

Flowers Are For Giving by Mary Montgomery

(This is the children's story that precedes the sermon.)

Narrator: We have a story today that might be true. It's certainly about REAL things which happen to REAL people, like you and me.

It's a kind of Easter story and is mostly about giving:
(invite children forward).

Our story begins with Mary, who was about 11 years old. Her grandmother lived down the street and Mary spent lots of time there. While her grandmother worked outside tending her rosebushes, Mary would play in the yard, turn cartwheels and swing in the porch swing. Her grandmother showed her how to rake leaves and make lemonade. Sometimes Grandmother baked chocolate chip cookies, which they ate right from the oven!

One beautiful summer day, Mary's grandmother called out:

Grandmother (Put shawl around her shoulders): Mary, come look at my roses and choose your favorite.

Narrator: Mary didn't even have to think about her answer.

Mary: "That one"

Narrator: she said, pointing to the bush with the red roses.

Grandmother: Get the spade. We're going to transplant that bush to your own yard. You can tell me where you want it to go.

Narrator: Together they dug up the bush and carried it down the block to Mary's house. Her grandmother kept talking about how to take care of rosebushes. Mary was a little puzzled by what was going on.

Grandmother: You know, Mary, roses are a bit like children: you have to take really good care of them. In fact, I'll write out instructions about what you should do in the spring.

Mary: But Grandma, you live so close. Why don't you just tell me about what to do for my new rosebush?

Grandmother: (Looks to the audience.)

Narrator: A faraway look came over Grandma's face and for a few moments, she didn't answer Mary. Then she smiled and spoke softly:

Grandmother: I hope in some way I will always be with you, Mary, (Steps back and removes shawl)

Narrator: Grandmother's answer gave Mary an uneasy feeling. That night she talked to her mother about it, and her mother said:

Mother: You know that Grandma has been seeing a doctor a lot, don't you Mary?

Mary: Sure, but she has been working in her flower garden all summer long. She doesn't look sick.

Mother: Your Grandmother has as sickness that has no cure. We don't know how long she has to live.

Narrator: That made Mary feel suddenly very scared! She said to her mother:

Mary: Grandma IS going to get well. The doctor's all wrong about no cure!

Mother: I wish that were true, Mary.

Narrator: Mary jumped on her bike and rode without knowing where she was going. Often when something was bothering her, she would go down the street to Grandma's house and they would make lemonade or hot chocolate and just talk. But this time, she rode right past Grandma's house without even looking at it. Grandma had lived in that same house for so long and raised the prettiest flowers – all those red and yellow and pink roses she took good care of, like children. Everyone who ever visited Grandma left with a bouquet of roses. Grandma had always said she raised flowers more for giving than for showing.

Mary kept telling herself:

Mary: Nothing much changes around this place. Grandma is going to be all right. Grandma's going to be all right.

Narrator: But as the weeks passed, it was clear that Grandma wasn't going to be all right. She got thin and pale. Many days she couldn't get out of bed and Mary's family took care of her. Finally, she became so sick that she needed someone to stay with her all the time. In the middle of the winter, Mary's grandma died.

At first, the hurt inside Mary was so big she thought she might burst. It seemed like the main thing she ever thought about was Grandma and the way things used to be. "Why do people have to die?" Mary wondered. "And why do things change?" She felt so sad that she stopped going pass Grandma's house.

But ever so slowly, even that began to change. Mary noticed that when she thought about Grandma, it wasn't just about the sadness of her dying. She began to remember things – like the

world's best chocolate chip cookies right from the oven. While that still made her sad, somehow it also gave her a happy feeling at the same time.

Later, Mary decided she could bear to walk past Grandma's house again.

But the house...! The first time she walked toward it, she saw something that made her run back home fast!

Mary: Hey, Mom! Some people are taking over Grandma's house – like it's theirs!

Mother: That's the Clinton family, and it IS their house, Mary. It will always seem like Grandma's house to us, but we sold her house to a new family.

Narrator: Mary kept thinking how the Clintons didn't belong in Grandma's house. What about all of the rosebushes - that Grandma took such good care of: Mary felt so glad that Grandma had given her the red rosebush. Now she wished Grandma had given her ALL her rosebushes.

Her red rosebush! Mary went out to check on it. Spring was coming, but there was nothing there but dead-looking branches poking out of the ground. Mary said out loud:

Mary: This thing will never have flowers!

Mother: Wait and see. Here are the instructions about watering and feeding the roses that Grandma wrote down for you.

Narrator: Each day Mary tended the rosebush and each day it looked dead. But one warm sunny afternoon, when Mary came home from school, there poking up from her rosebush she spotted a little sprout of green! Later came another sprout and another. As the bush grew and filled out with leaves, Mary followed Grandma's instructions very carefully. Finally, one summer day, the first rose bloomed.

Mary: (Brings a red rose forward) It's as perfect as any Grandma ever grew!

Narrator: She looked down the street where the Clintons lived. None of their rosebushes were blooming yet! They probably knew nothing about watering and feeding and loving rosebushes, she thought. Maybe all of their rosebushes will die.

Mary stared at her red rose – her gift from grandma and something inside her asked:

Mary: What would Grandma do if this was her rose?

Narrator: Right away she knew the answer.

Mary: Flowers are for giving, Grandma had always said. Giving away, sharing.

Narrator: It wasn't easy deciding what to do and then walking towards the house she knew so well. But that's what Mary did. And the closer she came, the more she began feeling that in some special way, Grandma was with her.

Mary rang the doorbell. The Clintons' doorbell and worried about what to say next.

Mary: What if they ask me about raising roses? Well, I guess I could just pass along Grandma's instructions. Yes, then I can tell them what Grandma used to say: "Roses are a bit like children, you know. You have to take really good care of them."

I Go A Fishing

Easter Sunday Sermon April 9, 2023

Rev. Dr. Judith E. Wright

It's Easter morning, and thus we turn to the Christian scriptures found in *The Gospel of John, 21: 1-14*.

Written in final form around 90 – 110 CE,

early Christians and Gnostics believed the author of *The Gospel of John* to be the disciple, John the Apostle.

Many modern scholars, however, challenge this,

stating that the author was unlikely to be a simple fisherman.

but someone who wrote impressive poetic verses

for a mixed Jewish/Gentile or Jewish audience outside of Palestine.

Today there is considerable debate over the context

-historical, social, religious - in which this Gospel was written.

Yet what does appear to hold up across the centuries

is that the author was writing within a community

that kept itself separate from its surrounding Jewish culture,

a culture from which the community had its original religious roots.

**These believers held an intense devotion to Jesus,
as God's revelation on earth,
and with whom they believed
they were in close contact through the Holy Spirit.**

Our scripture comes from the final chapter, chapter 21, in *The Gospel of John*.

In the preceding chapter there are four appearances of the risen Christ.

Two occur at the tomb of Jesus (20: 1-18) on Easter morning.

Mary Magdalene, coming to the tomb and finding it empty,

runs back to Simon Peter and the Beloved Disciple,

**both of whom hurry to the tomb, where the Beloved Disciple is the first
person, according to this gospel story, to have faith in Christ.**

In the second scene at the tomb Mary Magdalene later returns alone,

and after mistaking Jesus for a gardener, realizes her mistake,

and she, too, attains faith in the risen Jesus.

**These two resurrection stories reveal an intimacy, a closeness with Jesus,
that was typical of the author John's writings.**

The third resurrection scene occurring in Chapter 20

takes place in Jerusalem on Easter Sunday night.

The disciples are in hiding, with the doors locked, fearful of persecution.

John writes that Jesus suddenly appears to the eleven disciples,

breathes on them, thus filling them with the Holy Spirit,

and tells them to go forth and spread his teachings.

While present at this third scene,

the disciple Thomas later questions, after Jesus had left,

the reality of Jesus's appearance before them.

**Thus, the author John in chapter 20 has another resurrection story for us-
-that of doubting Thomas, which occurs a week later, again in Jerusalem.**

Here, through Jesus's words, Thomas comes to faith, ending his doubt.

The author of John then has Jesus bless

all future generations who believe in him,

without having to see him in the flesh

– a message of faith for all future believers in Christ.

With this background let us now turn

to this morning's scripture found in chapter 21: 1-14.

The Gospel of John concludes with chapter 20.

Chapter 21 is considered an epilogue.

The first scene, that is of another resurrection of Christ, occurs in verses 1-14.

The disciples are now at the Sea of Galilee.

Simon Peter says to them "I'm going fishing¹."

The other disciples join him, and they fish all night, without any luck.

At dawn they see a man on the beach, calling to them:

"Any fish, boys?" "No, they replied"

Then he said, "Throw out you net on the right-hand side of the boat

and you will get plenty of them!"²

So, they did, and the net was so full of fish, they couldn't draw it in, because of its weight.

¹ The Living Bible. *The Gospel of John, 21: 3.*

² The Gospel of John, 21: 5-6.

**Next it is the Beloved Disciple who recognizes the man on the shore as Jesus,
And eventually all of the disciples join the risen Christ on the shore,
to feast on fish and bread.**

**Traditionally within Christian circles this story is often interpreted.
to symbolize Jesus inviting the disciples to be missionaries for his faith.
The catch of so many fish caught may be symbolic of the author John's hope.
of bringing so many people into one community of Christ.
There is no doubt that this story was written to encourage
the early Christian church in the second century CE.**

**The Church at the time was very small and struggling to survive.
Times were very dark, and yet they held out hope of light coming into such
darkness.**

**They held onto the belief that the morning would come,
bringing them "*the assurance of a guiding presence,
the casting of the net on the right side,*"³
and with the dawn there would come a time of abundance,
where many future devotees would believe as the disciples did.**

**Moving away from the traditional symbolism of these verses,
let's consider some possible meanings for us today as religious seekers.
Any of us who have faced a deep personal loss
can connect to Simon Peter, and all the other disciples, for that matter.**

³ Carl Seaburg and Mark Harris. Celebrating Easter and Spring. A Sermon by Vivian T. Pomeroy. Anne Mininer Press. Cambridge, MA, 2000. P. 147.

Simon Peter was clearly at a great loss with the death of his Beloved Teacher, Jesus.

**The image of being out on a boat on a dark night,
-a tiny boat on a huge sea - is one that those of us who know such losses
can relate to, I suspect, immediately.**

**With the loss of a friendship or an understanding way of life,
or a beloved person or even pet,
we may find ourselves for a time unable to cope as we normally would.**

**In our Time for All Ages Story granddaughter Mary is not able at first
to face the loss of her beloved grandmother.**

**Only with the love of her mother and time does she eventually
accept this deep, most likely first loss of a beloved.**

I suspect this is true for most of us.

It's hard to imagine the world without our beloveds who have passed on.

We try to carry on our lives without the beloveds who are gone.

Like Simon Peter, we *go a fishing*,

trying to pick up our lives after such terrible losses,

trying to do what we did without what has been irretrievably lost.

It is, for most of us, not possible to do for a while.

This is true of the disciples who have no luck when they first return to fishing.

And this, I suspect, intensifies their sense of great loss.

**Like Simon Peter after a great loss, we go back to our ways of living
simply because there is nothing else to do.**

**We continue with what we have always done.
Life goes on. It doesn't stop,
yet our grief may color life to be like we are on a tiny ship in a darkened sea,
with little or no light ahead.
And yet what else is there to do?
We go a fishing. Because those are the habits we know.
It is a terribly hard time, but we need best face,
that loss so that we can accept it as real.
We have to face our own Golgothas, our own Good Fridays.**

**I have had the privilege to sit with people who have lost loved ones tragically.
It may take a long time for someone to find a way back out of such sadness.
In addition, we may have experienced the loss of a great effort we have made
only to see this cause lost against hard resistance and ignorance.**

**Working for sane gun control measures is one such cause,
which, up to now, has not been affected
by the craziness of the daily toll of lives in our country through gun violence.
We have, through our Social Justice Committee, studied this issue,
and have reached out through our UUActionState Network,
as well as our UU General Assembly to voice our findings and concerns.**

**This past week we witnessed as a nation the expulsion
in the State House in Tennessee, Representative Justin Jones and
Representative Justin Pearson, both Black, by their colleagues.
Both men, frustrated by being silenced when they tried to voice their opinions,
in the House, spoke out without permission against gun violence.
And for this reason, they were expelled.**

It is clear that this issue of gun safety is interwoven with how well our democracy is functioning or not, as well as, in this particular case, with racism.

I have been particularly moved by the remarks of Rep. Justin Jones in response to his expulsion to his colleagues in the House.

I encourage you, if you haven't already, to listen to his speech.

When working for social justice issues, there is an interrelationship of one issue with others. Social justice work can be disheartening at times.

Returning to our daily lives, no matter what the loss, every day existence may be hard to endure.

These words from Rev. Vivian T. Pomeroy describe well

how those experiencing the immediate effects of great loss may feel”

“The morning light shines cheerfully through the windows of the house, the rain drips with no more hint of tears than before; the hills are silent; the sea-tides rise and fall. “

Life goes on, in spite of our being in the midst of great loss and grief.

Perhaps we think at this point that never again will life seem so worth doing – all the ordinary experiences of daily life have lost their luster.

And yet we often have little choice but to keep on moving forward, in spite of the heaviness in our hearts.

We have bills to pay. Children to care for. Jobs to do. People to meet.

We, like Simon Peter, may feel compelled or then choose *to go a fishing*.

What makes a difference for Simon Peter and the disciples is, of course, their spiritual connection with Jesus, who is waiting for them on the shore.

The encounter with Jesus turns their heavy hearts into hope again.

The disciples had an intimate relationship with Jesus, their teacher, their Rabbi.

They came to believe he was still with them even after death.

Again, our children's story points one way for us to ponder this story of the disciples.

Mary discovers over time the presence of her grandmother after her death, through her grandmother's thoughtful gift to her of the rosebush, and Mary's loving memories of the numerous other ways her grandmother had shown Mary how she loved her.

Healing comes not only from how we are with one another before we pass on, but how those who are left behind remember us, and the gifts we gave to them.

Some of us may find healing in nature from such terrible losses.

I have been well comforted by these words and then by nature, itself, from Wendell Berry's poem *The Peace of Wild Things*,

*When despair for the world grows in me
and I wake in the night at the least sound
in fear of what my life and my children's lives might be,
I go and lie down where the wood drake
rests in his beauty on the water, and the great heron feeds.
I come into the peace of wild things*

*who do not tax their lives with forethought
of grief. I come into the presence of still water.
And I feel above me the day-blind stars
waiting with their light. For a time
I rest in the grace of the world, and am free.*

**We may find comfort and healing in nature,
which Wendell Berry contrasts well
with the griefs and anxieties of human existence.**

**Thus, human connection as well as
our profound possible connection with nature
can help us move out of our despair and grief and find new life ahead.**

**For me, as a UU mystic, as well as a UU Buddhist practitioner,
I also believe that healing can come from spiritual happenings,
such as what possibly the disciples experienced
on the shores of the Sea of Galilee.**

What to call such spiritual awakenings?

The disciples would likely say “Jesus and the Holy Spirit and God the Father.”

Buddhists might call these experiences of those who are fully enlightened.

The mystic Rumi would call this mystery nameless:

*When the soul lies down in that grass
the world is too full to talk about.*

Whatever we call this, it is for me a great mystery.

I don't know whether Jesus appeared to the disciples.

**I do know that they believed he did, and we now have centuries later
the Christian faith, believed by over one third of the world's population.**

Clearly as the author of John hoped,

the net was cast on the right side of the boat!

Whether we as UUs are Christian or not, whether we are theists or atheists,

**what matters the most on this Easter morning is that we learn from this story
of Easter how to let go
of whatever is holding us back from fully living our lives now –
no longer clinging to whatever is irretrievably lost:**

*pretending it is not lost
or refusing to live any other life
than what we had with
what can never be or
be lived with or in again⁴⁵*

**We best open to the new life that is waiting there before each of us,
waiting for us, to shed off the old husks of life as it was before,
and waiting for us to step into an unknown life before us.**

**By facing what was lost, we can go on,
with our memories of what has been,
and create then an untried life,
free and not clinging to change.**

*we can be true to the past
without being its prisoner
we can embrace the present
it is all possible
we can move into the future with hope
and even expectation.⁶ +*

⁴ Poem by Rudy Nemser

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid

Peace and love to you!

Happy Easter and Happy Spring to ALL!