

Sermons at Union Congregational Church

Preached by The Reverend Gail L. Miller, Pastor

April 21, 2019

Easter Sunday

The White Lily

(adapted from the story told by Jane Tyson Clement, found in *Easter Stories, Plough*, 2015)

They say that all good stories are set in motion by one of two possible plot lines:

a man went on a journey or
a stranger came to town.

This story is the latter....

Once upon a time, near a village far away, there lived an old peasant named Ivan. He lived in a little hut, with a small garden, a dog named Rubles, and a six-year-old orphaned nephew, Peter.

Ivan was not a bad man, as he did not murder, did not steal, told no lies, and did not meddle in other people's business. But on the other hand he couldn't be called a good man either.

He was cross and dirty. He seldom spoke, and then only grudgingly and unpleasantly. He ignored his neighbors, never showed them kindness, and refused any friendliness they offered him. Eventually they paid no attention to him either and let him go his own way.

As for Rubles the dog, he was afraid of his master and never went near him. He would follow him at a distance to the village and back, and would bark at strangers. But he also drove off the foxes that tried to attack the chickens, so Ivan kept the dog and left scraps for him, but never petted or praised him.

Peter was a silent little boy, since he was always spoken to in anger. He had no friends, as the village children feared his uncle too much to come near him, and Peter was too shy to speak to anyone. So he ran wild in the woods and made up his own lonely games. He too was afraid of his uncle Ivan, who seemed to have nothing but anger in him.

The little cottage was brown and bleak, the two windows were grimy and stained, the wooden rafters sooty, and all the walls and corners full of cobwebs. On the floor were the scraps of many meals, and the mud dragged in from many rainy months. The hearth was black, the pots and kettles dingy, the big bed for Ivan and the trundle bed for Peter messy and unmade, the table littered, and the chairs half-broken.

It was all a sorry sight, and outdoors was no better: the doorsill was broken, weeds grew everywhere, the vegetables came up as best they could, and not a flower was to be seen. Rubles, the dog, was thin and dirty and full of burrs. Poor Peter wore rags, his hair grew long and was tangled with straw from his bed, and he was filthy.

As for Ivan, he looked quite terrifying. His clothes were as black with age and no washings as was his hair. He was such a fright that people never made eye contact with him, and passed him by as quickly as possible.

One bleak March day, Ivan had to go to the village to buy some beans. As he trudged along the road, heading home, in the distance he saw a man coming toward him. Ivan was ready as usual to pass him by without a glance, but when he got closer, out of the corner of his eye Ivan noticed he was a stranger, and in spite of himself Ivan looked full at him.

Then he could not look away. The stranger was young, tall and spare, in rough peasant dress, with a shepherd's staff. On one arm he carried a sheaf of white lilies, like the day lilies that grew wild in the

fields, only so fair and glowing that they dazzled the eye. Ivan stopped in his tracks, and with a smile the stranger stopped also.

While Ivan stared at the lilies, the stranger looked him over slowly, from his muddy boots to his dirty face. Then he spoke: "Good day, friend." There was only silence, with Ivan staring at the lilies, so the stranger spoke again, "What is it you see?"

And Ivan lifted his eyes to the man's face. The light there was like the lilies, and he looked down at them again. "Those flowers...I never saw any so beautiful."

"One of them is yours," said the stranger.

"Mine?" said Ivan.

The stranger took one of them and offered it to Ivan, who with astonishment and unbelief exclaimed, "What do you want for it? I am a poor man."

"I want nothing in return, only that you should keep the flower clean and pure."

Ivan wiped his dirty hands on his coat and reached for the lily. His fingers closed around the stem, and he stood in the road staring at it for a long while, not knowing what to do with the precious thing now that he had it.

When he looked up at last, the stranger had passed into the distance again. Carefully Ivan carried the lily home.

Once inside the door he just stood in the middle of the room, looking all around at the filth and disorder; not knowing where to put the white shining lily. Peter had been sitting by the dead fire, but when he saw his uncle, he stood up slowly, gazing in amazement. He found his voice and said to him, "Where did you find it?"

And in a soft voice Ivan answered, "A stranger gave it to me, for nothing, and told me only to keep it clean and pure...What am I to do with it?"

Eagerly Peter answered, "We must find something to hold it! On that high shelf you put an empty wine bottle last Easter. That would do."

"Then you must hold it while I get the bottle down. But your hands are too dirty! Go draw some water from the well and wash first!"

Peter rushed out, coming back with clean hands. Ivan carefully gave him the flower, but cried out when Peter put it to his face to smell it. "Wait! Your face is too dirty!" Ivan grabbed a rag and rushed outside to the well, where he filled a bucket of water and washed the rag first, and then came in and awkwardly scrubbed Peter's face.

When he was through, he stepped back, unbelieving, as the boy with care smelled the white flower. He thought he had never seen that boy before.

Then he remembered the bottle and clambered up to get it. But it was dirty, too, and clogged with cobwebs. So out to the well it went, and came in clean and shining, filled with clear water. He set the lily in it and placed it on the windowsill. Then they both looked at it. Its glow lit the dim and dingy room, and as they looked at it, Ivan saw all the filth around him. "This beautiful lily cannot live in such a place! We must clean it up."

It was hard work and took more than one day. Windows were washed, walls and floors swept and scrubbed, pots and kettles scoured, and chairs fixed. The table was washed, the beds made, and the hearth polished till the long-neglected tiles gleamed in the firelight and the pots and kettles winked back. The daylight flooded in the windows and the dark rafters shone in the shadows. All the while the lily glowed on the windowsill.

When they were done, they looked about them in wonder and pleasure that their little house could be so lovely. And then they saw each other! "We don't belong in a house like this!" said Ivan. "Next we scrub ourselves."

By now he and the boy were friends, having worked so well together. So they scrubbed themselves, and Ivan went to the village to buy decent clothes for them both. He noticed Rubles following him at a distance. And when he came home, he announced, "That dog is a sight, dirty and full of burrs. He doesn't belong to this house. He too must be cleaned."

But when he went to get him, the dog slunk away out of reach and afraid of him. Ivan put gentleness into his voice, but it took nearly a day to win the dog over, until with Peter's help he could brush him and wash him. After soft words and a good supper, Rubles no longer cowered and whined, but gazed at Ivan with a wondering love in his eyes, and wagged his tail, and licked Ivan's hand. And Ivan felt a strange glow in his heart.

Then he looked outside and saw the yard. "A house like this cannot live in a garden like that," said Ivan in a cheerful voice. "We must clean it up." So they went to work, while Rubles sat close by on his haunches.

And the neighbors passing by stopped to watch, perplexed and astounded and scarcely recognizing the two who were at work in the garden. "What are you staring at, good neighbors?" called Ivan. "Come in to see our lily." And they did, so pleased to be friendly at last with the old man and his little boy.

For seven days the lily glowed and gleamed on the windowsill, and all the life around it was transformed. Then on the seventh day it vanished. Ivan and Peter searched for it everywhere, but there was no trace of it to be found. But when Ivan looked at Peter's face he thought, "The lily glows there still."

And when they saw the clean pure house, and spoke with love to each other, and greeted their neighbors, and tended the growing things in the new garden, each thought to himself, "The lily still lives, though we see it no longer."

The lily still lives, though we see it no longer.

Christ lives ... do you perceive him, even though we don't see him? Because he is alive, and who knows where and when you will discover him!

Christ is risen - He is risen indeed!
Amen.