



First Congregational Church of Anoka United Church of Christ

An Open and Affirming Congregation
April 14, 2024 ♦ Third Sunday of Easter



This bulletin is designed to assist you as you watch our livestreamed worship service, whether you follow along live or view it at a later time. The stream can be found on our YouTube channel at this location:

<https://www.youtube.com/@AnokaUCC>

Welcome & Announcements

If you are a guest with us today, welcome! If you are comfortable sharing your information with us, there are cards in the pew holders that you can use for that purpose (place them in the offering plate).

If you would like to join our mailing list, email office@uccanoka.org and ask to be added.

Centering Music

Emily Torvik

The Church Bell Rings

* Opening Hymn

“The Day of Resurrection” #245 (*alt lyrics**)

**particularly triumphal language has been replaced and is indicated with [brackets].*

**The day of resurrection! Earth, tell it out abroad;
the Passover of gladness, the Passover of God.
From death to life eternal, from earth unto the sky,
our Christ has brought us over with hymns of [love and life].**

**Our hearts be pure from evil, that we may see a-right
the Christ who reigns eternal in resurrection light;
we listen for the teachings once heard so calm and plain,
for we, too, want to follow and raise [melodious] strain.**

**Now let the heavens be joyful, let earth its song begin,
[let us sing of our Savior, with joyful verse and hymn];
let all things seen and unseen their notes of gladness blend,
for Christ again has risen, our joy that has no end!**

* Call to Worship and Opening Prayer (*adapted in part from Psalm 50*)

One: God, the LORD God, speaks and summons the world from the rising of the sun to its setting.

Many: From Zion, perfect in beauty, God appears in radiance.

One: Our God comes and is not silent. Fire precedes her, devouring, and around her a whirling wind, storming.

Many: She calls to the heavens above and to earth to love her people.

One: The heavens declare her righteousness;

Many: for God is the one who loves!

One: Let us pray.

Many: Holy One, give us a Spirit of imagination to believe that we are capable of more than we have accomplished. Give us a Spirit of confidence that if we can envision it, then we can believe it, and then we can make it so. Jesus showed and promised us that power and love come to those who believe; help our unbelief! In his name we pray; amen.

A Time for Children (10:30)

Prayer of Preparation

“Amen, Amen” #161 (*alt lyrics*)

(refrain) Amen, amen, amen, amen, amen!

Jesus died and rose again **(amen)** / Mary found him waiting **(amen)**
on Easter morning! **(amen, amen, amen!)**

Easter brings us joy **(amen)** / joy and laughter **(amen)**
Let us all rejoice! **(amen, amen, amen!)**

Like a fiery phoenix **(amen)** / Jesus lives again **(amen)**
This is truly Good News! **(amen, amen, amen!)**

Special Music

“Where No One Stands Alone”

Mosie Lister

Alice & Randy Getchell; Mike Benz; Kari Johnson

*Once I stood in the night / With my head bowed low
In the darkness as black as the sea.*

*And my heart was afraid, and I cried, “Oh Lord,
Don’t hide your face from me.”*

*[refrain] Hold my hand, all the way, every hour, every day
From here to the great unknown.*

Take my hand, let me stand / Where no one stands alone.

*Like a king I may live in a palace so tall / With great riches to call my own.
But I don’t know a thing / In this whole wide world
That’s worse than being alone.*

Scripture Reading – Acts 5:12-16

¹²Now many signs and wonders were done among the people through the apostles. And they were all together in Solomon's Portico. ¹³None of the rest dared to join them, but the people held them in high esteem. ¹⁴Yet more than ever believers were added to the Lord, great numbers of both men and women, ¹⁵so that they even carried out the sick into the streets, and laid them on cots and mats, in order that Peter's shadow might fall on some of them as he came by. ¹⁶A great number of people would also gather from the towns around Jerusalem, bringing the sick and those tormented by unclean spirits, and they were all cured.

One: Hear what the Spirit is saying to the church.

Many: Thanks be to God.

Sermon

Rev. Chris McArdle

Hymn

“We Live by Faith and Not by Sight” #256

**We live by faith and not by sight; no gracious words we hear
from Christ who spoke as none e'er spoke, who still we know is near.**

**We may not touch Christ's hands and side, nor follow where Christ trod;
but in confessing we rejoice: our Savior and our God!**

**Help then, O Christ, our unbelief; and may our faith abound
to call on you when you are near and seek where you are found.**

**That, when our life of faith is done, in realms of clearer light
we may behold you as you are, with full and endless sight.**

Prayers of the People

*If you wish to share a prayer with the congregation (joy, concern, hope, worry, or anything at all), raise your hand and a Deacon will bring you a microphone. Offer your prayer and finish by saying, “God in your love” to which we will all respond, “**Hear our prayer.**”*

Sung Prayer

Hear our prayer, O God, hear our prayer, O God; in -
cline your ear to us, and grant us your peace.

Prayer of Our Savior (unison)

*The Prayer has many versions; pray whichever you desire (debts, sins, trespasses, etc.).
We affirm that God has many names, so use one of the suggested or another of your choosing.*

Our Father/Mother/Creator, 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.

Offering

Text-to-Give: 844-334-1477

*Thank you for your gifts to our ministries!
If you are watching from home (live or later), please consider adding to the Offering
by sending your gifts by mail, text, or online (uccanoka.org/donate).
You can support the church further through the RaiseRight program:
www.raiseright.com. Our unique church ID is 9WKLGX8TRZCN.*

Offertory

Emily Torvik

*** Doxology**

DIX

“For the Beauty of the Earth” #28 v.4

**For the good that love inspires, for a world where none exclude,
For a faith that never tires, and for every heart renewed.
God of all, to you we raise this our hymn of grateful praise!**

*** Benediction**

*** Easter Acclamation**

“Now the Green Blade Rises” #238 (v.1)

**Now the green blade rises from the buried grain / Wheat that in dark earth for many days has lain;
Love lives again, that with the dead has been / Love is come again like wheat that rises green!**

You may be seated as you listen to the Postlude. If you choose to depart at this time, please speak gently as you exit out of respect for those who choose to listen.

COFFEE HOUR IS SERVED BETWEEN SERVICES.

**Has your personal information changed? Keep us informed!
There are information update forms on the bulletin table. Thank you.**

Acknowledgements

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Sermon Text

Nearly twenty years ago, I made a return to church camp in Nebraska after a long absence. It was for a fine arts themed camp, one where kids participated in theater, art, writing, and music groups. Once each day, the kids would return to the same element group they chose at the beginning of camp, and a different time each day they'd rotate through all four groups so that they had a day to experience each element. The person who invited me to counsel at that camp—let's call him Bob because that's his name—wanted me to come run the writing group. (As it so happens, it's a dang good thing I agreed, since it was at that camp I met my future wife.)

As the writing group facilitator, it was my job to—and this will come as surprise—get the kids writing! That was an easy task for the group that wrote every day. It was a bunch of girls who already wrote their own poetry, song lyrics, journal entries, and all manner of other scribal endeavors. I didn't have to work as hard with that group, because they didn't need encouragement! They just needed feedback. But the other group? That one needed all manner of coaching and cheerleading, all because a whole lot of them didn't believe.

By that, I mean they didn't believe that they were actually capable of writing creatively. I couldn't even tell you how many of them told me that. "I can't write." "I'm not a writer." "I don't know how to do this." I'm proud that my success rate with blowing up those self-critical beliefs was high, largely because I knew that in order to get those kids to believe in themselves, they needed to know that I believed in them.

We'd usually start with haikus, because honestly, anybody can string together five, seven, and five more syllables. One year, just to prove to them how easy it was, I came up with a half-dozen haikus about how silly the *Twilight* books and movies were. Once the kids dipped their toes in the writing pool with those, then we could go further. Usually, this involved me getting to know them. Their passions, pastimes, loves, even their hurts. I'd encourage them to write about them. One young man who already had a long history of disciplinary problems, mental health challenges, and violent tendencies was convinced he couldn't write—but he could play football. I got him writing about what it felt like to be on the line of scrimmage. And of course you know what happened next: it was *brilliant*. That happened so

many times. Kids who thought they had no facility with words just kept producing pieces of writing that made me weep. I'd read them to the other adult counselors, and a bunch of them would end up crying, too, because what these kids wrote was so beautiful, so vulnerable, so painfully honest.

None of that would have happened if we didn't believe in them, so that they might believe in themselves. None of those miracles could happen without that belief.

I know the Gospels give us all kinds of stories about Jesus healing people, and then in Acts his disciples demonstrate the same power. But time and again in Scripture, we learn—often in Jesus's own words—that these miracles only work because the person receiving it *believes*. Today's story from Acts is just one of many in that regard. Sure, we're hearing in this reading about Peter and the other disciples curing the sick and tormented, but in the midst of all of that magic, we get this line: "so that they even carried out the sick into the streets, and laid them on cots and mats, in order that Peter's shadow might fall on some of them as he came by."

Make no mistake: those kinds of miracles aren't happening because of Peter. They're happening because these sick folks *believe* that the grace of God is so available that all they have to do is touch Peter's shadow. Sure, they think that power is coming from him, but he's just a pipeline. They are made well because they have faith. They are made well because they *believe*. And this is all just in keeping with the many instances of healing miracles in the Gospels where Jesus says, "Your faith has made you well." That power isn't one-way; it's two-way. It's cooperative. He was able to help them because *they believed it was possible*.

It won't come as a surprise that I don't generally cleave to the more supernatural implications of stories like these, even if I don't discount the possibility of faith healing. I've heard enough stories and seen enough things to remind me that there is more on heaven and earth than is dreamt of in my theology. Moreover, I do believe that the human brain has great power to effect change in the body in ways we don't fully understand, and I honor the many ways humans have tried to harness that power, whether through belief, ritual, medicine, and who knows what else. Nonetheless, I want to be careful and clear: it's patently obvious that prayers aren't always answered in the way we hope, and if they are, that way lies crisis: for why would one person's prayer for healing work while another one doesn't? The implications of such things are awkward at best and nightmarish at worst.

When I read these stories about belief, I'm not expecting magic, but I do put my faith in the appearance of miracles. Because isn't it a miracle when a teenager who thinks they can't write shows us that the opposite is true? Isn't it a miracle when a schoolchild who thinks they aren't smart studies hard and excels? Isn't it a miracle when people come together in solidarity and unified effort and successfully change those things that they think were unchangeable? I'm not speaking in metaphor here; I do think such things are miraculous. As a person of faith, I believe that these things happen because we believe they can happen. Because we believe these things are possible. Because sometimes all it takes is for one person to have faith in a doubter for that doubt to turn into joy.

As a person of faith who bears the label Christian, I believe that Jesus was able to achieve miracles because he believed in the people he loved. I believe that when they met Jesus, this "decisive experience of the divine" that they had was, at least in part, because they realized just how much Jesus believed in them. His love, his care, his confidence, his faith, his *belief* inspired them to believe in themselves. It made them start to believe that they could do it, that they were worthy, that possibility was in their grasp. Barack Obama was far from the first to say, "Yes we can!" Jesus did it long before.

To that end, know this: I believe in you. I believe in each and every one of you, and so does God. Jesus believes in you. The Spirit believes in you. The Holy One believes that you are good, that you are strong, that you are resilient, that you are imaginative, that you are brave. Jesus believes in us all. Jesus believes that there is little we cannot accomplish when we work together for the good of the world. Jesus believes that we can end hunger. We can end homelessness. We can provide quality healthcare for everyone. We can cure cancer and Alzheimer's and Parkinson's and heart disease and so many other illnesses that plague us. We can create a system of justice that reduces crime while still caring deeply for those who are incarcerated. We can welcome immigrants and give them a home where they can live out their dreams in safety and love. We can build a world rooted in truth-telling and neighbor-care. Once we begin to believe that we have that power, we can make it so.

Imminently, you are all going to be invited to make an additional contribution to the church. We talked about this at our Annual Budget Meeting. The short of it is that we drew down our rainy-day fund in order to meet several repairs and replacements. We want to replace those funds so that we have the capacity to meet similar needs in the future, one of which is already visible: a full parking lot replacement. Watch for more about that! In the midst of this all, there's some anxiety in the church about these expenses. That conspires with the traditional anxieties about the size of the church, pledging, budgets, and all of those other thorny realities. But I don't want you to be misinformed, siblings. I believe that we will meet these needs. I believe that we will continue to maintain and even grow not just our size, but our capacity to meet our fiscal needs. I believe—in part because it happens all the time—that we will continue to greet all kinds of visitors, and that some of those visitors will stick around for the long term. Some of those will invite their friends, and those friends will stay. I believe that God has a vision for us here, and that when we work together to execute that vision, we will spread so much Good News in the north metro that our anxiety will never be as loud as our belief.

I believe. Do you?

Amen.

◆ **First Congregational Church UCC, Anoka, MN** ◆

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Moderator – Terja Larsen

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First Congregational Church, UCC of Anoka is an Open and Affirming Christian Community for all. We affirm that the image of God is most fully reflected in diversity. We invite all people to share their energy and talents in full participation with our community. We welcome all individuals and families of any sexual orientation, gender, gender identity, gender expression, relationship status, race, national origin, socioeconomic status, age, mental and physical health or ability, or belief. Together, we celebrate these and all other facets of one's essential being.