

**Centre Congregational Church, U.C.C.
Sunday Morning Service, 10:00am
April 9, 2023
The Rev Dr Scott Couper
Resurrection (Easter) Sunday**

**“Toward the Tomb”
Christian Scripture: John 20:1-18**



Credit: Jyoti Sahi (Indian, 1944-), *Resurrection*, 2007. Oil on canvas, 178X122cm

Yesterday in Connecticut, I enjoyed a one-day holiday. One of things I wished to do during my holiday is have a nice long breakfast and sit and talk with my parents. My father, technically speaking, is a 'nuclear electrician'. He is such because he served on a nuclear Trident submarine and had 'electrical' responsibilities.

During breakfast, I had the most amazing conversation with him. We talked about magnets. That's right, magnets. As we talked, I played with two magnets he retrieved from the garage. I was silently awed by how I could feel that which I could not see. The magnets repelled one another and they cleaved to one another depending on the direction they faced. I asked my father, "What *exactly* am I experiencing?; what is *actually* happening here? I can see these two magnets pushing-up against one another, but I can't see anything between them. What is going-on?" Father lectured to me about atoms, talked about physics, and even quantum physics. Together, we Googled this and that, dug deeper and deeper, and tried to figure out what is happening between these two magnets. The end result was that the explanations we found used vocabulary that was insufficient to understand the original question about the magnets. Or, the explanations used the same terms that were originally inquired about. So, all answers led to a chasm of infinitely deeper questions or were circular. For example, I asked Google, "Of what is the magnet force made? What is surrounding the magnet and interacting with the other magnet?" The answer from one authoritative source was: "The magnetic force is made up of 'invisible lines of magnetic flux', also known as 'magnetic field lines', that emanates from the north and south poles of a magnet".¹ After an hour of conversation and many internet searches, my father

¹ Sage, AI bot (Artificial Intelligence Robot), Beta, Quora.com. Accessed April 8, 2023.

confided to me that no one really knows *exactly* what the magnetic force ‘is’. What we *do know* is how the force works. Let me repeat that. We technically do not know what magnetic force *is*, but we do experience and know what it does and how it works.²

In our reading from John, everyone in the narrative is attracted ‘toward the tomb’. The first verse reads: “Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene went *to the tomb*” (John 20:1). Mary then reported to the disciples that the tomb was empty. Verse three reads, “Peter and the other disciple [who I proposed last week was Lazarus – remember?] started for the tomb” (John 20:3). They both ran, but [Lazarus] got there first, before Peter. “Then Peter came along behind him and went *straight into the tomb*” (John 20:6). “Finally, [Lazarus] who had *reached the tomb first, also went inside*” (John 20:8). The story continues that then “Mary stood outside the tomb crying. As she wept, she bent over *to look into the tomb*” (John 20:11). Verse one through eleven is about everyone being attracted ‘toward the tomb’.

Friends, I propose to all of you that we are all attracted or drawn ‘toward the tomb’; there is a force that draws us ‘toward the tomb’. Before you characterize me as macabre on this most celebratory of Christian holidays,

² The sermon title and the topic of magnets is inspired by “Worship Ways”.

Cheryl Lindsey, “Sermon Seeds: Toward the Tomb”, *Worship Ways*, April 9, 2023, United Church of Christ. Found at: <https://www.ucc.org/sermon-seeds/sermon-seeds-toward-the-tomb/>, accessed April 10, 2023.

reconsider. Reconsider. Please understand that the tomb in our story is a place of victory. It is a place of triumph. It is a place of relief. It is a place of joyful reunion. The tomb is a place of great hope. Just like the cross, Jesus transformed that which was seemingly macabre, the tomb, into that which fosters hope. I proclaim to you that, like with the magnets, there is a force. There is a force that compels us. There is a force that draws us. There is a force that pulls us 'toward the tomb'. We don't know what it actually is - but we know how it works! We see its effects and we can accurately predict its result.

We are all drawn 'toward the tomb'. Sometimes, it is voluntarily. Sometimes it is against our will. But we are all drawn 'toward the tomb'. My dear friend, Daniel Sicken, yesterday shared with me an e-mail from Hakusho, the Zen Buddhist leader that leads worship at Centre Church. Hakusho confided that beautiful man I knew, Philip, unbeknownst to me and to many who knew and loved him, ended his life on February 14. Philip was diagnosed with colon cancer and believed that people should not, and I am quoting Philip's writing, "struggle and fight to live long after their quality of life has decreased".³ Philip felt drawn 'toward the tomb'. Yet, I believe God loves him and redeemed him, and thus reclaimed him at the tomb. It was a beautiful unification.

³ Hakusho Johan Ostlund, e-mail, April 3, 2023. Subject: "Heartbreaking News".

This week, a horrible tragedy occurred at Groundworks Collaborative's Morningside shelter. Leah Rosin-Pritchard was brutally murdered by a woman whom she cared for at the shelter. Like Jesus' tragic death, Leah's movement 'toward the tomb' was not sought nor desired. Yet, like it was for Jesus, the tomb is a place of peace, of solace, of restoration, of healing, of reunion, of perfection attained – despite the tragedies caused by the cross and the small axe.

Friends, we who are on a path 'toward the tomb', for every living being is, should not see the tomb as macabre. For Philip, who took his own life, death was welcomed. For Leah, whose life was taken from her, who went to the tomb most unwillingly, the tomb NONETHELESS is one of redemption, of joy, or reunion, and of perfection attained.

We are all compelled 'toward the tomb'. Yet, as people of faith, we live as if the tomb is *not* a place of death or oblivion. No, absolutely not! Because of the resurrection story, the tomb is a place of victory without belittling or ignoring the magnitude of the tragedies. As people of faith, we fully appreciate despair and the collapse of spirit. Yet, as people of faith, we fully appreciate *more* that death has no power, death has no sting, death has no efficacy over any of us! This is the Easter Story! For Jesus. For me. For You. For Philip. For Leah. For all of us. No exceptions. God's love is more powerful than any force across any distance and

across any time. Thanks be to God for Easter! The tomb is no longer a place of sorrow. Rather, as it was for Mary, it is a place of celebration in the midst of tragedy. So much so, that none of us need ever fear again moving 'toward the tomb'.

This was the word of God, and it was preached to the people of God, and the people of God responded, "Amen".