

9th April 2023 – PLYMOUTH

Easter Sunday – led by Rev Kate Whyman

1. **INTRO MUSIC** Easter Oratorio, Bach

<https://youtu.be/ThJFXGGdmEk>

2. **WELCOME/CHALICE LIGHT**

Good morning and Happy Easter to you all! This is a Holy Day in the Christian Calendar, one that celebrates rebirth and renewal, one in which from the darkness and emptiness of the tomb comes the light and hope of re-emergence.

Opening words by Jack Mendelsohn

Here in this sanctuary of ancient dreams and wisdom and beauty we come to grow, to be healed, to stretch mind and heart, to be challenged, renewed; to be helped in our own continuing struggles for meaning and for love; to help build a world with more justice and mercy in it; to be counted among the hoppers and doers.

In the face of cynicism, darkness, brutality around us and within, we seek to align ourselves with a living community that would affirm rather than despair, that would think and act rather than simply adjust and succumb.

Here we invite the spirit of our own humanity and the healing powers under, around, through and beyond it, to give us the nerve and grace, the toughness and sensitivity, to search out the truth that frees, and the life that maketh all things new.

Let's begin our service, as is our custom, by lighting our chalice candle as a symbol of our free religious faith. (Do please light one with me if you are able to do so.)

LIGHT CHALICE

We light this flame this Easter Sunday morning with renewed hope for ourselves, for our community, and for all peoples everywhere.

3. FIRST HYMN 33 (P) Enter, rejoice and come in

Enter, rejoice and come in.

Today will be a joyful day;
enter, rejoice and come in.

Open your ears to the song.

Open your ears to the song.

Today will be a joyful day;
enter, rejoice and come in.

Open your hearts everyone.

Open your hearts everyone.

Today will be a joyful day;
enter, rejoice, and come in.

Don't be afraid of some change.

Don't be afraid of some change.

Today will be a joyful day;
enter, rejoice, and come in.

Enter, rejoice and come in.

Enter, rejoice and come in.

Today will be a joyful day;
enter, rejoice and come in.

Words and music by Louise Ruspini

4. PRAYER A Powell Davies

We thank thee, O God, for all the stirring of life renewed, for the warm winds and the whispering of leaves on trees, for the sweet new fragrance, for the brave colours of life's streaming banners, carried once more to victory over death. And for the soul's triumph, and the transmuting of tragedy, and for the true and the good, which are crucified but never die.

Breathe into us, O God, the quickening breath of life which was before the pageant of the world began and shall be evermore.

Amen.

Pause for people celebrating Easter, Passover and Ramadan all over the world at this time. It isn't very often that all 3 coincide but they do this year. Today may we acknowledge these three great Abrahamic religions and pray for more peace, greater respect and deeper understanding between them. May we recognize that we all have more in common than that which divides us.

5. **STORY: Mark 16:1-8**

When the Sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices so that they might go to anoint Jesus' body. Very early on the first day of the week, just after sunrise, they were on their way to the tomb and they asked each other, "Who will roll the stone away from the entrance of the tomb?"

But when they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had been rolled away. As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man dressed in a white robe sitting on the right side, and they were alarmed.

"Don't be alarmed," he said. "You are looking for Jesus the Nazarene, who was crucified. He has risen! He is not here. See the place where they laid him. But go, tell his disciples and Peter, 'He is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him, just as he told you.'

Trembling and bewildered, the women went out and fled from the tomb. They said nothing to anyone, because they were afraid.

6. **READING** Ruth Fainlight – The Angel

Sometimes the boulder is moved away,
but I cannot move it when
I want to. An angel must. Shall
I ever see the angel's face,
or will there always only be
that molten glow outlining every
separate hair and feathered quill,
the sudden wind and odour, sunlight,
music, the pain of my bruised shoulders.

7. **SECOND 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.

8. **READING** Rev Paul Beedle (UUA)

In all sacred literature, the hearts of the storytellers are revealed in the stories, their breath is felt in the words on the page, and we may be touched or moved or stirred by their ancient art. And maybe we can glimpse a truth that they saw, if we read closely and reflect on what we have read. And we can get a glimpse of what later interpreters saw, if we serve up their symbols as a separate dish rather than baking them into the story. We need a chance to savor each perspective.

The art of contemplation is how art begets art. It's how poems become songs, how stories become statues and paintings and rituals. One person's creativity awakens another's creativity, life touches life, spirit touches spirit—even down the long corridors of time. The Easter story has echoed down the centuries in this way, reverberating in sometimes surprising ways.

It says that after Jesus had suffered the worst agonies imaginable – has been physically tortured and publicly humiliated, pierced, broken and killed — still there are those who care about him. He is beyond their help, but they surround him with their love. And after a time, Jesus is healed in the tomb — healed from death — and he returns to life.

How does this happen? None of his friends know. It hits them like an earthquake, or it comes as a puzzling surprise, that he is no longer in the tomb. They recognize him, and they do not recognize him. He has come through this trial a changed man. And he has something to say to them. Isn't that the story of grief? of shame? of despair? of all our worst suffering? We die from it, and afterwards we live from it. And then we have something new to say.

9. REFLECTION

Into the cave. Take a moment to settle in quietness and emptiness, to simply be, and to sit with, the ache of your own heart. What is it you yearn for? What are you seeking at this time? It is in the quiet stillness – in the emptiness – that answers may reveal themselves, like angels, unbidden, in fleeting glimpses. Our task is only to be here, to show up, in the silence.

10. SILENCE and CANDLE LIGHTING

Offer a word of hope

11. INTERLUDE: Mercy, Max Richter

<https://youtu.be/uWrc6ihmaE0>

12. ADDRESS

What does Easter mean to you? How do you interpret it? How does it move you?

For me it has always been a mystery. The Easter story feels like an invitation to enter in to unknowing. It's a time to consider literal interpretations and reasonable objections, of course, but also to engage with a rich and ancient story that, as Paul Beedles says, 'echoes down the generations'. It invites our imagination and inquiry and provides a chance to allow our minds and hearts to turn away from the ordinary

and towards the extraordinary, a portal through which we can open up to possibilities of meaning and message.

It's natural to want to know what *actually* happened at the tomb. And who or what rolled the stone away. And whether Jesus did in fact rise again. But we don't know, and we can't know. The women, Mary of Magdalene and Salome, in Mark's account anyway, are told that Jesus has gone ahead and will meet them in Galilee. But in the ancient manuscripts of this gospel – the earliest of the 4 to be written – there were no actual sightings of Jesus recorded, though these were added in later versions. And so we are left – encouraged? - to wonder, to trust, perhaps to hope.

Does it matter? Personally I find my spirit flutters most alive in *unknowing* and its endless possibilities, whereas certainty and dogma quash it flat. I find that I don't particularly want to know for sure what did or didn't happen. I do, however, want to feel wonder, and awe, and to imagine. I want to sit with the story, once again, and be open once more to seeing where it takes me this time round. And if it has something new to say then, it seems to me, it is doing its work, and I am doing mine.

As an aside, I similarly about the Trinity, which I mentioned last week as having come up in a few different conversations recently. The Trinity seems to me to be an attempt to define the indefinable. The ineffable. Which by definition is impossible. How can one god be three persons, manifesting in simultaneously in different forms? Our Unitarian forebears dismissed this, largely because they could find no evidence for it in the scriptures. But maybe they could have simply offered a different interpretation rather than a literal one. Because for me it's a little like a Zen koan – a riddle like 'what is the sound of one hand clapping'. It doesn't make sense, so it can't be answered, but actually it isn't meant to be. That's the point. Rather it is intended to push our minds beyond their usual logical limits and into the realms of the transcendent, the unknowable. It is only when we surrender our attempts to solve such a puzzle – and let go of our insistence that it must make sense – that we may actually find ourselves transported into insight or awakening. Try explaining the Trinity to anyone and you'll likely find it impossible too – and maybe that's where it's work begins.

Cynthia Bourgeault writes that Jesus himself would not accept 'the role of Messiah continuously being thrust upon him...Rather, [she writes] he stayed close to the ground of wisdom: the transformation of human consciousness. He asked those timeless and deeply personal questions: What does it mean to die before you die? How do you go about losing your little life to find the bigger one? Is it possible to live on this planet with a generosity, abundance, fearlessness, and beauty that mirror Divine Being itself?'

These questions were more important than definitions.

This year, I find that the heart of the Easter story for me is the empty tomb. It is the place of darkness and desolation, emptiness and silence, loss and despair. But somehow or other the stone has been rolled away, and inside – according to the story – there sits – however improbably – an angel. And the angel says 'don't fear' and points the way forward.

The Easter story is equal parts pain and joy, loss and rebirth, darkness and light. It takes us to our place of despair and grief – the empty tomb – and yet also gives us hope. It reminds us that however abandoned and lost we might feel we are not alone. That there in the darkness it turns out guidance is available if we're able to receive it. There is always hope.

And Easter offers us another chance to feel again the almost unbearable lightness of possibility that is so easy to forget when it becomes obliterated by the weight of our burdens. This day of all days is a call for us to rise again, here and now, in the midst of this miraculous life, in the midst of our own precious life, in whatever way we can.

May an angel, in whatever form it may appear, help you move away the stone of your own suffering, and point you in the direction of eternal hope.

Amen

13. THIRD HYMN 44 (P) Give thanks for life

Give thanks for life, the measure of our days,
mortal, we pass through beauty that decays,
yet sing to God our hope, our love, our praise:

Alleluia, Alleluia!

Give thanks for those whose lives shone with a light
caught from the Christ-flame, gleaming through the night,
who touched the truth, who burned for what is right:

Alleluia, Alleluia!

Give thanks for all, our living and our dead,
thanks for the love by which our life is fed,
a love not changed by time or death or dread:

Alleluia, Alleluia!

Give thanks for hope that like a seed of grain
lying in darkness, does its life retain
to rise in glory, growing green again:

Alleluia, Alleluia!

*Music Ralph Vaughan Williams, words Shirley Erena Murray © 1987 Hope Publishing
Company*

14. CLOSING WORDS John Bannister Tab

Out of the dusk a shadow,
Then, a spark.

Out of the cloud a silence,
Then, a lark.

Out of the heart a rapture,

Then, a pain.
Out of the dead, cold ashes,
Life again.

Extinguish chalice

15. **CLOSING VIDEO** Morning has broken, Cat Stevens

<https://youtu.be/e0TInLOJuUM>