

Amazing Things
Luke 24:1-12
by the Rev. Dr. E. Scott Jones
First Central Congregational Church
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When our foremothers and forefathers a century ago, in the midst of the First World War, designed this worship space, they chose English Gothic Revival instead of the style more traditional for Congregationalists--New England Meeting House. English Gothic Revival, with these massive wooden beams rising to the sky and these brilliant stained glass windows behind the choir, both medieval and modern in their dancing colors. In 1947 our Aeolian-Skinner organ was installed with a premier concert by the greatest organist of his time, the Frenchman Marcel Dupre.

As we watched the Cathedral of Notre-Dame de Paris burn on Monday, it wasn't a stretch to see how our worship life was deeply connected to that glorious building. For it helped to pioneer our architectural language, our use of color and light, even our music. Western polyphonic music began in that building, inspiring what we sing here every week to the glory of God.

And so we watched the destruction not of some distant building, but a grandmother and sister of this space we all cherish.

And what a catastrophe it was. An 850 year old building, that took two hundred years to construct, almost destroyed in an hour and a half. Reports say that the building came within 15-30 minutes of utter destruction, that if hundreds of firefighters had not risked their lives to stop the flames spreading into the north tower, then the entire structure could have collapsed.

According to an article in *The Guardian*, "On French television, a historian of religion, Jean-François Colosimo, described the scene as 'images of the end of the world.' The fire, he said, seemed to communicate 'the extreme fragility of our situation.'"

The next day Katie Miller read for me a tweet she had seen, that this destruction was a harbinger of what we will experience throughout this century as ancient structures, including glaciers, forests, and islands, will be destroyed rapidly before our eyes.

John Pavlovitz blogged, "Watching the flames swallowing up such a universally beloved testament to the staggering creativity that humanity is capable of, we recognize how tethered to each other we are, how fragile and fleeting everything here is—and how starved for beauty we all are these days."

So many read deeper meanings into what we were watching.

One of the glories of our modern age is the shared, global experience, whether that be sharing in wonder like watching Neil Armstrong walk on the moon, or sharing in celebration like on New Year's Eve 1999, or sharing in terror as we did on September 11, 2001. Monday was another of those shared global experiences, with people all over the world watching together, remembering, and grieving.

The art critic Jonathan Jones wrote of the cathedral,

It is the human plenitude, the sense of hundreds of anonymous masons working in humble collectivism, and thousands of people across time sharing our awe for what they built, that gives Notre Dame its mystique. A great cathedral is a vast living organism. It's like being inside a whale, the vaulting a sublime rib cage above you. Unlike a symmetrical classical building a gothic cathedral is not an image of order but living disorder where flying buttresses sprout, mighty columns soar, lofty galleries conceal prayers and plotters.

"It is the human plenitude."

Pavlovitz wrote, "It isn't just wood and glass and concrete giving way today, it is a sustained wound to our shared humanity—one we would do well to remember." He then continued:

There is nothing we do or create or feel or breathe individually or collectively, that doesn't touch the rest of us. The best of our faith traditions, the greatest of our Constitutions, the most profound expressions of our creativity, and our most noble personal convictions tell us that we are inextricably bound together.

And it was lost on no one that this occurred on the Monday of Holy Week. The most sacred time of the year for Christians, the busiest week for any Christian worship space. I learned the news on Monday while sitting with Bob Vassell at Ellie Bucknam's funeral lunch. This congregation had just mourned a woman who radiated joy and delight and who contributed to this congregation for more than fifty years.

Over the last few weeks the griefs have been never ending. Ellie's was the third funeral for a church member in four days. Other church members had received awful medical news. Dear friends of mine experienced the suicide of a 13-year-old grandson. Another church member was lingering near death this weekend, and then this morning's news of the horrendous attacks in Sri Lanka.

Here we were, heading toward Maundy Thursday and Good Friday, and I always try to emphasize that these days not only celebrate an ancient event, but they are in tune with human emotion and psychology—that we all have Good Fridays in our lives. And it felt to me as if I was surrounded by Good Friday experiences this year, fearing that I might be overcome.

And the devastated cathedral was one more worldwide grief.

And yet.

And yet, Jesus proclaims all things new. Christ rises again, the firstborn of a new creation. When Peter sees the empty tomb, we are told "he went home, amazed at what had happened."

And yet, there are amazing things.

Tuesday was beautiful. Warm and sunny with clear skies. As I walked to and from lunch I saw trees leafing and flowers blooming. A clump of dandelions surprised and delighted me, a hopeful sign that winter had ended.

This morning for our sunrise service we gathered in a cemetery in the dark and lit a flame and sang about the light having risen again. The sun wasn't up yet. And that was the point. We are people who celebrate the new light, even when it's darkest. That is the essence of our Easter faith.

On that beautiful, warm Tuesday as I walked to lunch, I looked to see the latest news—the rose windows were spared, the great organ didn't burn, though it was damaged by smoke and water, the catastrophe was not as catastrophic as it could be. So, there will be a resurrection.

Jonathan Jones wrote

A cathedral can endure the loss of its stained glass and other fineries It's precisely this endurance that makes medieval architecture so special. Almost a thousand years after its original creation Notre Dame still speaks to us. Like cave paintings, it connects us with some primal aesthetic urge. Now our time faces a challenge. . . . If we can reawaken the creativity this building embodies it will be a great moment of artistic renewal . . .

Pavlovitz drew a broader lesson,

We all belong to one another. The more we remember that, the more beauty we will make together in this place. And the world needs beauty now more than ever.

Happy Easter to you!
Christ is risen! Alleluia!
Alleluia! Amen!