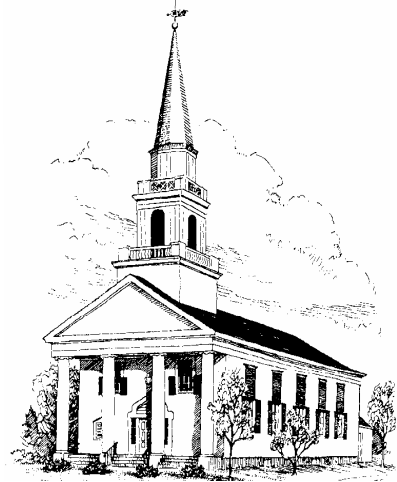


# Mystic Congregational Church, UCC

## Mystic, Connecticut

Sermon from March 30, 2008  
Rev. Barbara J. Libby  
**“Peace Be With You!”**

Scriptures:  
Psalm 16  
John 20:19-31



**O**n May 13, 1981, Pope John Paul II was shot. The next day, after a long night of emergency surgery, the pope forgave the gunman for pulling the trigger. No apology was necessary. The would-be assassin was forgiven before he even had time to apologize. The following week, the pope was asked: “Why did you forgive the man who tried to kill you? The pope replied, “I am not strong enough to carry yesterday into tomorrow.”

On October 2, 2006, a gunman walked into an Amish one-room schoolhouse in Nickel Mines, PA and shot 10 girls; 5 died. The Amish community extended an immediate response of forgiveness to the family of the gunman and also immediately extended their forgiveness to the gunman.

Donald Kraybill, a leading expert on the Amish, has since written a book about this memorable response. His book, entitled *Amish Grace*, talks in depth about how this “old order” community of Amish folks base their lives and try to live out the instructions that Jesus gave us—to forgive and to live by grace.

We know that Jesus talked a lot about forgiveness. We remember that he suggested that we forgive—not just seven times, but seventy-seven times. Why then does it surprise us so when Christians forgive?

Last Friday, Christ forgave his executioners from the very cross that would take his human life. Last Sunday morning, we heard Jesus give Mary Magdalene and the “other” Mary important directions when he met them in the garden. Christ said to the two Marys, “Go and tell *my brothers* to go to Galilee.” It was those words “my brothers” that opened up a future of “go and tell my brothers.” After all, his words indicated that Jesus had already forgiven them for their denials and betrayals.

In our reading from John’s gospel today, it is now later in the day on Easter evening. The risen Christ appears to the disciples in Galilee for the first time. And when he suddenly appears in the room he says to them, “Peace be with you.” Christ forgave those disciples even before they could say they were sorry.

One preacher summarizes it this way: “When Jesus appeared to his disciples, they were hiding upstairs in a locked room—the friends who knew him best, who had betrayed him, who had pretended they didn’t know him, who had run away when he was dying, who hid when he was arrested, who were frightened and ashamed. He appeared among them and greeted them. He didn’t say, ‘What happened?’ ‘Where were you?’ ‘You screwed up.’ He greeted them saying, ‘Peace.’ No matter who you are, no

matter what you've done or think you've done, whoever you have betrayed or let down, no matter how far you have gone from God, from Jesus, Jesus doesn't say to you, 'Where were you? You screwed up.' (*Laurel A. Dykstra, Peace Be With You*)

Instead, the uncanny thing is that Jesus' words "Peace be with you" sound a lot like "I forgive you." Jesus greets us saying, "Peace be with you!" We do not stand accused. We are invited to receive the power of the Holy Spirit. We are invited to forgive and forgive.

To make his point really clear, Jesus then inhales deeply, looks at his fair-weather friends, and exhales a spirit of forgiveness into them, into us. Christ breathes that peace into all of us in the same way that God filled the lungs of Adam and Eve.

We forgive because Christ forgives. We also forgive, friends, because it is good for us. It is good for the soul to forgive. It sets us free to really live.

Jesus says as much to the disciples on Easter night. In the *New Revised Standard* translation Jesus says, "If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven. If you retain the sins of any, they are retained."

Eugene Peterson's contemporary translation of these same words of Jesus provide a different way of seeing the gift of forgiveness and grace. Peterson translates Jesus' words as asking us a question, "If you forgive someone's sins, they're gone for good. If you don't forgive sins, what are you going to do with them?"

The implication here is that, if we don't forgive sins, we are going to continue carrying them on with us until they get heavier and heavier. Another way of saying this might be: If someone sins against you and you let it go, you are free from it. If someone sins against you and you hold onto it, it is yours to carry around.

Do you hear the incentive to forgive? It is difficult for us to imagine forgiving any persons who wound us terribly whether with a gun, violence, their words, or their actions. Yet forgiving is for both the good of the person who makes the mess and for our own good as well. Forgive that person like our future depends on it because it does. Let yesterday go. It is too heavy to carry around the weight of someone else's sin. It is too much for us to bear someone else's *should have*s, *could have*s, *would have*s. Let it go. Travel lightly into tomorrow.

We forgive because Christ forgives. We forgive because it allows us to step freely and more lightly into a new day.

We know all of this, don't we? We know why we should forgive. The hard part is how. How do we do all of that? How do we let go? How do we forgive?

I believe we forgive by God's grace. We forgive by a fierce determination to turn our eyes from a past we cannot change to a future where healing is possible. Amen.

*(Thanks and acknowledgement is here made to a sermon preached on this same text by the Rev. Andrew Nagy-Benson of Spring Glen Congregational Church on 4/3/05.)*