

February Remarks from Our Pastors

In their reports to Council each month, Pastor Gregg and Pastor Rachel conclude with some personal remarks that summarize the most recent period of their leadership here at Grace.

Senior Pastor's Remarks:

From George Herbert's "Easter":

*Can there be any day but this,
Though many suns to shine endeavor?
We count three hundred, but we miss:
There is but one, and that one ever.*

Herbert may have cut a couple months from the calendar for the sake of the poem, but his point is not lost. There are many days in a year – each of them beautiful in their own way – but none so fine as Easter. For that matter, none so fine as that *first* Easter morning. So, each year we go back to the empty tomb to experience some part of what it meant for the followers of Jesus on the initial Easter and ponder what it means for us now. Easter has been a tremendous source of strength, hope, joy, and endurance for the church, even in the most difficult times. Easter still offers all this to us.

Now, what if I was to tell you we could get a little *more* out of it? What if I could give you just a little *more* Easter?

We are approaching Lent, and our time in this season will once again be shaped by a theme. This year we will be *Keeping Vigil: Training Our Hearts to Expect Resurrection*

Think back to those times in your life when you have kept vigil for something or someone. Often, we think of vigil as the sort of bedside accompaniment we offer to our loved ones when they are very ill or perhaps even dying. Sometimes we keep vigil like this in shifts, trading time with other members of the family, so our loved one is not alone in a vulnerable time. Others may have experienced vigil as a time of prayer, an extended period of intentional intercession, when a group of people devote themselves to a particular need or cause. In both cases, vigil is an act of sacrificial love on behalf of others. The Easter Vigil is similar in some ways. We hear some of the sacrificial love of God. We sacrifice a little of our time in prayer for ourselves, our church, our loved ones, and our world. But the Easter Vigil is bigger than that, too.

The Easter Vigil is the historical practice of the church tracing its own place within the long history of God's redemptive work. It begins in darkness, which is both a continuation of the darkness of Good Friday and the darkness originally present before God called forth light. A new fire begins outside the Sanctuary, a new Paschal Candle is blessed and dedicated to mark the presence of resurrection in the church, leading the gathering into the darkened space, lighted only by the individual candles each participant holds, bearing the new fire. An ancient chant is heard, announcing that something new has begun in the darkness of this night. Then, as candles are extinguished, slowly the congregation begins to see a dawn emerging.

Through the stories of God's faithfulness at creation (Gen. 1), the liberation from Egypt (Exo. 14), the free offer of salvation (Isa. 55), the new hope of a people restored (Ezek. 37), and the deliverance from the tyrannical powers of this world (Dan. 3), we are repeatedly reminded that we are not forgotten in God's sight. There is a sung response and prayer after each story. Then, with a few words from St. Paul, the light returns in full – dawn has come – and we hear the resurrection story. The tone shifts to a celebratory one. Historically, this is when new members were baptized and welcomed into the church. Communion is celebrated. Sometimes there is a party afterwards (don't get too excited; we still have Easter Sunday less than 12 hours away). In all this, God's people reclaim something foundational to what it means to be the Children of God. Namely, we reclaim our place in the grand story of God's love.

These themes – Creation, Liberation, Salvation, Imagination, and Deliverance – will be our emphases during the weeks of Lent. When we gather on Wednesdays, we will practice retelling the stories associated with each and discover around our tables the ways in which these old tales still bring forth awe and hope in our lives. We will practice telling the stories, too. After all, the origins of Easter Vigil bear a strong resemblance to any group huddled around a campfire, telling stories to one another. These stories are the ones that have sustained and inspired thousands of years of faith. Since they are also for *us*, we will take hold of them, and each week will better prepare us to take our place among generations of faithful followers, who have gathered in the darkness of the tomb expecting – against all odds – to find it empty. We will be training our hearts for resurrection. We will be preparing ourselves to keep the Vigil.

There is a stark contrast between the hope and joy of the Easter Vigil and the dark night into which its participants emerge after the worship and fellowship experiences. We just heard all this wonderful news, but we do not yet see the brightness of Easter. Still, what we shared together has changed what we see. Think of it as a fusion of the peace of Christmas Eve and the renewal of Easter Sunday. We hold the excitement of a people with a wonderful secret, and so, as we head to our homes, we are fully ready for the coming dawn, yet we will have *already* seen something of what has risen, forever changing reality itself.

Herbert's poem got it right. There is only one Easter, and the scope of its impact is unlimited. One day, one son, one rising, forever. It is fitting, then, that as we prepare ourselves for our unique dawn of the morning of April 20th, we also take a little time in the darkness of night to slip outside of our timeline. Those who make that journey will find, as countless have before, that there is indeed still shining some of the brightness of that first resurrection morning.

Peace in Christ,
Pr. Gregg

Pastor's Remarks:

This weekend is our Youth Winter Retreat, and it starts on Valentine's Day. As I was planning this trip, I decided to use the coincidence to our advantage, and many parts of the weekend will be Valentine's themed – we'll play Valentine Jeopardy and trivia, we'll eat Valentine's Day candy, I'll wear my very cute flamingo earrings with hearts in the middle (made by one of our Youth!). And while this theme brings a good bit of fun into the weekend, it's not just for fun. We will be spending a weekend working on love, which I think we could all use a bit more of right now – at least, I know I can.

We will be spending time together, building relationships, learning to love one another better as we know each other more. We'll be spending time outside, finding the good in what we expect will be dreary weather, looking for what we can love in the midst of what we might wish was different. We'll have 4 adult leaders on this trip, showing our Youth that they are loved through their time and energy given freely for this weekend away.

We'll be sharing our love with the Asheville area, spending time and money in places that have had a hard time after Hurricane Helene.

On retreats that have a Sunday, we have a worship service, much like what's happening at Grace, without the music.

And when we get to the offering portion, rather than financial gifts, we offer what God has given to us in our time together – our God Moments. You may already know what God Moments are, but when we have someone new to our group, especially someone who may not have grown up in church or with God language in their lives, I describe a God Moment as a time when you felt love. And so, on Sunday, we will offer up the love we have experienced in our weekend, reflecting together on how God's love shows up all around us, filling us and sending us to spread the love around.

I am looking forward to hearing what love our Youth find this weekend; the world can rush by so quickly, especially for our kids, and pausing to remember that they are loved, by God and by Grace, matters. I invite you to take some time, too, to pause and remember that you are loved, by God and by Grace. And if you have a moment where you've felt God's love recently, I'd love to hear about it.

Peace in Christ,
Pr. Rachel