

31st March 2024: PLYMOUTH UNITARIANS

Rev Kate Whyman – EASTER SUNDAY

1. **PRELUDE** – Morning has broken

<https://youtu.be/DmAOBosGIHY?si=WEV4Zc5xzLYkarYG>

2. **OPENING WORDS**

Good morning. Happy Easter to you all!

The Easter story is the central narrative of the Christian tradition, but it has a message that is relevant to us all, whatever our beliefs. It is a message of hope and renewal, transformation and rebirth.

I'll begin with some words from Andy Pakula, former minister of New Unity in Islington, which is from 'Fragments of Holiness' (3rd April entry).

Let there be light.

The light of joy, the light of happiness and the light of contentment.

May it illuminate our paths and fill our lives with peace.

And let there be dark.

For it is from our dark places that we are brought forward.

Tried, tested, and impelled towards growth.

It is in these places that we realise compassion and learn to love.

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

3. **1st Hymn 33 (P)** 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.

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** Carla Grosch-Miller (adapted for Unitarians)

Blessed are you, O Holy One,
 who crowns the earth with beauty,
 who brings forth the greening
 and blesses the dying,
 who summons the songs of the beloved.
Blessed are You.

Blessed are you, O Holy One,
who absorbs the pain of the world,
who cradles broken bodies and sorrowful spirits,
who loves us back to life.

Blessed are You.

Blessed are you, O Holy One,
who waits in silence,
who holds the seeds of new life,
who keeps counsel with the wind.

Blessed are You.

Blessed are you, O Holy One,
whose love holds the universe together
and binds the human family to dust and stars.

Blessed are You.

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. **READING** John 20:11-16 (NIV)

This follows the description of Mary Magdalene and Simon Peter discovering the empty tomb, with nothing left but the linen shroud that had wrapped the body.

Now Mary stood outside the tomb crying. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb and saw two angels in white, seated where Jesus' body had been, one at the head and the other at the foot.

They asked her, "Woman, why are you crying?"

"They have taken my Lord away," she said, "and I don't know where they have put him." At this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not realize that it was him.

He asked her, "Woman, why are you crying? Who is it you are looking for?"

Thinking he was the gardener, she said, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have put him, and I will get him."

Jesus said to her, "Mary."

She turned toward him and cried out in Aramaic, "Rabboni!" (which means "Teacher").

6. **READING** 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."

7. **2nd 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.

Music John Bacchus Dykes, words Frank R. Caburn, used by permission

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

Take a moment to settle in quietness and emptiness. What is it you seek? What is it you yearn for? It is in the quiet stillness – in the emptiness – that answers may reveal themselves. Our task is simply to be here, to be present, in the silence, open to whatever is revealed, however surprising.

9. **INTERLUDE:** 'Dum transisset Sabbatum I: I. Dum transisset' , John Taverner, Tallis Scholars

https://youtu.be/j7E9EuNAjno?si=Hyfe-TPbva8xyk_Y

10. **ADDRESS**

I heard the Archbishop of Canterbury say that the Easter story was one of transformation, which I think it is. The story itself may seem to be primarily about the transformation from death to bodily resurrection. That is certainly the story that will be preached in many Christian churches today, one in which Jesus died for our sins and rose again with the promise of eternal life. It's a story that has continued to resonate for 2000 years.

But there are other ways of understanding the story too, and there is a truth to it that goes deeper than any one set of beliefs or any one religion.

It's always worth remembering that the four gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, all tell the story slightly differently. Which is not surprising since they were written at different times, by different people, and some decades after the event. And they've been edited and translated several times over, too.

And I have said before that one of the strengths of scriptures and the stories they tell is that they work on many levels, and can speak to our condition at the time. There are subtleties in the varying responses we may feel to them, from one reading to the next. And so it's always worth coming to them anew, and with an open mind, rather than with a preconceived idea about what they mean.

(Isn't that true of anything, actually? We do well drop our assumptions in order to meet life afresh.)

This year what strikes me as I revisit the story – in this case as told by John – are two things. The first is that, initially, both Mary Magdalene and Simon Peter saw only the emptiness of the tomb. They were looking for a body and it wasn't there. All they could see was the discarded shroud, and they were distraught. Mary stood outside the tomb crying.

But then she looked again, and this time she saw two angels in white sitting in the tomb. And now the emptiness was no longer quite so empty. Here were two beings, who spoke to her out of the darkness. 'Why are you crying?'

I wonder why did she not see them the first time looked? Had they only just arrived? After all, we can assume that angels have the ability to manifest in an instant. Or did she need time to adjust to the dark? Or was she just so shocked and focused on the absence of the body that she simply didn't notice them? Was she not yet open to the possibility of there being help?

And the second thing that stood out to me this year is the word 'Rabboni' or teacher. Here it is Mary's way of expressing her recognition that the 'gardener' is Jesus, by naming him. But it seems to say much more too. There is obvious respect, affection and love in the word. Intimacy, even. I was reminded that teacher, or prophet, is also how many Unitarians think of Jesus. As a human being. But also, it seems to me, Mary realises – maybe subconsciously – that she is being taught in this very moment. That in this moment of recognition her eyes are suddenly opened and that she will never be quite the same again. It's a very powerful moment.

And so to me the story – whatever we may believe about Jesus or resurrection – seems to offer several teachings at once. It reminds us that what may seem and feel like emptiness may yet reveal itself to be the beginning of new understanding. It impresses on us the need to look again, and again if necessary, in order to even if we don't recognise them or are ready to see them at first. And that our experience of loss or pain, our feelings of abandonment or confusion, our fear and bewilderment may, in fact, contain within them the seeds of our healing and renewal.

There is a lot in the story, in other words!

I'm sure – in fact I know – that you have had dark times in your life, when there has been hopelessness and despair. Maybe you feel that now.

In my own life I would say that the loss of a pregnancy and the subsequent inability to have a child felt like a profound emptiness to me for some time. For years, actually, it overshadowed everything else. But that very loss and absence was itself, in the end, the very reason I looked more deeply for meaning in life and began to reconnect with my spirituality, something I might otherwise never have done. Angels did appear, not with wings or fanfares, but in the form of books, people and places, and I was led, one way or another, to a strange church in Brighton, of a denomination I'd never heard of before, which helped restore hope and meaning, and for which I will be forever grateful.

Easter offers the promise of renewal and rebirth, however dark and empty life may seem. And it's a message we need to hear right now, because there is plenty of darkness in the world at the moment, and worry and concern on many levels. It can feel gloomy, and hope/less. It is important to keep looking for the good and the beautiful and the light, for it is still there and may lead us yet to brighter times.

In my life, and no doubt in yours, there have been many 'deaths' – a plethora of endings, losses and turning points. Our faith is that, at every stage of our journey, however challenging or painful it may be, there will always be help for us, and a resurrection of some kind will come, so that one day we too may find ourselves saying, in the words of the poet e e cummings...

'i who have died am alive again today'

May it be so.

11. 3rd 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

12. CLOSING WORDS Annie Heppenstall, *The Book of Uncommon Prayer*

O my rock,
In you I take refuge.

The storms of life rage outside
But in you I find shelter.

Holy One, you surround me,
The cave of your love welcomes me,
it draws me within to find the rest that I need.

In your safe-holding let me find peace.
In your strong embrace let me find renewal.

13. CLOSING VIDEO: Easter Oratorio

<https://youtu.be/ThJFXGGdmEk?si=x3DfbANG6JW77zv8>