

*SERMON: “ DEAD OR ALIVE”*  
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To most Christians, Easter is yesterday! The busy-ness of life and the business of life consume them; a volcano in Iceland is now the driving story.

The bodies of President Lech Kaczynski and his wife, recently killed in a plane crash with 100 other Polish leaders, arrived in Krakow for burial this weekend but dozens of world leaders, including President Obama, were prevented from attending because of the continuing ash cloud over Europe.

Then the financial well-being that our country seeks to regain was rocked by the news that the Security and Exchange commission will sue Goldman Sachs for defrauding customers who bought investments tied to risky subprime mortgages.

Steve Fraser, a Wall Street historian and author of “Wall Street: America’s Dream Palace” describes the situation starkly. “This is way beyond recklessness. This is way beyond incompetence. This is cynical, selfish exploiting.”

Closer to home there are the ongoing realities that quietly occupy many of you, struggles with personal health, child-rearing, the fragility of cherished animals, moving a frail grandparent into an assisted living facility, grappling with the assaults of Alzheimer’s and mourning a loved one’s death.

*WHAT A TIME FOR THE UCC TO LAUNCH ITS NEW AD! “THE LANGUAGE OF GOD”*

Circulating on Face Book and other social media since Friday, the ad offers a fast-paced countercultural message about our Still-Speaking God – speaking a word of inclusion, justice and welcome.

The message is clear, the United Church of Christ is alive, not dead. The *Language of God* video is centered in hope and driven by love to create inclusion, justice, and welcome for all people.

If you haven’t seen it yet, I hope you’ll have a chance to watch it soon; watch it several times, in fact, as the images flash by quicker than quick. It’s lively and relevant and presents our church as very much alive. It will be on our website and Face Book page soon.

Easter may be yesterday to many Christians, but to those of us in the UCC Easter is a season. My hope is to keep that season fresh and vibrant in our worship and in our life together.

That’s why I’ve decided to preach a series of sermons that lift up the nature of ALIVENESS in the context of resurrection.

As Howard Thurman says so eloquently “Don’t ask what the world needs. Ask what makes you come alive, and go do it. Because what the world needs is people who have come alive.”

In the early church it was common to focus on the resurrection of the dead and preach that Jesus was the first-fruits of those who rose. As Paul says in Romans, “For since death came through a man, the resurrection of the dead comes also through a man. <sup>22</sup>For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be

made alive. <sup>23</sup>But each in his own turn: Christ, the first fruits; then, when he comes, those who belong to him.

This understanding of ALIVENESS is tied to the old paradigm that preaches salvation through the death of Jesus. Those who preach this paradigm are stuck in a world that allows only two options: heaven or hell.

Those who belong to Christ get a ticket to heaven, those who don't, don't.

That's not what I'm talking about today. Aliveness in a progressive paradigm acknowledges the suffering and death of Jesus, but not to the exclusion of his resurrection.

There is no getting around the fact that Easter is about resurrection because without the witness of resurrection there would be no Christian story beyond Good Friday.

Resurrection has to do with courage it's about the journey from the graves of our lives to the fullness of life; more than a course in the basics of life... Resurrection is an experience of the promise of life.

If you listen again to the experience of the disciples who accompanied Jesus on his walk to Emmaus you'll hear the power of attentiveness:

When Jesus was at table with them, and took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them, "their eyes were opened, and they recognized him;"

They said to each other, "Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?"

Later when Jesus appears to all the disciples he once again opened their minds to understand the scriptures.

To be alive is to be full of energy and vigor, with a zest for and interest in life. It is to live with eyes and mind open and a heart capable of burning in the light of love.

Jesus' resurrection is not for the sake of the dead, though it well may be. Jesus' resurrection is for the living. It compels us to ask ourselves if we are dead or alive in spirit and in life.

To understand this distinction, we need to understand the energy fields that shape our lives daily. James Hillman once said, "Each of us is lived by powers we pretend to understand."

When it comes to being "ALIVE," not just living, each of us needs to be aware of the powers that live us.

The language of God invites us to live by inclusion, justice and welcome.

To live there, though we need to pay attention to what really motivates us, is it fear, greed, selfishness, or anger? Or is it love, compassion and forgiveness?

Do you understand the force-fields of power that you live in daily; do you understand the powers at your disposal that are always seeking your consent? Are you shaped by your own dreams and desires or are others determining your life more than you are?

One of the best ways to learn the art of attentiveness is to be attentive to our bodies.

For one thing, our bodies don't lie. They tell us our truths even when we are not willing and able to hear them. They tell us when we are happy or sad, fearful or calm, excited by love or motivated by anger.

The difficulty comes when we have stopped paying attention to what our bodies are trying to tell us. We keep pushing the envelope but our bodies may be falling through the cracks.

I've had to learn that the hard way in the past several months and stop denying the stresses and strains in my life. Now that I'm paying more attention to what my body needs to be healthy, I experience more aliveness.

What kind of aliveness are you searching for?

Our bodies help us shift the energy of spirit and release the potential for life that all of us are capable of living.

You can start to still the storms in your own life today, by listening to your own body, by attending to its needs, by freeing up the life-energy that may be blocked by illness or fear and by letting yourself be moved by the simple gestures of life that add up over time to yield an abundance of riches.

Each of us is subject to the forces of habit; we have an experience we like and then we claim it as the norm. This habit is the way we do things because this way among all other ways makes us feel better.

Some habits become daily activities, some become fall-back positions when life throws us too many curves.

Whatever they surface, whenever we recognize habit as habit and not truth, we are closest to resurrection living.

What we forget, though, is that every habit has a "hinge," a starting place, an experience that caused us to attach this habit to our experience of life.

That's where human imagination comes into play. Human imagination thrives on openness of mind body and spirit. When our imaginations are freed from fear, anger and selfishness, we experience hope, we experience more possibilities than we had allowed ourselves to experience before, we say yes more often than we say no, and we allow our inner and outer worlds to expand.

Jesus lived this way because he centered his body, mind and spirit in God's YES, God's possibilities. Jesus' resurrection is God's way of calling us to this way of living as well.

Jesus understood his life as being connected with all of life. Listen again to Tagore's stream of life poem:

*“Stream Of Life” by Rabindranath Tagore*

*The same stream of life that runs through my veins night and day  
runs through the world and dances in rhythmic measures.*

*It is the same life that shoots in joy through the dust of the earth  
in numberless blades of grass and breaks into tumultuous waves of leaves and flowers.*

*It is the same life that is rocked in the ocean-cradle of birth  
and of death, in ebb and in flow.*

*I feel my limbs are made glorious by the touch of this world of life.*

*And my pride is from the life-throb of ages dancing in my blood this moment.*

When the angel spoke to Mary at the tomb, he said, Why do you seek the living among the dead? He is not here, he has risen.

All of us need to hear this question directed to ourselves with a different slant ... why do you the living seek to live in fear rather than love, in anger rather than forgiveness, in pain rather than in hope?

I hope as the Easter season unfolds, each of you, myself included, will pay attention to the hinges of habit that have become the powers that live within us.

Poet and writer Jane Hirschfield encourages us to seek more attentiveness in our lives because attentiveness is where resurrection seeps into our veins. She writes:

*Attentiveness is the only means by which we can know the nature and qualities of our moment-by-moment existence – the entrance gate through which a person can not just “be” his or her life, but know it, taste it, consider it, work with it as a potter works with clay.*

*Attentiveness is what opens us into a conscious human experience, different from that of a tree or stone. The great human joy is to lead a known life, and an interconnected life.*

*To know what we are, within the self and in relationship to the rest of being, is to be enlarged. Whatever is going on for us, if we can experience it fully, without reservation – that is not only information, but a kind of happiness.*

*Writing, for me, is immersion in this moment’s deep matter, whatever it is.*

It may be that the happiness of deepest grief does not, while it is going on, feel very good – but it’s part of leading a fully lived existence.

The ability to keep and develop attentiveness in the face of whatever is going on – turmoil or boredom, happiness or terror – seems to me the greatest part of becoming fully human. It is never easy, I often wish I could avoid it, but I can’t. And so, for me, the process of engaging experience with shaped and passionate language enables me to take on that task. In the end, I think, poetry doesn’t just come out of attentiveness, it creates it for me.

For Hirschfield poetry and writing are powers that live her. What are yours? What activity gives you the gift of immersion in this moment's deep matter? Is it writing, music, gardening, parenting, quilting, dancing?

Whatever that activity is I encourage you, I encourage myself to discover it once again and be faithful to it. Find the entrance gate through which you can not just 'be' your life, but know it, taste it, consider it, and work with it as a potter works with clay.

Until next week:

“Don't ask what the world needs. Ask what makes you come alive, and go do it. Because what the world needs are people who have come alive.” Amen.

