

# Greenfield Hill Congregational Church

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Date: February 17, 2013  
Sermon Title: Ecce Homo: Behold the Man  
Scripture: John 19:1-5  
Pastor: Rev. David Johnson Rowe

## **John 19:1-5**

*Then Pilate took Jesus and had him flogged. And the soldiers wove a crown of thorns and put it on his head, and they dressed him in a purple robe. They kept coming up to him, saying, 'Hail, King of the Jews!' and striking him on the face. Pilate went out again and said to them, 'Look, I am bringing him out to you to let you know that I find no case against him.' So Jesus came out, wearing the crown of thorns and the purple robe. Pilate said to them, 'Here is the man!'*

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Well, Lent has begun. It sort of snuck up on us. Easter is early this year, which means Lent is early, which means Ash Wednesday is early. I remember waking up on January 2 and thinking, "Holy Cow. I need to get ready for Lent!"

We had just finished Christmas. This year's Christmas season was the most active, the most successful, and the most emotional I could ever imagine. Huge crowds, beautiful services, lovely events, and deep emotion as we shared together the awful sorrow at Newtown and the delightful joy of Christmas. And somehow it worked, as if the miracle of Christmas really is more powerful than the slaughter of the innocents. We lived the truth of Christmas.

Then all of a sudden, it's Lent. I like Lent. I like its purpose, its structure, its length. And I like Ash Wednesday. I like the ashes on our foreheads. I know it's not a big seller in this old New England Congregational church, and I had never done it until I came here. But I like it.

I was actually up at New Haven on Ash Wednesday. We had two church families with kids at Yale-New Haven Hospital, both in pediatric ICU, so I was in and around Yale for a few hours. And I kept running into folks with

ashes on their foreheads. Some Yale college kids, some Yale hospital workers, some downtown merchants. We would all nod at one another, no big show or anything, just recognition ... of what? Well, recognition that we took this guy Jesus seriously.

Ash Wednesday is ostensibly about death, "ashes to ashes, dust to dust," get it? We put ashes on the forehead as a blunt reminder of our mortality. We are all finite. Life ends. We will all one day be ash or dust again. But when we put the ashes on the forehead, we make a little cross. On a day about death, we put on the mark of Christ, and Christ is about life. So in reality, Ash Wednesday is more about *life* than death. But it's subtle.

You've probably already noticed that in your pew are copies of my book *Fieldstones of Faith*. It's been put there as sort of a handy Lenten devotional. My little book of poetry provides a ready journey through many of the key events in Jesus's life. In fact, you'll see at the top of today's bulletin I list 16 of the poems directly connected to Lent. From Ash Wednesday to Easter, from death to life, from all the things that happened to Jesus during Holy Week, from the good to the bad, all the way back to the good again. I urge you to use the book as your own spiritual guide to Lent. In fact, please turn now to page 41, my "Ash Wednesday" poem, a good place to begin.

### **Ash Wednesday**

(Genesis 3:19; Job 30:19; Ecclesiastes 3:20)

*Life's mad dash  
interrupted by ash  
a bold cross upon the head  
foreshadowing  
the road ahead  
life's path  
toward death's ash to ash  
dust to dust  
the penalty of sin, we're taught  
all our stuff  
all for naught  
    so we make a mark  
        a smudge  
        a nudge toward death  
a stark reminder  
of the great divider*

*between breathless and breath  
life's end and life again  
removing  
once and for all  
the stain of Cain.*

The stain of Cain. Everybody asks about that. It's an obscure reference from a story you know a little bit. In the book of Genesis Cain and Abel were two brothers. Abel was the quiet one — humble, unassuming. God liked him. Cain was more aggressive — pushy, demanding, arrogant. God didn't like his attitude. So Cain killed his brother Abel. Now God definitely didn't like his attitude, and so God banishes Cain into exile and puts a mark on his forehead, a signal to the world that God has branded Cain for his evil. Logically, that sets the stage for the rest of humanity. Human beings are branded as sinners, and the penalty for sin is death. Plain and simple. "Original Sin" and all that. You're bad and God is going to get you.

My little poem dares to imagine that our little Ash Wednesday smudge actually clears away the stain of Cain. That's the promise of Ash Wednesday. That's the purpose of Lent. That's the glory of Easter: life wins over death. And how we yearn to believe that! As pastors, we've had two deaths this week. In each instance, my contact person was a young woman, a daughter. One lost her dad way too soon; one lost her mom unexpectedly. Both women, beloved daughters, are heartbroken, grief stricken, sorrowful. These words say it all so starkly: heartbroken, grief stricken, sorrowful. Stricken by grief, their hearts are broken, and they are full of sorrow.

Each instance presents me with a challenge. The two women are too gentle and too sweet to put it as crassly as I'm about to, but in effect, they and members of every grieving family say to me, "What do you have to offer? What can you say? What can you do for my broken heart?"

I learned that early on in my career. In my book *Death Is Defeated*, I tell a heart-wrenching story of being called to a home by a very angry father. Here's how I tell the story:

*A few years ago I was called to the home of a very rough and tumble Italian businessman. When I rang the doorbell, the door was opened, and I was face to face with a very distraught, very angry, very grieving middle-aged man.*

*"Good afternoon, I'm Rev. Rowe."*

*Putting a heavy arm across my neck, he pulled me into the house. His dead daughter, about 25, was lying on the couch. He brought me to her.*

*Tightening his grip around my neck, the man blurted out, "There she is, that's my baby, what do you say, if I let you do my little girl's funeral, what will you say"?*

*I had never taken a course on "What to say to distraught fathers of 25-year-old dead girls lying on the couch." But I could tell the man what I honestly felt.*

*"I'm sorry, I really am. We'll just try to find some joy in her life and some challenge for the rest of yours." And I meant it.*

*The man softened, and he slumped into a chair near the couch. "Without looking up, but with violence still in his voice, he said, "That's O.K. The last three clergy I had in here all told me it was God's will. They said the same thing when my wife died. I couldn't take that no more. If you had told me it was God's will, I would have beaten you from one end of town to the other."*

What I have to offer is Jesus. Not much else. Oh, I suppose I could say, "That's too bad" or "I'm sorry." Or I could echo some churches and some pastors and some religions, and question the deceased's credentials for eternal life: was your loved one born-again? Did he go to church? Was she baptized properly? Did he go to the right church? It would be like a checklist to see if they got a proper burial and get into heaven.

But that's not Jesus. Lazarus wasn't baptized, and he got raised from the dead. The Samaritan woman at the well was married five times, and she got eternal life. The Roman Centurion was a pagan, and he got a miracle. St. Peter denied Jesus, and he ended up the head of the church. St. John infuriated Jesus. St. Thomas doubted Jesus. St. Paul killed Jesus's followers, and they all ended up saints. That's why I offer Jesus. Jesus does not turn away from us. Not in life, not in death.

We are at the beginning of Lent, but the scripture lesson you just heard comes at the end of Lent. Jesus has been betrayed, arrested; he's been passed around the High Priest, King Herod, Pontius Pilate; roughed up, mistreated, interrogated, threatened. Now it's been decided. Jesus is going to die. He's innocent. The top politician in the land says so, but the pro-capital punishment crowd wants him dead. And the politicians like to keep the crowd happy. So Jesus is going to die. At that point, Pontius Pilate hauls

Jesus before the madding crowd and says in Latin, "Ecce homo": "Behold the man." It's a question as much as a statement: Here he is. What do you *make* of him? What do *you* make of him? This is Jesus. You've seen him. You've heard him. You've watched him. You know what he said. You know what he did. You know what he stood for. So what do you think? How do you respond? What's your reaction? Turn to page 44 in the poetry book. You'll find my poem, "Ecce Homo."

## **Ecce Homo**

(John 19:5)

*Ecce Homo  
Behold the Man!  
you got that right  
the day the sun was turned to night  
this  
was a man  
divine and all  
too human  
not what was expected  
not requested  
not this "What a Friend We Have in Jesus"  
no, not that!  
not this "Jesus, Friend, So Kind and Gentle"  
no, not that.  
No "Jesus Lover..."  
I want "All Hail the Power..."  
I want "Onward, Christian Soldier."*

*Yet there he stands  
Ecce Homo  
behold the man  
beaten, betrayed  
consigned to the cross  
a choice, for God's sake  
a choice for Pete's sake  
for Christ's sake  
behold the man  
abandoned.  
Alone.*

At that moment that was the man: abandoned, alone. And I would add "waiting." Waiting on us. How will we respond to him?

I was reading an op-ed piece in the *New York Post* defending Pope Benedict for his courageous stances, including holding to the view that "there is no salvation outside of [his] church. His church. Not this church. Not any other church but his church. Everyone else goes to hell. That's not Jesus.

Or how about the poor Lutheran pastor up in Newtown? He agreed to apologize for taking part in the interfaith prayer service after the killings in Newtown. In his perverted religion is not allowed to pray with anybody else from any other church or any other religion under any circumstances. That's not Jesus.

On our honeymoon Alida took me to Sainte-Chapelle, surely one of the most beautiful churches in the world. But the more I read about it, the more agitated I got. I hated it. I hated the idea of it. Some French king got hold of some of the holiest relics in all of Christianity, bits and pieces from Jesus's crucifixion. Then he built this chapel to house them, and the chapel was just for him and his family. A private God for his private collection in his private chapel. That's not Jesus.

Three examples of people who "beheld the man," who looked at Jesus and turned him into some toy for their personal pleasure. "Ecce homo." "Behold the man." Stolen. Minimized Exploited. Fabricated. Caricatured. Imprisoned in someone's selfishness.

We don't have to do that. I invite you to use the seven weeks of Lent, these 40 days leading up to Easter, to breathe new life into Jesus. See his Good News. See his open arms and wide embrace. See him as a symbol of life, not death. See him face the cross with boldness, enter the tomb with confidence, emerge on Easter, triumphant.

That's the Jesus I bring to every funeral, every sick room, every crisis. That's the Jesus I bring to every wedding, every baptism, every celebration. That's the Jesus Alida and Carol take to India, that many of you take to Appalachia and to the soup kitchen in Bridgeport.

That's the Jesus of joy and miracle and love itself.