

17th March 2024: PLYMOUTH UNITARIANS

Rev Kate Whyman – A spring in your step

1. **PRELUDE** – Appalachian Spring, Copland (3'15")

<https://youtu.be/MTnflAFSsq2E?si=hqg-J6V0AOomfyvz>

2. **OPENING WORDS**

Good morning and welcome. Happy St Patrick's Day.

Today we will be celebrating the return of Spring, its joyfulness and hopefulness, as well as the balance that the Equinox invites us to consider, the time when the days and the night are equal, and light and shade co-exist in harmony. So...first the light with some words by Shari Woodbury.

Let us enter this sacred sanctuary
the way a soft infant enters the
bright world:

*squinting in wonder
holding to another
taking it all in.*

Let us open all our senses
and let our synapses spark
one connection after another

*as we make sense of the world
and find joy with each other
and follow the instinct to play.*

And then the shade, which is that this past week we have lost two dear friends. Bernice Lashbrook from Bridgwater, and more recently Cullompton Unitarians, sadly died on Monday after a lengthy stay in hospital. And our own Thelma Mitchell died on Tuesday in Derriford, also after being unwell for some time.

I know Bernice was remembered at the Western Union meeting yesterday, and during our reflection later today there will be a time of candle lighting for Thelma and the chance to share a few words of memory. We also have some photos here which you might light to look at later.

This service will reflect the cycles of life and death of which spring is such a vital part.

But first, as is our custom, let us begin lighting our chalice as a symbol of our free religious faith. (Do light a candle at home)

Around us, light is returning.

It rekindles the spirit of life in the skeletons of trees.

It brings forth new shoots from the soil.

It wakes us from our winter slumber, and invites us to see what lies beyond.

We light this chalice in the spirit of our Earth's awakening and to reaffirm our commitment to the value of our home.

3. 1st Hymn 267 (G) We sing the roses waiting (words by Ralph Waldo Emerson)

We sing of golden mornings,
we sing of sparkling seas,
of fenlands, valleys, mountains,
and stately forest trees.

We sing of flashing sunshine
and life-bestowing rain,
of birds among the branches,
and springtime come again.

We sing the heart courageous,
the youthful, eager mind;
we sing of hopes undaunted,
of friendly ways and kind.
We sing the roses waiting
beneath the deep-piled snow;
we sing, when night is darkest,
The day's returning glow.

Music Alexander Ewing, words from Ralph Waldo Emerson

4. A SPRINGTIME PRAYER by George Tyger

Oh power of springtime,
Spirit of green grasses and warm breezes;
Goddess of creativity
of birth
of life renewed
You sing all about us at this time.
The birds call your sacred name.
Buds burst forth with your vestment.
The sun reaches higher into the sky
shining the light of this new day
through the windows of your cathedral,
this world.

Oh power of springtime
forgive us our speediness
and our racing before your
eternal grace
that we do not see
the miracle world we share.

Open our eyes with your warmth
and our hearts with your beauty
slow our minds with awe and wonder.

Dear Spirit of green grasses
and warm breezes;
let us find here
in these moments of quiet
the grace of your breath
as we breathe into our bodies
the spirit of spring.

Let us be silent now, and allow ourselves to be present here in the quietness.

May we allow anyone known to us who is pain or suffering of any kind to gently come into our hearts and our mind's eye. May they be bathed in light and love, and find comfort and peace.

And we open our hearts more widely and fully, to all those beloved souls who are unknown to us, wherever they may be in the world. We remember those who are unwell in body or in mind, those who are grieving, those living in fear and in war, or suffering under oppressive systems or regimes. May all living souls find solace, freedom and wellbeing.

5. **STORY** 'No, Maybe and Yes', by Dennis Clark, from 'Sunday morning reflections on the Word'

There were three tulip bulbs named No, Yes and Maybe. They lived at the bottom of a bulb tin, content to be round and plump and dressed in silky brown garments. When autumn came, they fell to discussing the destiny of tulip bulbs. NO said, "I don't think there is any life for tulip bulbs. We were made to live in bulb tins and I'm quite content to be right here." And with that NO rolled over and went to sleep.

MAYBE disagreed. "I'm not satisfied with things as they are. I feel something inside me that I must achieve and I believe I can." So he squeezed and squeezed himself, turning this way and that. But nothing happened, and finally in frustration MAYBE gave up.

Then YES spoke up. "I've been told," she said very softly, "that by ourselves we can do nothing but that we can achieve our destiny, if we put ourselves in the hands of Life." The others just sniffed and looked away.

Now one day a hand reached down into the bulb tin, groping for a bulb. NO and MAYBE scurried out of reach, and hid in a corner. But YES rolled right into the hands of Life, which took her and buried her in the cold, damp earth of winter!

"What a fool to fall for that trick," laughed NO and MAYBE, who were warm, dry, and safe in their little bulb tin. And with that they went back to sleep.

When spring came, NO and MAYBE were nowhere to be seen. NO had shrivelled up and died in his sleep; while MAYBE had worried and fidgeted himself to death. Nothing remained of them but a few dry husks and a handful of dust.

And what about YES who had let herself be buried all winter in the ground and had seemed to everyone to be dead?

Well she was a sight to behold. For you see, she had burst out of the ground and blossomed into a whole new life.

6. **READING** 'The trees', Philip Larkin

The trees are coming into leaf
Like something almost being said;
The recent buds relax and spread,
Their greenness is a kind of grief.

Is it that they are born again
And we grow old? No, they die too.
Their yearly trick of looking new
Is written down in rings of grain.

Yet still the unresting castles thresh
In fullgrown thickness every May.
Last year is dead, they seem to say,
Begin afresh, afresh, afresh.

7. **2nd HYMN 111 (P) O Brother Sun (piano accompaniment only)**

O Brother Sun, you bring us light,
all shining round in fiery might.
O Sister Moon, you heal and bless,
your beauty shines in tenderness.

O Brother Wind, you sweep the hills,
your mighty breath both freshens and fills.
O Sister Water, you cleanse and flow
through rivers and streams, in ice and snow.

O Brother Fire, you warm our night
with all your dancing coloured light.
O Sister Earth, you feed all things,
all birds, all creatures, all scales and wings.

O Sister Death, you meet us here
and take us to our God so near.
O God of Life, we give you praise
for all your creatures, all your ways.

*Words © Sharon Anway, adapted from St Francis of Assisi
Traditional Scottish melody arr. © David Dawson*

8. **REFLECTION:** Let us come to a quiet time of reflection and contemplation.

Spirit of spring and new life, spirit of decay and death,
We turn to your wisdom and strength as we seek to live lives of meaning and love.
The cycle of life is powerful. Everything that lives, dies. Everything that dies has lived.
There is no escaping this cycle. What then, can we learn from its power?
The leaves that we put away in the autumn are now compost, fertilizing the soil as we
prepare to till the garden for this year's plantings.
That harbinger of spring, the crocus, brings delight, and lasts but for a moment. Then
it's gone, making way for the abundance of green and colour that spring will bring.
When one who was beloved dies, we cry. We mourn. We lament. And we carry them
on in our hearts, seeking to live as they inspired us to live. As a child grows, we
marvel at their unfolding into their own unique self.
These lives we live hold so much beauty and so much pain.
And we, like each of our ancestors across the millennia, seek to live them fully.

Let's take some time to remember Thelma.

Silence – candlelighting

9. **INTERLUDE:** Tracy Chapman, 'Spring'

<https://youtu.be/ShGrOKaHjeM?si=IDNSE-psIOSHgqhv>

10. ADDRESS

If I had to sum up the meaning of spring, for me it would be about saying a big 'Yes' to life and everything it contains. It is a surge of energy and an emergence of colour and light. And the gradual gift of warmth. But yet...it carries its own poignancy within it, for like any moment, any day, any season, it is brief – and then it is gone again. Just as our entire experience of life is of one moment giving way to the next, and to the next, and the next. Nothing stays. And so spring is both full of hope and promise, and also achingly ephemeral. It carries within it its own mortality, as do we, from the moment of our birth. Catch it while you can.

This reminds me of the story of the broken vase or goblet, which goes something like this...

"You see this goblet?" asks Achaan Chaa, the Thai meditation master. "For me this glass is already broken. I enjoy it; I drink out of it. It holds my water admirably, sometimes even reflecting the sun in beautiful patterns. If I should tap it, it has a lovely ring to it. But when I put this glass on the shelf and the wind knocks it over or my elbow brushes it off the table and it falls to the ground and shatters, I say, 'Of course.' When I understand that the glass is already broken, every moment with it is precious."

I find that beautiful. To see the impermanence of everything, to feel the sadness of it, but also to heighten its worth, value of what is here now. To appreciate the transience as a gift.

At mindfulness last week we shared food as we always do, which included many tasty offerings, but I was particularly struck, as I think we all were, by the cherry tomatoes and the grapes. I have brought some with me for you to try later. If you can find a quiet moment to sit, and contemplate, and simply eat a single one, savouring it and allowing the juice and the flavour to explode in your mouth – then I think you will have encapsulated that moment of 'yes-ness'. The moment that says 'this is life, and I am here'. An exquisite ecstasy. It won't last, the feeling will be short-lived – indeed in a sense the grape is already eaten – but the moment neatly captures the essence and spirit of spring. And that is very much the practice of mindfulness, and our own

practise as Unitarians to attempt (as Tracy Chapman sang earlier) 'To greet every new day that may come, Like the first of spring.'

There was a period last year when Thelma seemed to have the spirit of spring in her. Bright eyed and wide awake, meeting every opportunity with almost childlike excitement, her diary filled with places to go and people to meet. She was so thrilled go on her first march! I will remember her like that.

It isn't possible – at least I don't think it is – to maintain the beginner's mind, that one that continuously begins afresh and sees anew. Our brains are built to adapt and to become habituated so that we barely notice much of what's all around us all the time, but are primed to react to differences, which of course is important if we are to survive and if our minds are not to be overloaded by stimuli. But there is a cost, which is the loss of wonder in the everyday. Spring comes to reawaken us for a time. And in such moments of lucidity we may finally find our god, where he, or she, or they have been all the time.

I hear that there is cold weather coming, even snow in some part of the UK, which is not unusual for March. But even though the weather may be erratic, the movements of the solar system are entirely predictable. We are part of a system that turns and spins, and ebbs and flows, and lives and dies in continuous motion, in a universe that is constantly evolving and expanding, powered and driven by forces and energy way beyond our capacity to grasp. May open your heart and your mind to the elements.

May you feel the spring in your step, and the wind in your hair, and the sun on your back as you let yourself be carried by the earth, the air, the sun and the rivers.

May we each say yes to life, with all that it entails.

Our final hymn was a favourite of Thelma's.

11. 3rd HYMN – 167 (P) There is a place I call my own

There is a place I call my own,
where I can stand by the sea,
and look beyond the things I've known
and dream that I might be free.
Like the bird above the trees,
gliding gently on the breeze,
I wish that all my life I'd be
without a care and flying free.

But life is not a distant sky
without a cloud, without rain,
and I can never hope that I
can travel on without pain.
Time goes swiftly on its way;
all too soon we've lost today,
I cannot wait for skies of blue
or dream so long that life is through.

So life's a song that I must sing,
a gift of love I must share;
and when I see the joy it brings
my spirits soar through the air.
Time goes swiftly on its way;
life has taught me how to fly.
For now I know what I can be
and now my heart is flying free.

Words and music by Don Besig, arr. David Dawson © Harold Flammer Music

12. CLOSING WORDS

Look to this day:
For it is life, the very life of life.
In its brief course
Lie all the verities and realities of your existence.
The bliss of growth,
The glory of action,
The splendour of achievement
Are but experiences of time.

For yesterday is but a dream
And tomorrow is only a vision;
And today well-lived, makes
Yesterday a dream of happiness
And every tomorrow a vision of hope.
Look well therefore to this day;
Such is the salutation to the ever-new dawn!

13. **CLOSING VIDEO: Max Richter**, Bodies Never Lie dance company, The Highline String Quartet
<https://youtu.be/Qz6EGYMO1QY?si=kbcj3gwbFjKqOpvj>