

4th April 2021 – ‘Easter: What does it mean to you?’

led by Rev Kate Whyman

GATHERING MUSIC Morning has broken, Cat Stevens/Yusuf Islam

<https://youtu.be/e0TInLOJuUM>

WELCOME AND CHALICE LIGHTING

Welcome everyone. Happy Easter!

Welcome to our celebration of this special day of hope and re-awakening. Today we join with churches all over the world for the most sacred day in the Christian calendar, but we do so in our own particular way, bringing the openness of our minds, the warmth of our hearts and the light of our understanding to this holy occasion.

I shall begin by lighting our chalice flame, as is our custom, as a symbol of our Unitarian tradition, to mark once again the beginning of our time of shared worship.

If you have a candle you might like to light yours with me now.

May this flame be the light that connects us. May it be a symbol of the light that has shone for all time, and through Jesus and other sages and prophets across the ages. May it be the light that shines in us all today.

PRAYER ‘Easter Miracle’ by Jacob Trapp

Divine Spirit

I am amazed to the point of ecstasy
at the miracle of awareness.

Life brings me its freshness as an ineffable gift.

Every moment renews my vision.

Death is permission granted to other modes of life to exist,
so that everything may be ceaselessly renewed.

The ploughshare of sorrow,

breaking the heart,

opens up new sources of life.

The land bursts again into bloom.

The possible and the future are one.
The possible strives to come into being,
and can be, if we help.
Without sacrifice there is no resurrection.
Nothing grows, flowers and bears fruit save by giving.
All that we try to save in ourselves wastes and perishes.
All things ripen for the giving's sake, and in the giving are consummated.
Praise be. Amen

FIRST HYMN 109 (G) Life's rebirth

A day like many other days
has seen us gather here to sing
and offer words which reach for thoughts
that lie beyond their capturing;
 yet may those prayers our lives renew:
 from rocks of thought a vision hew.

We tell from land to land our tales
where powers of hope shape life from death,
in differing words that share a dream –
with glorying shout, or whispered breath;
 to caves of cold, dark unconcern
 we bring our lights of love to burn.

Such warmth can melt a winter's cold
in human hearts, as flower and field,
and push aside the blocking stone
with which so many a heart is sealed;
 may I be never shut inside
 the tomb of selfishness and pride.

This day, like many other days,
may see us roll the stone to find
a kindred soul who thirsts for light

yet to the darkness was resigned;
so may we stretch our hands to lead
to life's rebirth all those we've free.

STORY: Based on a story by Anthony de Mello, *One Minute Wisdom*

A writer arrived at the monastery to write a book about the Master.

"People say you are a genius. Are you?" he asked.

"You might say so," said the Master with a smile.

"And what makes one a genius?" asked the intrepid reporter.

"The ability to see," said the Master.

The writer was betwixt and between. Scratching his hair with one hand and rubbing his tummy with the other, he muttered, *"To see what?"*

The Master quietly replied, *"The butterfly in a caterpillar, the eagle in an egg, the saint in a selfish person, life in death, unity in separation, the divine in the human and the human in the divine."*

READING by A N Wilson, from his introduction to the Gospel of Matthew, Pocket Canongate

[This] book ... has changed more human lives than The Communist Manifesto or Freud's Interpretation of Dreams: [it's a book which] has shaped whole civilisations: a book which, for many people, has been not a gospel but *the* Gospel.

And you are bound to ask, because you are born out of time in a post-Christian age into a world of newspapers and investigative reporting and science – is it true?

Did a virgin really conceive and give birth to a boy-child in Bethlehem? Did wise men, guided by a star, come to worship him? Did he grow up to be able to walk on water, perform miracles, to found the church, to rise from the dead?

Stop. Don't ask. They are all questions that seem reasonable enough. But they will lead you into the most pointless, arid negativism. Your educated, scientific, modern mind will decide that no one ever walked on water; no virgin ever conceived; that corpses do not come to life.

And by rejecting this Gospel, you will be rejecting one of the most disturbing and extraordinary books ever written: not, as you might think, on intelligent grounds, but because you (and I, alas) are too hemmed in by our imaginative limitations to see the sort of things this book is doing...

This is a book, not of easily dismissed fairy-tales, but of power and passion: more arresting, disturbing and truthful than most reading matter which you could buy for the price of a magazine on a station bookstall or in the paperback store. This is the Gospel of Christ, in all its terribleness, its wonder, its awe-inspiring truth and its self-contradictions.

REFLECTION

We now come to a period of silence followed by music. You might like to light a candle for a joy or a sorrow in your life.

'Now the green blade riseth', Steve Winwood

<https://youtu.be/vpU01KQIUJM>

ADDRESS

In the 'Introduction' to her book *The Bible*, Karen Armstrong wrote:

'From the beginning, the Bible had no single message. When the editors fixed the canons of both the Jewish and Christian testaments, they included competing visions and placed them, without comment, side by side. From the first, biblical authors felt free to revise the texts they had inherited and give them entirely different meaning. Later exegetes held up the Bible as a template for the problems of their time. Sometimes they allowed it to shape their worldview but they also felt free to change it and make it speak to contemporary conditions. They were not usually interested in discovering the original meaning of a biblical passage. The Bible 'proved' that it was holy because people continually discovered fresh ways to interpret it and found that this difficult, ancient set of documents cast light on situations that their authors

could never have imagined. Revelation was an ongoing process; it had not been confined to a distant theophany on Mount Sinai; exegetes continued to make the Word of God audible in each generation.' Words by Karen Armstrong.

I called this service 'Easter: What does it mean to you?' because there is no single meaning. I meant it as an invitation to each of you – and to myself – to reflect, not on what Easter means in general terms, but on what it means specifically to you, and particularly today. It's an invitation to stop and pause rather than to trot out a well-rehearsed answer, as perhaps we are all inclined to do at times; one that comes readily to mind and which we've perhaps not given any thought to for some time.

And such an unconsidered response might be anything from: 'It's the holiest day of the year' to 'Nothing. Unitarians don't do Easter.' And pretty much anything in between. Maybe Easter is cultural but not religious for you – it's a holiday, an egg hunt, a roast lunch. Or perhaps you see it as a Christian co-opting of an originally pagan spring festival. Or maybe it's a symbol for you that there is always hope – that we can always 'rise again' in life, however dark and difficult things may feel. And all of these interpretations can be valid.

I remember as a child experiencing Easter primarily as boredom; as what felt to me then like endless days when everything was shut and there was nothing to do and nowhere to go. Thank goodness those days are over. Oh...and suddenly I have a startling insight into how this lockdown must have felt like an absolute eternity for many of our children.

In last week's service I wondered out loud how ancient stories, such as Passover or the Easter story, have gained such traction and endured for so long, and suggested it was because they still speak to us today, which is I think what Karen Armstrong seems to be saying. But I should have added 'if we let them'. I do believe that stories are at their most powerful when we free them, not only from the dogma that strains to imprison them, but also from our own habitual thinking. When instead we set them free: free to strike a fresh chord with us, or touch a raw nerve, or maybe prise open a long-closed and creaking door in our hearts even just a little. A story can turn out to have the miraculous power to roll away the heaviest of stones, but only if we let it.

What I know is that whatever my reason and logic tell me – and reason and logic are excellent and essential faculties for living, I'm not knocking them – but whatever they have to

say to me about a story like Easter is, as A.N. Wilson puts it, arid negativism. It's a comfortable kind of arid negativism because it completely releases me from the burden of needing to think any further. Phew! I can simply tidy Easter – and any other tricky religious festival for that matter – into a box and put it on a shelf at the back of cupboard. (I cleared out the cupboard under my stairs at home on Friday and can confirm a cupboard is the very best place to put things if you want to forget they ever existed.)

But Easter to me, today, suggests something much more alive. Something deeper and more mysterious, and worthy of bringing back out into the light. It feels more than simply a metaphor for spring, or a chance to see family or friends, or a fairy-tale to be dismissed. The aspiring mystic in me says 'Wait a minute! Take a moment to pause and dwell in and with this story for a while. Inhabit it, and let it inhabit you; allow its meaning to be revealed for *today*. Listen to what it is saying underneath the surface, beneath the obvious, beyond the literal. And see where it leads you.'

And so today the Easter story invites me to play with the possibility that it's true. Not literally true necessarily, not in the way a set of committee minutes or a forensic legal report might be factually true, but poetically true at the level of my soul where, it turns out, it resonates with the clarity of a bell. Where the richness of its timbre has space and time to vibrate through my entire being.

And so, today, the Easter story suggests to me that however confusing or uncertain life may feel, I can be sure that a way forward will be revealed when it's ready. Today it suggests to me that the dark, the difficult and the distressing are not just unpleasant, inconvenient and troublesome times in life, to be endured patiently – or not – until they pass, but are actually necessary and important in their own right. Necessary in the way that a butterfly can only exist after a period in the darkness and uncertainty of the cocoon, and as an eagle can only soar in full flight after a period of hidden germination in the mysteriousness of the egg.

Today Easter suggests to me that the entity I understand to be 'me' – this person who wanders about the planet, more or less ineptly, and frequently in the dark – might also turn out to be lighter than imagined. What if I – and you too – are silently preparing to be more than is yet known? What if I - and you – are the potential butterfly still locked within the caterpillar, or the one-day-to-be-an-eagle concealed within the egg? And what if there is some potential within me, this 'Kate' who stands here – and also in you who sit where you

are now – that has the potential to emerge, and that will in fact one day be revealed as nothing less than beauty and light, and take flight?

Karen Armstrong wrote: “We have got used to thinking that religion should provide us with information. Is there a God? How did the world come into being? But this is a modern aberration. Religion was never supposed to provide answers to questions that lay within the reach of human reason. Religion’s task, closely allied to that of art, was to help us live creatively, peacefully and even joyously with realities for which there were no easy explanations and problems that we could not solve: mortality, pain, grief, despair, and outrage at the injustice and cruelty of life.’

And so it is not my job to tell you what Easter means. Certainly it is not for me to tell you what it means for *you*. Or to guess how a 2000-year-old story might chime with you in your life right now. All I can do is offer up the possibility that this story, which has inspired and given hope to millions, just might have something special and specific to say to each of us. Something that it’s never revealed before. And that if we’re able to put aside any objections we might feel to this seeming impossibility, and take the risk of entering in – surrendering, even – to its power, then Easter might just turn out to be more of a miracle than we could ever have imagined.

May it be so.

SECOND HYMN 105 (P) Nature shouts from earth and sky

Nature shouts from earth and sky, Alleluia!

In the spring our spirits fly, Alleluia!

Join the resurrection cry, Alleluia!

Love is God and fears must die, Alleluia!

Mary’s song, Christ Jesus, died, Alleluia!

Killed by humans full of pride, Alleluia!

Such a loss of such a friend, Alleluia!

Yet the cross was not the end, Alleluia!

Out of death his spirit sings, Alleluia!
Love to all the earth he brings, Alleluia!
Telling nations, war must cease, Alleluia!
Sisters, brothers, join in peace, Alleluia!

Christian, Muslim, Buddhist, Jew, Alleluia!
All the ways for love in you, Alleluia!
Many rainbows share one sun, Alleluia!
In the many, God is one, Alleluia!

NOTICES

Thank you to Myron for filming and Karen for co-hosting.

Next week's service will be led by me.

This Tuesday the committee will meet at 2pm on zoom. One of the items on the agenda is when and how to reopen the church.

And this Wednesday at 7.30pm we'll have the second discussion on our draft strategy, this time looking at why and how we might increase participation in the life of our congregation.

CLOSING WORDS

I close with words by British UU Elizabeth Tarbox on what Easter meant to her, or at least what it meant to her at the moment she wrote these words.

'Easter is an exercise in letting go. It is a reminder that life is precious and fragile, beautiful and impermanent. It is a reminder that love is a gift of immense proportions, that if we have shared it for even so fleeting a moment as the time it takes for a pair of mallards to sanctify our pond, or dawn to come to a grieving woman who watches by a tomb, then love has touched us and we will never be the same again.'

May we each go in peace, and have a very happy Easter Sunday.

CLOSING MUSIC

<https://youtu.be/M-hybuhxJg8>