

“Revelation is Not Sealed”

May 5, 2019

The First Parish in Lincoln

Rev. Jenny Rankin

Reading: Excerpts from Luke 24, “The Old Neighbors” by Katha Pollitt

“The weather has turned,” writes the poet Katha Pollitt

And the “old neighbors” as she calls them are outside in the sunlight

On the front stoop, in the garden, a mini-Sicily with its Virgin Mary birdbath and a thicket of roses in downtown Manhattan

And I think we know what she means, don’t we?

In the last week or so it has happened—

That mist of pale green spreading through the forest

The bright green of small leaves coming up through the red brown pine needles

The moss, luminous and lime green, on a wet black rock

And the green, the deep lush green of the fields

Rain drenching down

Making everything fresh and new again.

“Everybody needs beauty as well as bread,” John Muir writes.

“Places to play in and pray in,

Where nature may heal

And give strength to body and soul alike.”

The beauty of May breaks upon us again

And like the “old neighbors,” we make our way outside
Dig in the garden, bike on the roads—
Paint, plant, repair, clean
We work and play, using muscles we’d forgotten
Waking up from the trance of another New England winter and the protracted not-
quite-yet-will it ever be spring.

“I believe it, the poet says
That this is all there is
That all history has brought us here
To our only life.”¹

It is May again
Its blossoming burgeoning
Heart-stopping beauty
Breaking over us
And wherever Life finds us on this Sunday morning, we are here with one another,
Glad to be gathered into the shelter of this community
Once again.

Two weeks after Easter we read the story from Luke
One of many different accounts of the resurrected Jesus
In this one he is walking on the road to Emmaus with his friends

¹ Katha Pollitt, “The Old Neighbors.”

But they don't recognize him at first

Don't know who he is.

He is just a stranger who joins them for a while on the road

As they walk along

It is not until they are sitting around the table together

Literally breaking bread

That the scales fall from their eyes and they "see"

That it is Jesus. Their teacher and friend.

(Although later, they are able to admit they had a kind of funny feeling when they were walking with that stranger. They knew "something was up.")

Their hearts "burned within them," the text says, and that is how they knew.

I'm thinking about that "moment of recognition" they had

The disciples there on the road to Emmaus—

A flash of revelation if you will

We have them, too, don't we?

Moments of insight

Moments when our perception is altered

When it's as if the scales drop from our eyes

And we see things in a whole new way

Get a different perspective

A new angle of vision on things

Sometimes, this is big and life-altering

But a lot of the time it just happens in the middle of a regular old day

When for whatever reason we're able to stop ourselves for a minute

Just pull ourselves away from those thoughts that whirr and spin
And *really see* the green of the leaves by the path
Really *take in* the look of the rain falling down
Really stop and *hear* that bird for a minute
Really *absorb* the beauty of that white froth of a tree.

Poets and mystics and artists have called these moments of insights by many different names

Wordsworth in his poem “Tintern Abbey”

Recalls a walking trip that he’d made years ago in Wales.

And says that sometimes when he is in the city and feeling lonely or vacant or just down

He will flash back onto the green countryside, the tidy farms

And the memory of that time sort of brings him out of his own body for a minute

Makes him into what he calls “a living soul”

And for just a moment, he says,

With an “eye made quiet by the power

Of harmony, and the deep power of joy,

We see into the life of things.”

That was Wordsworth’s language for a moment of revelation.

You may have your own.

“Revelation is not sealed”

One of the great acclamations of our liberal faith tradition is that “revelation is not sealed”

We’re actually going to sing that line in our hymn at the end of worship today

It was written by Samuel Wadsworth Longfellow, the brother of the more famous poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow; Samuel wrote a lot of Unitarian hymns).

Revelation is not sealed. That is,

It is not fixed. It is not finished. It is not “over and done with.”

Revelation is ongoing. Evolving. Continuous.

It is always happening, again and again, ever fresh and new.

Our Puritan ancestors —common to both the UCC and UU traditions that we share—our Puritan ancestors believed something very different.

They thought that revelation WAS sealed. That it was to be found in one place—the Bible—the writers of the Bible had received revelations of truth from God and now it was over and done with, forever, amen.

God was done revealing truth.

(Now just to be clear, the Puritans weren't fundamentalist—they didn't think every word of the Bible was literally true. They thought about what they read in the Bible. They used their skills and reason and intelligence. They learned Hebrew and Greek to study Bible. Harvard was founded so that there would be a learned ministry that knew these ancient languages and could study and think and interpret the Bible carefully).

Out of this tradition of independent thinking and study Unitarianism was born in the first years of the 19th century

Unitarians who rejected the Puritan notion of predestination, the idea that people were born either saved or damned and there wasn't anything you could do to alter that.

No, the Unitarians said, actually human beings are born good but then they get to choose and they can choose a good path or an evil path

It doesn't always turn out well, we humans can make unwise choice but Unitarians believed that at least we had some power, some efficacy over our lives

However, these early Unitarians (and by the way that word was first used in 1819 by William Ellery Channing in his Baltimore sermon) they still believed that revelation was ONLY to be found in the Bible and it was done.

It wasn't till the second generation of Unitarians came along—the people

we now call the Transcendentalists—

That people started to say something different

Actually, they said, revelation--sources of truth--could be found in all sorts of places

In other world religions—in the sacred texts of Buddhism, Hinduism, Judaism—

You had Thoreau borrowing a copy of the Bhagavad Gita from his friend Emerson and reading it out at Walden Pond. "In the morning I bathe my Intellect in the stupendous and cosmogonical philosophy of the *Bhagavad Gita*...."²

Revelation could be found in art, poetry, nature, even in our own experience.

You had Emerson calling on each person not just to depend on old famous authors but to wake up and have their own relationship with God and the Universe, right here, right now!

As he wrote in his essay *Nature* in 1836:

Our age is retrospective. It writes biographies, histories, and Criticism.

*The foregoing generations beheld God and nature face to face;
We, through their eyes. Why should not we also enjoy an original
Relation to the universe?*

*Why should not we have a poetry and
Philosophy of insight and not of tradition, and a religion by revelation
To us, and not the history of theirs? ...*

*The sun shines to-day also. ...*³

“Why should we not also enjoy an original relation to the universe?”
Why not! And so they did.

So that central and to me heartening message of our liberal faith

² Henry David Thoreau, *Walden*.

³ Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Nature*.

That revelation is NOT sealed
But is ever and always new
Fresh
Being created, here and now, as we live and breathe
Open to all of us
Available to all of us

But as my friend Pam Barz, minister in Scituate, reminds us
Along with that immense pleasure and privilege of revelation comes responsibility
Because we have to be cultivating our awareness of it, looking for it, learning about
new sources of revelation. Reading books, studying, finding new spiritual practices.
And then, we have to be careful not to hoard all this good stuff to ourselves but share
it with others,
We are called to share the good news
The insights
The beauty
The flashes of recognition
The enlarged perceptions
The different angles of vision
We are called to share that with each other here

We will be doing a little bit of that this month when we gather in small groups
“Can we Talk”
To tell each other a bit about our own spiritual journeys
How we have gotten to this place
What feeds us?
What we need for the journey

Revelation is not sealed. That is part of the good news of our liberal faith tradition
Created by our spiritual ancestors
And handed on to us to enjoy today.

I want to close this morning by telling you about a moment of revelation I had this weekend.

Yesterday morning I walked with Chris and Sarah Andrysiak

And their extended family to the Lincoln cemetery for their son David's graveside service.

We gathered on Old Lexington Road around 7:15 am

And walked across Flint field in silence.

It was Chris and Sarah's idea

To walk across the field in silence

And so we did

One following after another, single file, in a long line.

It was so quiet

Misty gray with just a light sheen of rain.

Bird songs. Hush.

The grass almost impossibly green under foot

The field stretching out under a wide sky.

We walked in silence, one after another,

I could only see the person right in front of me but I was aware of the people up ahead.

And at some point

We reached a point in the field

And the line of people turned to the right,

And walked that way for a bit, and then turned again

Left and straight across to the cemetery.

And all of a sudden, instead of only being able to see the person right in front of me,
I could see each person in the line, one by one, stepping out across the grass

And I watched them go.

This great line of family

I don't know what it was about seeing that line of people

Walking, turning, walking—this great swath of people

In the silence

In the morning

Something about it almost heartstoppingly beautiful

That line of love

Stretched out across the great green field

Walking along, one person, then another

Showing up, putting their body there,

Showing up with their hearts full to breaking

Showing up with their love for this boy

And his parents

For this family

I will never forget it

Silence. Green, family. Loss. Love.

Silence and morning and a kind of ache in the heart

Behind me the mother and father walk together

Sarah and Chris, bringing up the rear.

That line of love stretching out across a great green field in Lincoln

Etched into my brain

Revelation

It comes in all different ways and in all different places

Flowing into our lives

Moments that break through

Pierce the shields we wear

Shatter the distractions which can swamp us

Revelation

Moments when our hearts burn within us

And it's as if the scales drop from our eyes

And we can see

Really see

See right into, as Wordsworth said, "into the *very life* of things."