

THE TOWER

APRIL 2012

VOLUME 36, NUMBER 7



*Celebrating 125 Years in Service to the LORD
1887 - 2012*

Park Congregational Church

United Church of Christ

Worshiping in Davis Chapel

111 Park Avenue

Worcester, MA 01609

Telephone: 508-752-2468

E-mail: parkchurchucc@juno.com

Website: www.parkcongregationalchurch.org



www.facebook.com/ParkCongregationalChurch

The Rev. Dr. Gary R. Shahinian, Minister

Telephone: 508-756-5667

Cell: 508-451-8785

Fax: 508-753-7354

E-mail: shahinian.bogosian@juno.com

A NOTE FROM THE MINISTER

“Bonhoeffer’s Easter Joy and Ours”



When Dietrich Bonhoeffer spent his first Easter in a Nazi concentration camp, he said the following:

At last the tenth day has come round, and I’m allowed to write to you again; I’m so glad to let you know that even here I’m having a happy Easter. Good Friday and Easter free us to think about other things far beyond our own personal fate, about the ultimate meaning of all life, suffering, and events; and we lay hold of a great hope. (Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, 25, dated Easter Sunday, April 25, 1943)

Imagine Bonhoeffer in a concentration camp telling his friends on the outside that he was “celebrating a happy Easter” there. He wanted to live for Christ and to know the power of his resurrection, as the apostle Paul states (Philippians 3:10).

One of Bonhoeffer’s fellow prisoners was an English officer, Captain Payne Best, who narrated the last sermon that Bonhoeffer ever gave on Sunday, April 8, 1945. He writes,

Pastor Bonhoeffer held a little service and spoke to us in a manner which reached the hearts of all, finding just the right words to express the spirit of our imprisonment and the thoughts and resolutions which it had brought. He had hardly finished his last prayer when the door opened and two evil-looking men in civilian clothes came in and said: ‘Prisoner Bonhoeffer, get ready and come with us.’ Those words, ‘come with us’—for all prisoners they had come to mean one thing only—the scaffold. We bade him goodbye. He drew me aside. ‘This is the end,’ he said. ‘For me, the beginning of life.’ (Best, *The Venlo Incident*, 200)

Bonhoeffer was executed just 11 days before the extermination camp was liberated by American troops. The Nazis knew that they had already lost the war when they marched him to the gallows. They killed him out of sheer vindictiveness.

In last month’s message, I talked about Bonhoeffer’s paradoxical view that only a

suffering God can help us. Another aspect of his seemingly puzzling theology is that religiosity is rubbish. What counts is one's commitment to Christ, which is not the same thing as religion. Bonhoeffer wrote about "religionless Christianity." This idea today resonates with those who claim that they are "spiritual, but not religious."

Like the apostle Paul, Bonhoeffer came to believe that he could no longer boast in what he was, what he did, or what he had become. What counted was Christ! This allegiance to Christ is what motivated him to take part in the abortive attempt to assassinate Adolf Hitler, for which he was arrested on April 5, 1943, and spent the final two years of his life in various military prisons and concentration camps.

Bonhoeffer was an academic theologian of very high caliber. He earned his Ph.D. in Theology at the prestigious University of Berlin at the age of 21! His intention always, however, was to become a pastor, not a professor.

Raised in the liberal theological tradition prevalent in Germany at that time, he was not beyond seeing the flaws in liberal theology. He was influenced by the theology of Karl Barth and neo-orthodoxy (a school of theology critical of both liberal and conservative theology, seeking to incorporate what is best in both perspectives within its own theological approach that emphasizes various themes of the Protestant Reformation).

Because Bonhoeffer's death came at the young age of 39, it is difficult to assess his overall theology and what it may have looked like had he lived longer. Many of his important theological ideas are found in his *Letters and Papers from Prison*, and so, are fragmentary and ambiguous, written under severely inhumane circumstances. It is a testimony to his theology that today both evangelical and mainline/liberal Protestant theologians and laypersons applaud his writings, claiming that they have deepened their own spirituality.

Our Bible Study group this month will begin reading Bonhoeffer's *The Cost of Discipleship*, written in 1937. As the title suggests, he opposed all forms of superficial Christianity, what he termed "cheap grace," the deadly enemy of the Church. Bonhoeffer said, "Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate" in contrast to "costly grace," which is "the gospel which must be *sought* again and again, the gift which must be *asked* for, the door at which a man must *knock*. Such grace is *costly* because it calls us to follow . . . *Jesus Christ*. It is costly because it costs a man his life, and it is grace

because it gives a man the only true life” (Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, Touchstone edition, 45).

As mentioned above, Bonhoeffer did not like “religion,” writing in several places about “religionless Christianity.” Theologians today continue to debate as to what exactly he meant by the word *religionless*. Is it possible to formulate a non-religious interpretation of biblical terminology? Despite the fact that he disliked religiosity, Bonhoeffer nevertheless was a devout student of scripture. He loved the liturgy of his Lutheran Church and, particularly, the Psalms. He spent much time in prayer and had a sustaining sense of God’s presence.

As a prisoner for the last two years of his life, Bonhoeffer often thought about death. But when he spoke about death’s stark reality, he did it from the perspective of Christ’s resurrection. Beyond the struggles and suffering of this world is another world in eternity for which the Christian must yearn. But he insisted that this longing for eternal life should not be egocentric or selfish. One should not be concerned about only his or her own individual salvation. Though death is an enemy, it is also a supreme festival on the road to freedom.

Does this sound paradoxical? Not when we consider Christ’s attitude about his own death and his own victory over the grave. Death cannot be properly understood apart from the resurrection. Christ’s resurrection is our hope. We who believe in Christ and have committed our lives to him are already children of the resurrection. This is what Easter is all about! This is why we celebrate it! Easter provides the energy for each of us to persevere in our Christian faith. It is what made Bonhoeffer rejoice as he marched to the gallows. And it is why we too will rejoice on Easter Sunday morning!

Blessings in Christ,
Pastor Gary

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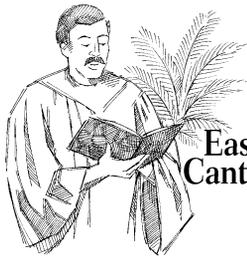
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Maundy Thursday

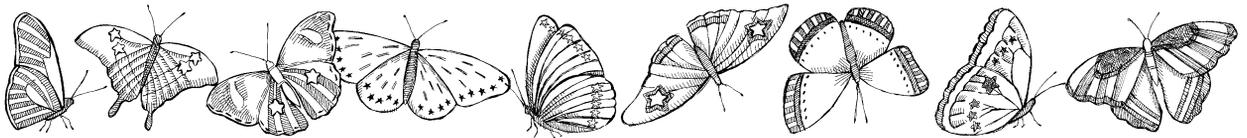
**MAUNDY THURSDAY SERVICE
ON APRIL 5 AT 7:00PM**

Join us for our Maundy Thursday Service which will include the participation of laypersons, the Youth Group, and the Sunday School children. Pastor Gary will deliver a brief message and Holy Communion will be served.



**Easter
Cantata**

**EASTER CANTATA TO BE FEATURED
DURING THE EASTER SUNDAY SERVICE**
Our Easter Sunday Service at 10:00am on April 8 will feature a Cantata by the Adult Choir and members of the Youth Group. Pastor Gary will deliver a brief message. Come and join us for the most important holy day on the Christian calendar. For those early risers, a Sunrise Service will take place at Institute Park at 7:00am followed by an Easter Breakfast.



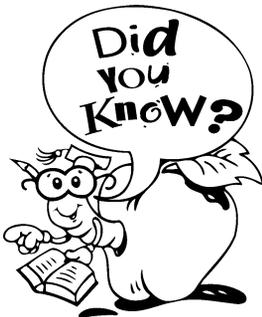
NOT MENTIONING ANY NAMES but somebody very nice hung our 125th Park Church Anniversary banner up in Davis Chapel as well as made sure that the drapes were freshened and adjusted to perfection . . . but then again, maybe we should mention the name . . . **JOHN BELANGER!** Thank you so much, John, for keeping an eye on our needs!

CONGRATULATIONS TO . . . Samantha Proulx whose picture and accomplishment was featured in the March 16 issue of the *Webster Times*. Miss Samantha, who has a wonderful interest and talent for writing, sent a letter to President Obama and received an acknowledgement from the White House! How wonderful that Miss Samantha is using her God-given talent of writing to reach such heights at such an early age! Nice job, Miss Samantha!



THANK YOU TO . . . Ron Devoe for his wonderful message to the congregation on Stewardship Sunday. Stressing not only the need but the financial responsibility of each member of our congregational family to our church, Ron's words were not only on the mark but inspiring! Thank you, Ron, for stepping up and standing up to the call to serve.

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MARK YOUR CALENDAR! VACATION BIBLE CAMP will take place on June 25, 26, 27, and 28. **OPERATION OVERBOARD** is the theme this year. First Baptist Church is the host church. As always, there is a strong need for

volunteers so PLEASE give your name to Miss Linda if you can help in ANY way! There's a place for everyone to help out and a **SPECIAL** place is being held just for YOU! Don't wait--volunteer now! This is our **8th** year sharing God's love together with the children from First Baptist Church and Wesley United Methodist Church!

DON'T FORGET OUR CONTINUING 125TH CHURCH ANNIVERSARY EVENTS:

CONCERT FEATURING DAVID ROSE, JENNIFER NODELMAN, ERIN COOPER, AND JOSHUA NAKAMA ON SUNDAY, APRIL 15, AT 1:15PM IN GORDON HALL

SCOTTISH TEA FEATURING MARY, QUEEN OF SCOTS, ON SATURDAY, APRIL 28, AT 2:00PM IN GORDON HALL, TICKETS AVAILABLE FROM EITHER CHRISTINE WILSON AT 508-885-9540 OR ANN LAVALLEE AT 508-892-5114

THE CHILDREN'S TOWER

April 2012



MARK 16:6

Dear Children,

Easter is almost here! In fact, pretend with me it is the night before Easter and we are getting ready for the big day tomorrow!

Okay, I need to find the alarm clock and set it for early, early, so as to be ready for the Sunrise Service at 7 AM. Where *is* that alarm clock? I know where it should be, but when I look there, I can't find it! Makes me MAD! Okay, I'll sleep with one eye open to be sure I am not late. Better get my Easter clothes ready. Oh, where is that special dress I bought a while ago, planning to wear it for the first time on Easter? I know where it should be, but when I look there, I can't find it! It's not there! WHERE IS IT?! Makes me MAD! Okay, on to the shoes that I know are in the closet. EEEK!!! No shoes?? They should be right where I put them! How could they not be there? Makes me MAD!!! I can't seem to find what I EXPECTED to find when I look there and it makes me mad!!!

Now, children, let's pretend that it is that first Easter morning over 2000 years ago and we are with the women who went to the tomb (cave) where they KNEW Jesus had been buried. They knew that He was there because Joseph of Arimathea had donated the cave in which to bury Jesus. Everyone knew that Jesus was in the tomb because Pilate ordered guards outside the tomb to secure it by sealing the stone. But, when we, along with Mary Magdalene and the other women get to the tomb, the cave is empty! Jesus is NOT THERE!!! Certainly, that makes us . . . **GLAD!!!!** Yes, **GLAD!!** Jesus is not where we thought He would be. He is not dead in the tomb! Jesus has risen from the dead for you and for me and that makes us **GLAD!**

Happy, happy Easter!

Your friend . . . Linda

BENNY



The afternoon of Sunday, March 18, was special for our Park Congregational Church Sunday School. Our NEADS sponsored dog, Benny, completed his training as an assistance dog and GRADUATED before a crowd of about 250 or more people at the Four Points Sheraton Hotel in Leominster, MA. Sitting in reserved seating were Miss Ceaira, Miss Arianna, Miss Laura, Miss Sarah, Miss Linda H., Miss Linda B., and Pastor Gary. Along with several other dogs, Benny was introduced to those in attendance and politely accepted the applause for his accomplishments! Benny will be a Ministry Dog answering God's call to serve along with Pastor Kelly who serves a Methodist church in New Hampshire. Benny will visit the sick and challenged in hospitals, schools, and nursing homes or wherever the need. Though far away in miles, Benny will still be with us in Sunday morning worship as a "Benny wanna be" aka a black lab stuffed animal with a NEADS neck kerchief will be quietly sitting in the Chapel! The Sunday School and Church Family NEADS sponsorship was and remains to be a wonderful demonstration of a mission project. As Benny carries out his "work," he will forever carry the mantle of his sponsor, Park Congregational Church!



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