." And when she did, her mother never said, "I told you so." She said, "My baby is home! Oh my darlin! Mother's gonna cook you something." Maya said, "She loved me and liberated me to life."

I wrote: I know this is the kind of parent God is-- a parent whose love liberates us, sets us free to be, to do, to create all the wonderful things God sent us here to create. I know that when my heart is set fully upon God, I am aware of my love and liberation, and I am my best self.

But there are times-- oh far too many times-- when I am not in tune with God's liberating love. In my day-to-day choices and interaction, I am pulled towards love with conditions, love that binds, love that tears down, love that competes, love that isn't, well... love. When we are looking for love, anything we find that does not set us free to be our fullest, most beautiful selves is not love.

I wrote at the end of that letter, "May you experience the love that liberates, today and every day."

Looking back at that letter now, I'm realizing that this Sunday in our Looking for Love in all the Wrong Places worship series is the week that we are "looking for the liberator." Over the past five weeks in our worship series, we have looked for the resistor, we looked for the helper, we looked for the thirst-quencher, we looked for the shepherd, and now we are looking for love that liberates. Certainly I would have talked about Lazarus in a completely different way five weeks ago.

Now I am thinking about the ways in which we are all a bit "bound." Most obviously, we're bound to our homes, and we're bound to that anticipatory grief. And we are looking for love that liberates. And this is where I return to that confidence that God has a way of entering into our broken places and redeeming us. Because what are we being liberated to right now? We are recognizing the ways in which we have failed to participate in the commandment of sabbath, by working so hard that we don't know how to stop. We are recognizing the ways in which we have forgotten to slow down and see the beauty of God's creation right before our eyes. God is waking us up today to see the holes in our social safety nets and learn how to sew them up together. God is waking us up to see the faces of our neighbors even if we are doing it by standing on our porches and yelling across the driveway to each other. God is waking us up to self-reflection. God is waking us up to life.

Jesus' weeping is liberating. When he shows us his humanity, when he stands with his feet in our pain and he weeps, he shows us that sorrow is a powerful catalyst for change. In the story of Lazarus, his weeping leads to transformation, and then we see his third response. It is because Jesus experiences devastation that he recognizes the need for restoration. In this time of Quarantine, of anticipatory grief for Covid-19 and what it has done and what it will do to God's people, we are allowed to shake our fist and say, "if you had been here, my brother wouldn't have died." and Jesus' response will not only be two-fold, it will be three-fold: He will say first to Martha: Your brother will rise again, second to Mary he will have no words but weeping, but third, Jesus will respond to all of us as a gathered and grieving community and he will say, "Come out."

Love always liberates.

It is Jesus' weeping that becomes a powerful catalyst for change. Perhaps our grief will provoke us in similar ways-- what breaks our hearts, what keeps us awake at night, what enrages us, and can God liberate us, shake us up, awaken us within those very spaces to work for transformation, to seek justice, to find love that lets people go and builds people up?

Debie Thomas says at the end of her blog post this week, "During these last weeks of Lent, as we prepare for Jesus's own death and resurrection, I hope that Jesus's tears can keep us tender, open, humble, generous, and brave. I hope his honest expression of sorrow will give us the permission, the company, and the impetus we need, not only to do the work of grief and healing, but to move with powerful compassion into a world that sorely needs our empathy and our love. Yes, we are in death right now, but we serve a God who calls us to life. Our journey is not to the grave, but through it. The Lord who weeps is also the Lord who resurrects. So we mourn in hope."

Continue to let yourself feel the feelings, beloved church. Weep, please. Your body needs you to weep sometimes. But do not weep as others do who have no hope. For our weeping, as people who believe in the resurrection, is balm for our weary souls, and our weeping can be a powerful catalyst for change.

Be well, sweet church, I love you, and I can't wait to see you back here in this place when the time is right. Thanks be to God. Amen.

Benediction

Love always liberates. Go forth from this place, even if you stay right where you are, weep for a while when the time is right, and then feel God's liberating love-- in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, One God Mother of us All. Amen.

Postlude

Première Arabesque by Claude Debussy

Ben Malkevitch, piano