

April 7, 2024
The Second Sunday of Easter
Year B
John 20:19-31
Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Norwood, MA
Pastor Amanda L. Warner

A Sermon I Wouldn't Preach in Connecticut

I've been here at Emmanuel for a long enough time for most people here to know that I am a huge UConn Women's Basketball fan. I've been a fan since the 1995 championship season, when I came home from college for spring break and discovered that my parents and grandparents had changed, my friends had changed, my state had changed.

All of a sudden everyone I knew was obsessed with Women's college basketball and UConn's women's basketball team, that just might win it all. I decided that, since I couldn't beat my basketball obsessed family and friends, I might as well join them, so I became obsessed too.

And UConn fans are having quite the run, with almost 30 years of dominance in the sport. 11 national championships, 23 final four appearances, the longest winning streak, 111 games, in men's or women's division one basketball history.

We've had a bit of a championship drought for the past 8 years, that continues this year, but still, it's the privilege of being a UConn Women's Basketball fan to be able to enter every season with the reasonable expectation that the season will end with a national championship.

Britton tells me that being a UConn women's basketball fan has ruined me for sports because I still struggle with the concept that sometimes your team loses. Nevertheless, since he moved to New England, he's been a UConn Women's Basketball fan right along with me.

I feel like I need to present my UConn fan credentials, before I preach this sermon, because I'm going to say some things that might sound critical of a certain

player on UConn's team who is beloved and admired, and rightly so. In fact, this is a sermon that I wouldn't preach in Connecticut, because it's too soon after this year's super close Final Four loss. But I'm not in Connecticut, am I?

Of course, that means I also have to give you a little background, in case all of you haven't been following women's basketball this year.

UConn started this year out looking like it was going to be a juggernaut. There were three highly ranked freshmen coming in, and another red shirt promising, healthy and ready to start her UConn career freshman. After missing most of her sophomore season and all of her junior season because of knee injuries, Paige Bueckers, who won National Player of the Year honors her freshman year, was coming back. There were two other experienced and talented seniors by her side, as well as a fifth-year player, Aubrey Griffin, who has battled injuries her whole career at UConn, but who was finally healthy. Add to all of that, three juniors and two sophomores, many of them very talented players as well, and there were high hopes and high expectations for UConn at the beginning of the 2023-2024 season. 14 healthy and talented players. It was going to be a great season.

And then the injuries started happening.

I won't give you all the painful details, but by the time UConn started NCAA tournament, they had eight players available to play and of them, only seven were likely to see any court time and only the five starters were likely to see significant minutes.

In other words, it was highly likely that my team, that I've been following for almost 30 years and which had struggled this season, in games against nationally ranked teams, because of all of the injured players, was going to run out of gas, and probably early in the tournament. After a hopeful start, there were no championship hopes for the women's side of UConn basketball this year.

In fact, on Easter Monday, when I settled in to watch UConn in the elite 8 game that they had made it to, against 1 seed USC (University of Southern

California), I, unfaithful though it may sound, expected them to lose. I had prepared myself for them to lose. I thought that, against the toughest opponent that they had faced yet in the tournament, a team with a superstar freshman, they just wouldn't have the steam to make it to the Final Four.

And I was wrong.

While it wasn't easy, UConn won their Elite 8 game by 7 points and were on their way to the Final Four.

I hope you're enjoying this episode of Sports Center. We're 700 words into this sermon and I haven't mentioned God once. I haven't even mentioned why this sermon could get me in trouble if I preached it in Connecticut.

But if I haven't mentioned God, then someone else has that covered for me. And that someone is UConn's star, Paige Bueckers. Because she started her post-game on the court interview with these words:

There's so much gratitude. I'm a living testimony. I give all glory to God. He works in mysterious ways.

Last year I was praying to be back at this stage and he sent me trials and tribulations but it was to build my character, it was to test my faith to see if I was only a believer in the good times, but I just kept on believing and I did all I could so God could do all I can't, and there's just so much joy and pride for this team, I'm so proud, we aren't even supposed to be here and here we are. A Godly miracle. I'm just so proud, I can't even put it into words,

You can overcome anything with God on your side, with hard work on your side, and with a belief and a faith and just the perseverance, the resilience, it's all about how you overcome adversity in life and battle test it and sticking together as one and not let anything break us. (Paige Bueckers—post-game interview—Elite 8—April 1, 2024)

Let me just say, that I think that Paige Bueckers is a phenomenal basketball and that she seems to be an even better person, based on what she publicly presents to the world; her leadership of and camaraderie with her team, her treatment of her fans, her off the court kindness to opposing teams, her humility in spite of her extraordinary talents, and based on the things her coaches and teammates say about her as a player and a person.

I also have no doubt that she's a faithful Christian and I have no doubt that her faith helped her during the difficult and scary times when she went through serious injuries that kept her off the court for almost two full basketball seasons and disrupted her present life and potentially her future hopes and plans.

But I take issue with her theology on one point. And it's this. No matter how faithful she is, God didn't reward her faith by getting her and her team to the Elite 8 game And God didn't make them win it.

Because if God only blesses the believers, then we wouldn't be here today, hearing today's gospel reading. Hearing about Thomas.

On the Sunday after Easter (also known as the Second Sunday of Easter) the gospel reading is always the same. It's always the Sunday evening story of Jesus coming to his disciples, the ones who had not understood or not believed the news of his resurrection on Sunday morning, and offering them peace, breathing on them to give them the Holy Spirit, and giving them a ministry of forgiveness.

It's also, possibly more familiarly, the story of Thomas, who is sometimes called Thomas the Unbeliever.

Because Thomas was not with other the disciples when Jesus came among them and when the others told Thomas about it, he did not believe them. And he gave them, and unbeknownst to him, the resurrected Jesus, an ultimatum. "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe." (John 20:25)

Of course, there was nothing that the disciples could do to make him believe, so they all spent the week together, until the next Sunday, a week after Jesus' resurrection, when Jesus came and stood among them again and said, "Peace be with you." (John 20:26)

And then Jesus gave Thomas a shocking invitation, that Thomas could indeed put his finger in the marks of the nails on Jesus' hands and put his hand in Jesus' side, so that he could not doubt, but believe.

And Thomas, on seeing Jesus, on hearing his words, did not need to touch him to know that he was in the presence of his resurrected Lord. Instead, he said, "My Lord and my God." (John 20:28)

Thomas doubted. Thomas questioned. Thomas was out of step with the rejoicing disciples who had seen the Lord and who knew Jesus alive again. But in spite of Thomas's doubts, in spite of the way that he didn't quite fit in with the rest of the disciples, with their confidence and joy, Jesus was there for him.

Jesus didn't just come for the believers. He came for the unbeliever.

Of course, when Jesus came to Thomas, he became a believer, but one has to wonder if, in the weeks and months and years after those upper room experiences, Thomas or any of the other disciples doubted, questioned, wondered if what they remembered was really true:

Jesus in the upper room, Jesus' peace spoken to them, Jesus' breath upon them, Jesus' love, reaching out to them with nail pierced hands.

But even if they doubted, even if they had questions, Jesus was still with them.

Jesus was with them when their belief was strong, when they were rejoicing, when things were going well, when crowds were asking "What must we do to be saved?", when thousands were seeking to be baptized.

And Jesus was with them when they and their message was being rejected, when people turned away from them, when religious leaders confronted and threatened them, when Roman authorities imprisoned them.

Jesus was with them when their belief was strong and when it looked like they were winning, and Jesus was with them when they doubted and when they felt like they were losing it all.

And I hope that Paige Bueckers knows that. Because less than a week after that Easter Monday game, that she described as a miracle, UConn was beaten, by two points, in their Final Four game against Iowa.

And that loss doesn't mean that UConn didn't pray hard enough or believe hard enough. And it doesn't mean that Iowa was more faithful than UConn. It probably doesn't even mean that the refs were completely terrible, although many are making that argument.

In fact, I have confidence that Paige Bueckers does know that UConn's loss in the Final Four was not due to a failure of her faith and not due to God's favor being given to another team.

Listen to what Paige had to say in the post-game interview for the Final Four: Everybody can make a big deal of that one single play, but not one single play wins a basketball or loses a basketball game. I feel like there were a lot of mistakes that I made that could have prevented that play from being that big...we should have done a better job; I should have done a better job of making sure we didn't leave the game up to chance like that... (Paige Bueckers—Post-game Interview—Final Four—April 5, 2024)

Winning or losing the game was no longer about belief or unbelief. It was about playing hard enough, playing clean enough, and a little bit, about chance.

Here's what I know, God loves all of the players playing in March Madness; the ones on the teams that win, the ones on the teams that lose, the believers and the unbelievers alike.

As you know, today is our final celebration of Emmanuel's 125th year. We've spent time this year, celebrating the remarkable faithfulness of our ancestors in faith, those who started this congregation and helped to thrive for over a century, those named and unnamed, those remembered and unremembered saints who prayed and planned, who gave their time and talents, their money, their energy, their skills, who built and repaired and mowed and shoveled, who baked and made coffee and sewed, who taught Sunday School and sang in the choir, who visited the sick, who assisted with worship, who taught Bible Study and led small groups and who went to them, who knitted and crocheted, who raised money and collected food and soap and so many other things, who played bells and other instruments.

We have celebrated those believers and we have celebrated our successes as a community of faith. And it has been easy to see how God has been with us.

But here's something I know, because Thomas taught me so. I know that while God is certainly with us in our times of success and belief, those times when it's easy to follow, as individuals and as a community of faith, God is also with us when it's hard, when it's hard to believe, hard to be faithful, hard even to know what direction to go, where God is calling us.

And that is good news, that is a good word to take with us into the future, that God is with us, no matter what, even if we doubt, even if we question, even if we wonder what's next for us, even in those moments when, with the world around us changing so much, we might feel like we've lost, or feel like we are lost.

For in those moments when think that all is lost or that we are lost, Jesus enters our locked rooms, with our shut doors, and comes to us in our unbelief, and says, "Peace be with you." And with the breath of the Spirit, Jesus brings us to life again, and leads us into the future. Thanks be to God. Amen.