

April 15, 2026

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## PASTORAL MEDITATION by Reverend Thomas Hawkins

### WHAT THE GOLDFINCH TELLS US ABOUT EASTER

In the weeks since Easter, we have watched the male goldfinches at our feeder slowly shed their olive-gray feathers and dress themselves in their summer wardrobe of brilliant yellow. I imagine that they've decided to clothe themselves in their Easter finery; but it's taken them a few weeks to put away their winter feathers and put on something bright and cheerful.

Watching this transformation, I've wondered, "What triggers a male goldfinch's feathers to turn to bright yellow after wearing olive-gray since last fall?" Is it a chemical in its feathers themselves that responds to longer, brighter days? Or is it a molting process by which winter's drab feathers are lost and a male goldfinch grows new, brightly colored ones?

All birds, after all, molt. Shedding old feathers and growing new ones is necessary for birds to stay dry, warm, and airborne. Molting occurs for most birds in late summer or early fall. In some songbirds, there's also a second, partial spring molting season. Goldfinches are one of the species that have a full molt in the fall and then, in the spring, molt a second time. In the fall, they gain their olive-gray feathers; in the spring, those feathers molt and are replaced by yellow ones while keeping the preceding autumn's wing and tail feathers.

The pigments in summer's yellow feathers are carotenoids and linked to the goldfinch's immune system. The transformation from olive-gray to yellow is a hormonal one, likely triggered by longer days and increased sunlight. The more colorful the male's plumage, the healthier its immune system. Thus the brighter the feathers, the more attractive he is as a mating partner for female goldfinches.

Across the centuries, the goldfinch's transformation around Easter has taken on a theological significance. Raphael's "Madonna of the Goldfinch," for example, has the infant Jesus and his cousin John the Baptist sitting on Mary's lap. John is holding a goldfinch and the Christ Child is reaching out to touch it. There are, in fact, more than 500 Medieval and early Renaissance paintings that include a goldfinch, according to Herbert Friedman in his *The Symbolic Goldfinch*. (to which I am grateful for most of the information in this reflection.) Sometimes the goldfinch is perched on infant Jesus' hand or resting near his mother Mary. In these nativity paintings, the goldfinch's presence is meant to point toward Jesus' cross and resurrection. The European goldfinch has a distinctive red patch on its head which is usually in these paintings. According to legend, the European goldfinch acquired this red spot when it saw Jesus on the cross and flew down to pull one thorn from his crown to ease his suffering. As he bent down to remove the thorn, a drop of Jesus' blood spotted his head. Our American goldfinches do not have this red spot. They do molt like their European cousins. So the goldfinch's molt from olive-gray to bright yellow envisions Jesus' resurrection as well as our own. Like him, we too will be transformed from one body into a more glorious one.

But these artistic goldfinches are more than a theological statement about death and resurrection. Goldfinches also serve as symbols of freedom. Donna Tartt's novel, *The Goldfinch*, begins with an explosion at the New York Metropolitan Museum. At the moment of the explosion, 13-year old Theo Decker and his mother are looking at paintings from the Dutch Golden Age of painting. As she dies, his mother says to Theo, "I guess anything we manage to save from history is a miracle." Then, a mortally wounded older man entrusts to Theo the Dutch painter Fabritius' masterpiece, "The Goldfinch." In the painting, a goldfinch sits on a perch to which his slender foot is attached by a chain.

Goldfinches were popular household pets in Fabritius' time. Their beautiful plumage, their musical songs, and their unusually fine-tuned coordination of feet and beaks made them a popular bird to capture and sell to well-to-do Dutch families. Families enjoyed training their caged goldfinches to draw water from a glass placed beneath the perch to which they were chained using a tiny cup on a chain. Hence Fabritius originally titled his painting "Het Puttertje," the "putter" or the one drawing water from a well.

But birds are not created to be caged; they are meant to soar freely in the sky. Goldfinches do not belong chained to a perch for the amusement of their captors. To Fabritius, his painting of a goldfinch was not only meant to symbolize our longing for new life and new beginnings but also our deeply human longing to live free. It's why Maya Angelou titled her autobiography's first volume *I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings*. The title comes from the opening lines of a poem by African-American writer Paul Lawrence Dunbar:

*I know why the caged bird sings, oh me,  
When his wing is bruised and his bosom sore –  
When he beats his bars and he would be free.  
It is ...a prayer that he sends from his heart's deep core...  
...that upward to Heaven he flings.*

Russian poet Osip Mandelstam turns specifically to Fabritius' painting of a caged, chained goldfinch to express his yearning to be free after Stalin exiled him from Russian in the 1930s.

*When the goldfinch like rising dough  
Suddenly moves, as a heart throbs...  
The cage is a hundred bars of lies.  
The perch and little plank are slanderous.*

Or as St. Paul speaks of the Risen Christ's work in Galatians 5:1, "It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery." In these early weeks of Eastertide, the male goldfinches at our birdfeeders are finally arriving in brilliant Eastertide yellow. I know they do it to signal to potential mates that their healthy immune system will produce strong offspring. What I see instead is the Creator's promise of resurrection and new life in Christ written into nature itself, visible in a goldfinch's wild, undulating springtime flight across our greening lawn. These small, delicate songbirds also speak to me of Christ's promise to set us free from the cages in which we too often imprison ourselves or in which other powers and principalities of this world wish to entrap us. They sing of Christ's rising from the grave so that we might shed the drab cages in which we imprison ourselves and soar as transformed and transforming people into a more glorious future both in this world and the next.

When you see that bright flash of a small, yellow bird in its undulating flight cross your path, I hope your heart too rejoices in Christ's rising from the tomb to breathe mercy and freedom into our lives.

Happy Easter, Pastor Thomas

**SUNDAY WORSHIP** in the sanctuary or livestream link: <http://www.facebook.com/churchontherotary/>

### **LET'S THANK OUR DEDICATED FIRST RESPONDERS**

We would once again like to deliver home baked cookies and/or individually packaged snacks to our always alert, dependable police and fire departments. We realized that your delicious baked goods would stay fresh for a limited amount of time, but packaged snacks will be available for much longer. So why not offer both! If you would like to participate, please drop off your contribution by Sunday the 19<sup>th</sup> or before 10:00 on April 20<sup>th</sup>. Please leave it in the kitchen. We thank you for supporting this important mission of gratitude.

Thanks for caring. M&O

### **ALTAR FLOWERS**

Would you provide flowers for Sunday service? The following dates are open: May 10 & 31 and July 5 & 19. To reserve a date please look at the Flower Calendar sign up poster in Bulter Hall or call the church office (525-4121). Thank you! The Flower Committee

## NOTE FROM YOUR MODERATOR

Happy Spring!

As the temperatures warm and our bulb flowers are making an appearance this all signals the arrival of a couple of events.

First, the "Earth Day 2026" cleanup is on Saturday, May 2nd.

We pull together a team of folks who work from around 9 am for a couple hours cleaning up our neighborhood. We break off into small groups and do roadside pickup of trash and other abandoned treasures on a short length of Porter Road, Somers Road, around the rotary and obviously the greensward between the church and the rotary. If you are available to help out for an hour or 2 on May 2nd. Please RSVP (We don't need to know who isn't) so we can pick up enough trash bags from the town and register us as a team by April 30.

After the teams complete cleanup of our area the bags of trash and recyclable items (bagged separately) will be brought to the East Longmeadow transfer station. We will meet at the church around 8:30am with coffee in hand and enjoy a bit of active fellowship on a Saturday morning!

The second event that Spring brings us is the annual meeting.

This year the First Congregational Church of East Longmeadow/UCC Annual Meeting will be held immediately after service in the sanctuary on May 17. You will see a warrant to call the meeting soon with the details and agenda. The first item will be to read and vote to accept the presented slate of officers and Board members that will be presented prior to the meeting in the annual report from church leadership. There will be a few changes, as is normal, to some of the Boards and committees so if you, as a member, feel like you want to engage with a particular board please reach out! Enjoy the Spring!

## THANK YOU NOTE

To our friends at the Congregational Church,

A note of thanks for letting us use your kitchen and hall to prepare one of our appetizers for our upcoming fundraisers – "Dancing with Heart". The fundraiser parters St. Luke with Shiner's Children's New England to raise money not only for St. Luke but very importantly Shriners and the awesome work they do for children and their families.

This year we needed help with our preparations, and you said YES without hesitation. Thank you again...

## PRAYER

O God, enlarge in us the sense of communion with all living things; for our brothers and sisters the plants and animals. You have given them the earth as their home in common with us. Especially we thank you for the beauty of goldfinches and other songbirds. May we join our Alleluias to their springtime songs of praise. Help us to be alert as cardinals to beauty all around us. Give us the energy and persistence of woodpeckers in hammering weapons of war into implements of justice and peace. In this season of sprouting seeds and flowering shrubs, we give you thanks for all you do within us to make us new. Amen.



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