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In February of 2019, I sat down to eat Thai food and talk about deep questions with the Multifaith group at my undergrad. This group, made up of students from a variety of spiritual and religious traditions, met weekly to discuss a host of topics ranging from community to authenticity to silence to activism. Today, we were talking about “the middle”. We had talked before about beginnings and endings and talking about the middle only felt right. In fact, the middle was one of our classic discussion topics and one that came up at least once a year.

As an intro activity, we asked people to think of a process or a project or some other long-term aspect of their lives and put onto a shared line how far along they were in that endeavor. People could think of anything they wanted, from progress in their time at college to an essay to a relationship. We all put our names and our dots on the same line to mark our individual progress in whatever thing we had each chosen. On the front of your bulletin, you can see our little experiment.

What we saw, which was particularly curious, was that most people had put their dot towards the beginning or towards the end of the line. There was a gaping hole in the middle where no one had placed their name. It was the beginning of a new semester, which meant that we were quite literally halfway through the year. It was a group largely made up of sophomores and juniors, who were at least somewhat close to the middle of their college careers. People also came into the meeting knowing our discussion topic. And yet, despite a few factors that might encourage people to have the middle on their mind, no one wanted to claim anywhere near the center of that line. We had all either chosen an endeavor that was toward its beginning or end. Or perhaps, regardless of whatever thing we had chosen to think about, we had all chosen to frame it in our heads in terms of being towards the beginning or the end. None of us had wanted to claim the middle of that line.

If you look really closely at the image, you’ll see my name at the far left side of the line. I was so enthusiastic about the placement of my name that I even put it before the word “beginning”! I think when we were discussing our thinking behind where we placed our names, I said something cheesy like, “I placed mine at the very beginning because I was thinking about the beginning of the semester. And I like to think that every day is a new day.” In many ways, I still agree with this comment I made. In just over a week, I will have my twenty-first first day of school and I could not be more excited. I really, really love starting things. And of course, every day is a new day and beginnings are a beautiful gift from God and, as a dear friend is always saying, grace abounds. We are an Easter people, after all. We thrive in the business of renewal. There have been many sermons preached on the importance of beginnings and they said wonderful things about who God is calling us to be.

Other friends put their names towards the end of the line. And though I myself was and still am a beginnings person, I too appreciate the crispness of endings. Endings mark milestones. They can come with clarity. Sometimes endings are a little less tidy than beginnings. But they still at least often attempt a tidiness of sorts. Though, in my experience, sermons given from a UCC pulpit rarely mention anything about the end times or the afterlife, such a topic is commonplace in many Christian traditions. Even if we as a denomination may not be jumping up and down for a conversation about the apocalypse, who hasn’t wondered every now and then how it will all end? Or what happens when we die? And so too, endings, just like beginnings, are relevant to our faith and worthy of intentional discernment.

But this isn't a sermon about beginnings or endings. It's a sermon about the middle because, in today's scripture, that's where Jesus's concern seems to lie. He knows that there will be a time, soon perhaps, when the disbelief in his reappearance will fade and the disciples will be left with a mountain of things to do as followers of Christ. Jesus knows that the middle is soon coming and he is spending his limited time before ascension on giving them a bit of a pep talk for this potentially daunting part of their work.

But why talk about the resurrection story at the end of August? Didn't we have this conversation back in April? Aren't we good to go on the resurrection sermons for now? Well, right now, my friends, we are in the middle. We are in the middle of the church calendar. But more importantly, we are in the middle of the work that Jesus told his followers so long ago. As Jesus calls us to do in today's scripture, we are in the middle of making disciples, of baptizing people, of teaching each other how to love, how to do justice, how to be Christ-centered.

And if there was anything I learned from that Multifaith meeting a few years ago, it's that the middle is really, really hard for lots of people. So many of us shy away from embracing it. Maybe you're tough and you're all-in for the middle. Maybe the sparkliness of beginnings don't quite do it for you. Maybe you love rolling up your sleeves and seeing a big thing through. And if so, I am especially grateful to be in community with you. We clearly need all of the middle-enthusiasts that we can get. But if you're anything like a dozen undergrads and one chaplain, you might find the middle a little scary. The middle is full of questions, confusions, and hard work, often without much light at the end of the tunnel. The burst of energy from the start of the thing is gone and the burst of energy from nearing the last corner has not yet appeared.

The good thing, though, is that Jesus seems to recognize the challenging nature of the middle. He assures the disciples that he will be with them as they carry out this tall order ahead. "And remember," Jesus says, "I am with you always, to the end of the age."

It is precisely Jesus's focus on the work in front of his disciples and this loving reminder that he will be with us throughout that asks us to perhaps consider resurrection as a process, rather than a one-time event. Jesus rising may indeed be the exciting beginning of resurrection, but in no way is it the entirety. In fact, in this scripture, Jesus is annoyingly calm and unfazed about the whole risen-again deal. Just a few verses earlier, Jesus tells his disciples to meet him in Galilee. After a greeting, the first thing Jesus says to the disciples is to meet him in Galilee, where he gives them these instructions about the things they must do. He's to-the-point and doesn't even bother to acknowledge the circumstances. If the resurrection was really only limited to Jesus rising again, don't you think he would've made a bigger deal about it when he saw his followers?

Instead, he tells them where to meet him and gives them their mission. And of course, it's the same mission as it's always been. As a wise teacher does, Jesus is focusing on the most important things and repeating them. One of the lectionary readings for today is from Luke 14, where Jesus tells a parable about a banquet to his followers. "Go and sit in the least important place," Jesus tells them. "All who lift themselves up will be brought low, and those who make themselves low will be lifted up." And of course, in classic Jesus fashion, he makes sure to tell people to invite the outcasts, the poor, the disabled folks in the town to their meals. You've had plenty of meals for your friends and family and rich neighbors. It's time to make sure everyone and not just your favorites get fed.

So when Jesus talks with his disciples at the end of Matthew, he's reminding them of his teachings and asking them to think back through his ministry. Remember when I told you to sit in the least important place at the banquet? Have you been inviting the outcasts, the sick, the poor to your meals? Are you loving your enemies as much as you possibly can? Remember that stuff about the kingdom of heaven belonging to little children? And the whole thing about welcoming the town weirdos? Remember when I told you to be as generous as possible with your possessions? And how your loyalties are to the kingdom of God, not a kingdom of money and power?

But there's a lot of stuff for Jesus to remind his disciples of and he can't possibly tell every parable over again. Hopefully, some of it stuck the first time. So instead, at the end of Matthew 28, Jesus gives the major bullet points: welcome people into this community. Make sure they are loved and know my teachings.

And so, two thousand years later, here we are, still in the middle of carrying out these instructions. Like so many middles, this middle is hard. We do ourselves, our communities, and our God a disservice when we pretend that this middle is an easy one. We're working for a better world that can seem a little more cracked each day. Too many beloved souls have died from a pandemic that is still going. We're finishing up one of the hottest summers on record, surely pointing to a worsening climate crisis. Millions of people don't have access to healthcare or a living wage. I know of few people who have not had significant challenges of some sort in recent years. This is the middle where we are and it's a hard, hard middle.

It is in this hard, hard middle that I invite you to consider resurrection as a process, not a one-time event. What if resurrection was a movement that Jesus started? What if we could indeed be part of this process when we co-created a just and loving world? What if resurrection was our invitation to really believe that all our trudging through the middle has great meaning? What can we do with the gifts God gave us as individuals and as a collective? Where is God calling us in our shared obligation of making a better world?

And when we think of resurrection as a Jesus-inspired process rather than a one-time event, we're also embracing the good news that we are not in all of this messy stuff alone. This is a process that takes all of us. Jesus's instructions at the end of Matthew 28 were all about bringing new people into the community. Everyone has a place in our shared work for a better world. The process of resurrection is not about going off and doing your own thing, but about celebrating that we all are part of God's body alive in creation and that we all have just the perfect puzzle piece for God's work. And of course, Jesus ends by saying that he will be with us always, until the end of time. As long as there is work to be done, we will not be alone in that work.

And so my friends, it is a joy to be with you in this tiring, wonderful, strange, blessed middle. As we embrace our shared process of resurrection, I would like to end in prayer:

Blessed is the middle

Blessed are the small moments

The doubts, the questions, the uncertainties

Blessed is the grief, the heartache, the sorrow

Blessed is the middle
Blessed is the loose ends
The unfinished projects
The unmet deadlines

Blessed is the middle
Blessed are those who hope
Who work each day for love and justice
Who are living, breathing commitments to their communities

Blessed is the middle
Blessed are those for whom the middle has not been kind
Who miss the beginning or who long for the end
Who are left unsupported as they trudge along

Blessed is the middle
Blessed is this church community, as we work through our own projects
As we dream our future together
As we listen to where God is calling us in this process of resurrection
Amen