

April 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.

Pastor Gregg's Remarks:

Recently I happened upon a website full of travel blog writers who explore rare and interesting places. One author wrote about a phenomenon most of us have *heard* of, but I suspect few of us know very well: mirages. [In her article](#), Sabrina Imbler describes how there are a variety of mirages, caused by predictable scientific factors. To drastically summarize all that science about perception, mirages are basically an optical illusion: light rays are bent in such a way that fixed objects in the distance appear to be displaced. The most popular example is when the dehydrated traveler sees a mountain in the distance, and beholds beneath it an apparent oasis of water. After running to the 'water' the traveler finds only more sand, and a lot less hope for survival. If the weary traveler had only known about mirages, perhaps his situation would be a bit less dire. But then, on the other hand, the only way to know for sure is to move *towards* the mirage - *cautiously*.

Today roughly one-third of SC residents have received a Covid vaccine. The same is true for the US population, too. Of course, worldwide numbers are not as encouraging (11%, and vaccines are not equally effective across the globe), but even so, people are making significant progress in this pandemic. Things are getting better!

Having finished a Lent that sought to connect us across all times and in all places, I hope we are more acutely aware that our whole lives are bound together in Christ. We are now in the celebratory time of Easter, rejoicing that Jesus brings new life to us all. In the resurrection we are released from captivity to sin. Remaining in this freedom, however, is our intrinsic baptismal connection to one another. What does this mean? Our problems are faced *together*, not individually. Our solutions seek what is good *for all*, not what is convenient for a few. Remembering this, we continue the holy work of finding our way back to a way of doing ministry together that is better-informed, and more appreciative of our blessings. The only thing that would stand in our way at this point is a self-soothing sprint to 'normalcy'.

The temptation to 'fling wide the door, unbar the gate' is palpable. There is a gravitational pull in our minds to return to the way things were before the pandemic. I would say we have been living through 13+ months of cognitive dissonance. So, knowing where we are, we can know how susceptible we are to mirages of one form or another. We are a thirsty people, Grace Family, and the conditions are right that we might lose our better judgment if we are not careful. But know this also: the leadership of Grace is not sitting idly in this time, waiting for someone or something else to tell us what to do. In our caution, we are planning, executing, listening, and evaluating. This process is not one that happens overnight.

In the coming month, we will be asking questions that give us insight as to what each one of us is looking/waiting for regarding a return to more in-person ministry. The results will be available for everyone to see, like last time. Council will continue to consider this specific feedback as one of the most important factors in its discernment. Combined with recommendations from health experts, church leaders, and our own diligent committees, we will continue moving forward in a deliberate manner.

As we move forward, understand that our pace will continue to be set by our commitment to move *together*, and in the ways the Holy Spirit is leading us.

Peace in Christ,
Pr. Gregg

Pastor Rachel's Remarks:

This past month I was privileged to take part in a pilot program with the SC Department of Heath. "Suicide Prevention in Ministry Settings" was a 4-week program of that utilized the at-home coursework of LivingWorks Faith and online small group discussion to cover prevention, intervention, and post-vention in order to promote life, intervene, and support after a loss. Suicide prevention and care is not a topic I'd had much education in before, and I am very grateful to have had this opportunity to learn a significant amount and to find many helpful resources for myself and our congregation. I'll be considering how best to connect what I've learned to Grace (whether that's further education for our leaders, small group discussion, or something else), as this training was a gift that I'd like to share. I hope, at the very least, to communicate that I am a safe person to come to if you're experiencing suicidal thoughts or concerns, and that I will work to connect you to the help you need.

This past month we also chose and announced our Outreach Partnership Grant recipients, and I'm very excited about this program! Our 3 partners – HOPE of Rock Hill, Pilgrims' Inn, and Community Cafe – are excellent organizations dedicated to caring about and providing for the needs of our neighbors. As we enter into deeper conversations with these partners, I'm looking forward to the events we'll have together and the opportunities to learn from them how to more fully engage with our neighbors. I was also glad that we were able to award surplus grants to three other organizations that applied to be partners – Safe Passage, Life House Women's Shelter, and Bethel Men's Shelter. These organizations are critical for our community and I'm thankful for Grace's generosity that allows us to support their work.

This month, of course, also included Holy Week and Easter. I am so grateful to everyone who worked hard to make the many in-person and online worship services meaningful. Celebrating Communion on the front porch of the church on Easter morning next to the flowered cross was such a joy. As we celebrate the Easter season, I hope the joy of resurrection and new life in Christ fills your life, as well.

Peace in Christ – Pr. Rachel