

Unrecognizable**Sunday, April 4th, 2021 || Easter Sunday || Pastor Christy Wright**

Join us for our ecumenical Sunrise Easter Service outside at 6:15 AM on Sunday, April 4th at the First Congregational Church of West Brookfield. Masks and social distancing will be observed!

If you are unable to join us in-person, we invite you to light a candle Easter morning and join us in prayer ONLINE or over the PHONE. Audio worship, including music, prayers, and the sermon is available at

<https://georgewhitefieldumc.weebly.com/worship-services>

Audio worship is also available at (978) 990-5000, access code 719365#. Just dial in, enter the access code on your keypad, and you will hear the service begin with music.

Note that the bulletin information is enclosed; only the sermon is printed in this week's mailing.

Unrecognizable - Pastor Christy Wright

You know something that's weird? Something that's really been bugging me since the pandemic began? It's so strange to not recognize someone who is wearing a mask. Even loved ones whom we've known for years look so incredibly different wearing a mask. And for some of us, we've waited months to have a haircut, or some have even taken matters into their own hands and gone for the kitchen shears - so we're even more unrecognizable. Whether we bump into people in town or at the grocery store, it can often be a game of who's who - and in many ways, it can be disorienting. But it can still be a blessing to see one another again, regardless. And we anxiously await the day when we can be in one another's presence without masks, embracing one another again.

We have been through so much this past year that we are still grieving, even on Easter morning, even as the sun begins to rise on a new day. But this morning's Easter reading, from the very beginning, gives us permission to weep. It lets us mourn, even when we know we should be joyous. In this passage, Mary is asked several times, "Why are you weeping?"

Can you imagine such an insensitive question? For three days, Mary had been holding onto so much grief. She had lost her Savior, her friend. She didn't want to believe it to be true. And I wonder if this was Mary's first visit to the tomb; maybe she sought closure, thinking that if she were just able to see it in person, she'd finally be able to believe that Jesus was dead and move on with her life.

Imagine her shock and her sorrow when she saw that the tomb had been disturbed; she had been seeking peace, a way to grow from this new reality, and instead, she was prevented from receiving the closure she so desperately sought. But the story didn't end there; as Mary looked into the tomb, she saw two angels, who again asked her why she was crying. She believed that Jesus' body had been stolen, and all she wanted was to lay the body to rest, so that she, too, could rest within this new reality without him. And as she pleaded with the angels, she turned around to see a stranger in her midst, who she believed to be the gardener, and began pleading with him as well.

And then he whispered, "Mary."

In an act of recognition, Mary leapt up and gasped, "Teacher!" She knew that Jesus had risen, in the very moment he spoke her name. Jesus wiped away all her tears in his appearance, except for those tears of gratitude in knowing that she was not alone. But here's the thing: Jesus was unrecognizable to Mary in that moment. Mary only knew one thing: Jesus was dead. The faith story was over. This wasn't supposed to happen. So the appearance of a resurrection would have been completely unrecognizable to Mary, an impossibility, a mirage of sorts. She wasn't expecting this, not in the least.

So it makes me wonder - is there resurrection in our midst, something that is completely unrecognizable to us? Where is God moving and working within our own lives? And how would we know? For many of us, this past year has felt like we've been sealed in the tomb of Good Friday and Holy Saturday, unable to see Easter on the other side. But I wonder, I just have to wonder: Maybe this isn't a tomb.

Maybe this is a womb - dark, mysterious, and scary for sure, yet filled with life. Familiar, but unrecognizable. Where we are in this moment resembles something we know, in essence, but in appearance it's all different. We're learning to discern the visible and invisible in our lives, and we're beginning to understand the potential dwelling in reality, now, even if we're only getting glimpses here and there. And it makes me wonder: does God do the best work in the dark?

So let's explore together - where is the unexpected, the unrecognizable in our lives? Maybe it's a reconciled relationship. Or maybe it's closure from a job or a particular season in life that is a blessing in disguise. Maybe we've lost loved ones this year, and we've grown closer to those who remain. Regardless, know that you are not alone. Know that God is doing incredible, life-giving, and transformative work in the darkness. And may we seek to recognize the resurrection in our midst, giving glory to God in the small signs of life that are popping up all around us.

I'd like to close with a blessing from the poet John O'Donohue, entitled *For the Unknown Self*.

So much of what delights and troubles us happens on a surface we take for ground. Our mind thinks our life alone, our eyes consider air our nearest neighbor, yet it seems that a little below our heart there houses in us an unknown self who prefers the patterns of the dark and is not persuaded by the eye's affection or caught by the flash of thought.

It is a self that enjoys contemplative patience with all our unfolding expression, is never drawn to break into light though we entangle ourselves in unworthiness and misjudge what we do and who we are.

It presides within like an evening freedom that will often see us enchanted by twilight without ever recognizing the falling night, it resembles the under-earth of our visible life: All we do and say and think is fostered deep in its opaque and prevenient clay.

It dwells in a strange, yet rhythmic ease that is not ruffled by disappointment; it presides in a deeper current of time free from the force of cause and sequence that otherwise shapes our lives.

Were it to break forth into day, its dark light might quench our minds, for it knows how our primeval heart sisters every cell of our lives to all our known mind would avoid.

Thus it knows to dwell in us gently, offering us only discrete glimpses of how we construct our lives.

At times, it will lead us strangely, magnetized by some resonance that ambushes our vigilance.

It works most resolutely at night as the poet who draws our dreams, creating for us many secret doors, decorated with pictures of our hunger.

It has the dignity of the angelic that knows us to our roots, always awaiting our deeper befriending to make us beyond the thresholds of want, where all our diverse strainings can come to wholesome ease. Amen.

In Our Prayers. Thanksgiving for: the gifts that make ministry possible, medical professionals and researchers. Holding in our hearts: those experiencing unemployment, those facing racial injustice and violence and cannot breathe under the weight of oppression, especially for our Asian and Pacific Island community, for our world as we continue to combat gun violence, for our congregation as we grieve the loss of loved ones (particularly for the Armitage family and loved ones of Mandy; for the Frazier family in the loss of Barbara; and for John and the Toppin family and loved ones in the loss of Priscilla), those experiencing illness or health issues - especially those who are ill with Covid-19, and (for Al (and family as they care for him), Brad S., Dan D. (Vicki's husband), Kelly R., Lindsey S., Peter M.), those in nursing homes or extended care facilities (Betty, Claire), those caring for others (Carrie G., Crystal, Rachel), the United Methodist Church. *Note that this list will renew each month.*

Community Announcements

- **IN-PERSON OUTDOOR WORSHIP TO RESUME: Update from the Reopening Advisory Board.** The Board met last week, and we are excited to announce that in-person outdoor worship services will resume **weekly on Sunday, April 11th** at 9:30 AM on the Charmil Drive Green, weather permitting. Regardless of vaccination status, **masks and social distancing are required** in order to limit our risk factors. Remember to bring your lawn chair! Should weather become a concern, Pastor Christy will begin a phone chain by Saturday at 4 PM prior to the service. Indoor worship possibilities are still being explored. As always, if you have any questions, suggestions, or concerns about in-person worship, feel free to reach out to anyone on the Reopening Advisory Board: Jane Dolan, Tom McKeon, Diane Mundell, Melissa Quilitzsch, or Pastor Christy.
- **Heifer Project Total.** Thank you all so much for donating toward the Heifer Project! We have received a total of \$243.10, \$55 of which has already been donated, which leaves us with \$188.10 to decide on which animals we can support. Here are our options: (1) Goat \$120 (2) Pig \$120 (3) Sheep \$120 (4) Alpaca \$150 (5) Duck \$20 (6) Honeybees \$30 (7) Hope Basket of Rabbits & Chicks \$50 (8) Flock of Chicks \$20. Please let Pastor Christy know of your preferences by April 15th; otherwise, we will donate as a monetary donation. Thank you!

(508) 867-3667

(860) 908-7531

pastorchristygwumc@gmail.com

- **Upcoming Transition.** We invite you to be in prayer as the Staff Parish Relations Committee works with our District Superintendent Rev. Megan Stowe to discern our next pastor, to be appointed on July 1st, 2021.
- **Prayer Chain.** As a church, we are a wonderful community of prayer. When a need arises, we send it through the prayer chain so we can all meditate together. If you would like to be a part of this prayer chain, reach out to Jane Dolan, who will put you on the list.
- **Pastor Christy's Office Hours: APRIL.** Pastor Christy's office hours have shifted to **Mondays** and **Thursdays** from 8 AM to 4 PM and **Fridays** from 8 AM to 12 noon. If you have an emergency outside of office hours, please call her cell phone, leave a message, and she will get back to you as soon as possible.
- **THANK YOU for your continued generous donations to the work of the church!** We are so grateful for your gifts, for they make an impact near and far. As a reminder, you can mail your offerings to PO Box 576, West Brookfield, MA 01585. Thank you!

Sonshine Phone Calls and Cards List

If you know of anyone who could be added to our Sonshine list, let Pastor Christy know.

Betty Hubbard
47 E Main St.
West Brookfield, MA 01585

Kelly Rice
98 Lake Shore Drive
West Brookfield, MA 01585

Claire Wirf
(508) 791-8131 (mornings)
838 Mill Street
Worcester, MA 01602

Daily Devotionals:

A Community Of Prayer from Around the Connection

The Upper Room Daily Devotionals official magazines are still being distributed.

If you would like a copy, please let Pastor Christy know.

Monday, April 5th through Saturday, April 10th || Written by Various Authors in the Conference
We invite you to light a candle at 9:30 AM daily, meditate on our given scripture, and join us in prayer

Monday, April 5th, 2021

Rich Hughen, Interim Conference Lay Leader
Read Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29

We praise your name and give you thanks for you are with us always in both the mountain tops and the valleys of our lives. This past year has been a difficult year for many of us. Those days of being physically distanced and isolated from family and friends have made us ever mindful of the many blessings that we too often have taken for granted. Help us to recognize that every moment, every hour, every day, is crafted by you. Life can be tough right now. We need you to open our hearts and fill us with your grace that we may see the opportunities to witness to your presence in them. May the gift of your presence in and around us be shared with all through our living and through our loving in all circumstances.

“Praise God, from Whom all blessings flow;
Praise God, all creatures here below;
Praise God above, ye heavenly host;
Creator, Son, and Holy Ghost.”
Amen!

Tuesday, April 6th, 2021

Beth DiCocco, New England Annual Conference Director of Communications
Read Luke 1:26-38

God of miracles, You called on a young woman to rise above her own expectations, to rise above the expectations of her society, to rise above doubt and fear. She said yes. Answering your call was the right thing to do. Answering your call is the right thing to do. We say yes. Amen.

Wednesday, April 7th, 2021

Poem from “readings from the book of exile” by Pádraig Ó Tuama
Read John 15:1-17

Remember that this has passed before and that there will be more days of plenty...eventually. Pay attention to your feelings; keep those feelings sharp. Try to hold yourself together and pull yourself apart. Keep your eyes on the prize that

you might never gain. Don't ignore whatever pain is blooming like a flower that you never planted. Occupy your hands with kindness. Remember you can see, even though this blindness is remarkable. Mark the places that you're feeling; mark the spaces where you're needing held; mark the evenings that are dark; and mark the afternoon of coping. Mark the morning that you waken finding mourning has been taken to a different part of heartland. Remember what has passed before. Pour your body like the sacramental wine; pour your blood with loving.

Thursday, April 8th, 2021

**Rev. Karen L. Munson DMin, Superintendent, Many Waters District
Read Jeremiah 31:31-33**

The days are coming, LORD, we can feel them in our bones. Days of longer light and lovely green. Days of renewed health and strength when we may worry less, hug more. What will you do in that day, LORD? What covenant will you make to mark your salvation yet again? We are both covenant breakers and broken people, we confess it, huddled in our homes, venturing cautiously out for necessities, counting our losses, mindful of the ice at our feet and receding in the oceans, daring to hope. Will we recognize ourselves when that day comes? Will we recognize you? Write yourself, LORD, into our hearts and into our days. May the new law be Christ-shaped. May it hold us safe no matter what the day brings. May we who emerge be measured by your justice, and by our fidelity to your new creation. May the cleansing of our hearts and the renewing of our days restore our covenant with you to care for your creation and every single being. Amen.

Friday, April 9th, 2021

**Rev. We Hyun Chang, Superintendent, Commonwealth East District
Read Psalm 51:10-12**

God, our breath and our heart, each moment we breathe, help us feel your breath filling our heart with all that is life-giving and pushing out from our heart all that is life-draining. Every time we feel our heart, awaken us to your law inscribed in our heart, the law of Love that never shackles but always liberates, never condemns but always restores. On this pilgrimage, help us follow Jesus into the depth of our own heart in which you made your home where all are your beloved and from which you would never leave. Let every beating of our heart echo your holy presence in each of us and our sacred calling to be fully and justly present to your presence and belovedness in all of us. God, our breath and our heart, every breath we take and every heartbeat we feel, let them be our quiet yet faithful praise for your willing and just Spirit in all. Let them be your delight as we live and grow joyfully in you one breath and one heartbeat at a time. Amen.

Saturday, April 10th, 2021

**Rev. Taesung Kang, Granite District Superintendent
Read John 12:20-33**

O God of mercy and grace, You are eager to forgive our iniquities and restore to us the joy of your salvation. Knowing this, we come before you this morning with humble and repentant hearts. With a hope to see you once more in our midst, we confess. We fail to keep our baptismal covenant with you. We fail to resist evil and let go of our old selves. We are in a hurry to judge others from our limited perspective. We see people through our worldview shaped by our own bias, privilege, and pride. We distance ourselves from the needy of the world while growing more concerned for ourselves. We act out of our fear, aggression, and selfish ambition. O, Lord, help us to acknowledge the ego that takes over our hearts. And forgive us for our transgressions. In this season, O God, change and sanctify our hearts with the transforming power of the Holy Spirit. Help us to repent and overcome our aggressiveness and fear, as we seek to look beyond our own agenda and serve you. Make us your humble servants. Grant us the courage to die to ourselves, and let us bear much fruit. Give us your eyes to see people with love, mercy, and compassion. Help us to be vessels to bring your healing today. Blessed are you, O Lord, may we shout out, "We see you, Jesus!" Restore to us the joy of being in union with you and with one another. May this prayer be acceptable to you. We pray in the name of the One who is the joy of our salvation. Amen.