

Greenfield Hill Congregational Church

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Date: Easter Sunday, April 24, 2011

Sermon Title: Friendship: the Women
Friendship: the Men
Friendship: God

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ALIDA:

EASTER! What a joy! It's no wonder the world has turned Easter into a party! Some Christians get offended that Easter has been taken over by the Easter Bunny, the Easter Parade down Fifth Avenue, Easter egg hunts, Easter bonnets. But why not? Easter is absolutely the biggest, best, happiest day of the whole year!

I remember one Easter it SNOWED! The sky was dark. The air was chilly. The ground was icy. The wind was brutal. And when I got to church, the church was full. Everybody was smiling and happy. We had a great church service because it was EASTER! Easter makes everything better!

The other day I ate a Reese's Peanut Butter Easter Egg. Reese's Peanut Butter Cups are pretty good any day, and Reese's Pieces are good on anything, even on macaroni and cheese (trust me), and Reese's Peanut Butter Cups chopped up on a Dairy Queen Blizzard or on Cold Stone Creamery ice cream ... that's pretty good. But somehow, if you take a Reese's Peanut Butter Cup and shape it into an Easter egg, it's even better! Because Easter is better ... than anything. Easter is better than Christmas. Easter is better than spring break, Easter is better than your birthday.

Why? Because Easter is all about LIFE. We all have sadness in our lives. We all know about sickness and dying and losing our loved ones. We all know about tears and sorrow, about cemeteries and grief. Spring break doesn't help any of that. Christmas presents, birthday cakes, even Reese's Peanut Butter Cups don't help any of that.

Only Easter gives us a love that never ends, a life that starts over in a new way, a joy that is just as real as our tears, but stronger and lasts longer.

In the simplest language possible, on Easter Jesus stopped being dead. Jesus told us, Jesus showed us that death, something everybody worries about, death is weaker than God's love.

DAVID:

Today we have three brief messages for you. Two messages from Jesus's friends and one message from God. We took the idea from two Simons, actually. From Will Simon and Paul Simon. Will Simon is in our Confirmation class, and he was one of the preachers at our dawn Easter service. When he showed us his sermon two weeks ago, it was so good, we decided to steal the idea.

Will talked about Jesus's love for his friends and the friends' love for Jesus, and Will said that it was that friendship that made Jesus want to come back to life! I loved that! Jesus loved to use the language of friendship. Jesus even said, "I don't ... call you servants, I call you friends." (John 15:15) Since we stole Will Simon's idea, you're going to hear from Jesus's women friends and Jesus's men friends.

And guess what! Paul Simon has a new album out. And in one song, God sings. It's not a song *about* God or *to* God! It's God, singing! He said he had to use a lower voice, but if Paul Simon can put words in God's mouth, so can we (but we won't sing, we promise).

Well, let's hear first from the women, the real heroes of Easter!

ALIDA

Friendship: The Women

It's been amazing to be friends with Jesus. It wasn't easy. The guys, those all-male disciples, they didn't want us to be too close to Jesus. Who knows? Maybe they were jealous or insecure. I don't know. I'm not a psychologist. I just know everybody has tried to analyze and over-analyze our friendship with Jesus. Did you read *The DaVinci Code*? Or watch the History Channel? Or did you see "Jesus Christ, Superstar"? Remember, they had Mary Magdalene sing, "I don't know how to love him"? Oh, people love that, Jesus and Mary Magdalene. Wink-wink, snicker-snicker.

*Jesus and Mary,
sittin' in a tree,
k-i-s-s-i-n-g.*

"Tortured lovers," kept apart by destiny, theology, ecclesiology. Let me tell you, I'm not confused. I loved him. We loved him. All the women around him. We loved him. Because he first loved us. Just as the Bible says, read it for yourself, "While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us." (Romans 5:8) And John wrote, "We loved him because he first loved us." (1 John 4:19)

That's us. He loved us – before we were anything – me, Joanna, Victoria, Martha, the "other Mary," and all the "anonymous women." That's what the scholars call them, "anonymous women." But they weren't anonymous to us! The woman Jesus healed after she just touched the hem of his garment? The woman at the well with what, how many husbands? Four? Five? I forget how many – she forgot how many – but Jesus knew. And befriended her, too.

Nobody is anonymous to Jesus. Not even women! To Jesus, every single one of us is important. That's how we got to be part of Jesus's inner circle! And you'd better believe we were his inner circle. How do you think we ended up at the cross? How do you think we ended up at the tomb? How do you think we were the *first* to hear that Jesus was raised from the dead? The *first* to actually see Jesus? The *first* to actually believe? The *first* to tell others.

We got there in the inner circle at the cross, at the tomb, because Jesus "friended" us. Isn't that the popular phrase now? "Friended"? Jesus "friended" us. He showed interest. He stayed connected. He respected. He loved. And we loved him.

That's why we went to the tomb early Easter morning. Just to show our love. And Jesus rewarded us with the Greatest Story Ever Told!

DAVID

Friendship: The Men

If you look up "friend" in the dictionary, you won't see a picture of us next to it. The Men. We don't meet the definition of friend. What's worse, if you look up friendship in the Bible, we, the guys, the men, the all-male disciples, we fail. We don't measure up.

The Bible says, "A friend loves forever" (Proverbs 17:17); the Bible says, "A man with many acquaintances may come to ruin ... but there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother" (Proverbs 18:24); the Bible says, "If one falls down, a friend will help him up!" (Ecclesiastes 4:10)

Well, we did not help Jesus up. We did not stick closer than a brother, and our love did not seem to be forever. Fact is we were scared. Jesus had been talking about his arrest, betrayal, death; but frankly, we didn't take it all that seriously. He was so popular! The people loved him!

Just five days before he was killed, we had this gigantic parade through downtown Jerusalem; the streets were packed, people were cheering and waving palm branches. Jesus was treated like a conquering hero. People even compared him to King David.

But then, just a few days later, in the dead of night, soldiers came and arrested him, dragged him away, began to beat him, threaten him. Just like that ... it was over. And we were scared. No doubt about it, we figured they'd come for us next. So we ran away. Hid. You may have heard, Peter snuck around the city for a while, trying to find out where they'd taken Jesus, but when some folks recognized him, he denied even knowing Jesus ... three times!

John, bless his soul, at least John went to the crucifixion the next day. The rest of us lay low. We lacked courage. We lacked friendship. We lacked faith. Most of all, we were just a disappointment, and that's one of the worst feelings in the world.

You know that look your mother gave you when she caught you doing something you shouldn't? She didn't need to say a word or tell your dad. She just gave you that look that said, "I am so disappointed." Well, we men, we were a disappointment. To Jesus. To ourselves.

And what was Jesus's response? On Easter Sunday this extraordinary man, this Son of God, this Divine Royalty, this larger-than-life Messiah, this wonder-worker, miracle-maker, he could have gone anywhere, been with anyone, kings and potentates. He could have taken Jerusalem by storm. He could have shaken the Roman Empire to its roots. He could have put the world at his feet ...

Instead, Jesus came to us ... quietly, privately, even seeking us out one at a time, two at a time. Reconciling. Reassuring. Forgiving. No look of disappointment. No shaking his head. No wagging his finger. Just love, pure love.

You know what? I'm proud of the women. They were better friends to Jesus. They let love steer them through their fears. We let fear steer us through our love. We'll do better. But do me a favor. Do yourself a favor. As

Christianity grows, let the women have leadership, real leadership. They earned it. We're still working on it.

ALIDA: The Women

Wow! That was really nice ... what the men said at the end, about our having real leadership and being real friends. I didn't expect that! Thank you. Maybe we could lead together, how about that? Besides, Jesus gets the real credit. He's the key to our friendship. He lifted us up, he sought you out. He believed in us. He never gave up on you. The old hymn is right, no wonder everybody loves it: "What a friend we have in Jesus."

O.K., the women have spoken. The men have spoken. And now, God talks!

DAVID: God

All right! Now I get to talk. Through David. But that's generally how it works. Sometimes I do have to shout, but mostly I talk through people. That's how you got the Bible. People say I wrote the Bible. I didn't write the Bible. I don't write. I don't e-mail, text, Tweet, or blog. What I do is I whisper. I plant an idea. I give an impulse or intuition; people get a feeling, a sense. I inspire.

Walk through any museum. Go into any library. Get Netflix. Download from iTunes. You'll find some paintings, some books, some films, some songs ... and you'll know I had a hand in them. The good ones even admit it. But I'm not looking for credit, I'm just telling you how it is I inspire. I throw my spirit all over the place. Some people catch it. Some don't bother.

I hear Paul Simon has a new CD out, and I'm in it! I actually have words. I sing! He's got songs on it about angels, blessings, Christmas, prayer; he actually thanks me for listening to his prayer! Pretty cool. And he thanks me for love. I wish he'd stopped at that because when he puts words in my mouth, and has me sing, he makes me sound cranky, irritable, and I AM NOT CRANKY ... or irritable. I'm actually pretty happy! It's Easter. I won. Death and life went at it, mano a mano. And life won. Jesus and Satan went at it. And Jesus won. Love and hate went at it. And Love won.

And even Paul Simon knows that I am love. Just as the Bible says, "God IS love." That's me. Love. That's me. That's who I am. That's what I do. Who's your best baseball star nowadays? What's-his-name Pujols, Albert Pujols? Or Alex Rodriguez? You expect them to bunt with the bases loaded? No, they do

what they do best. What I do best is love. And on Easter, love won. That was my choice. I could have chosen anger, vengeance, getting even. I chose love.

I hear there's a bit of a hullabaloo down there in church circles. One of my pastors wrote a book called *Love Wins*, and some folks don't like that idea. They want me grumpy and angry and vengeful and *cranky*, especially at the end, they want the bad people to get it, badly. They don't believe God is stronger than anything, even badness. And I am love, which means love is stronger than anything, even badness. Which means ... love wins!

You want a hint how the world ends? Just a hint? Look at Easter. Look at how Easter ends. And ... how did Jesus end up?

Love wins! Take that to the bank.