

Plymouth Unitarian Church Sunday 5th April 2026

Steve's "Easter Special" A Service for Easter Sunday by Steve Finnie

Opening video/music:

Handel – March from SCIPIO – organ transcription (YOUTUBE 2.25m)

Find it here: <https://youtu.be/8b1ehLlzDzA?si=dgYHNOAecbpXIOfL>

Welcome + Introduction

Welcome to everyone – in church and online. Happy Easter to you all.

Today's service has been written by Steve and, as you might expect, it's an Easter Sunday Special.

As many of you know, Steve prefers to write services rather than lead them, so members of the congregation will be sharing today's reflections. The service is presented in three parts and includes readings, hymns, music, and several short video clips.

Our opening music was the march from the opera SCIPIO composed in 1725 by Georg Friedrich HANDEL. Steve who has a particular fondness for organ music, chose this as a joyful and uplifting beginning to our worship.

We now begin, as we always do, with the lighting of our chalice - a symbol of our free religious faith.

Chalice is lit

Opening words From the New Testament Gospel of Matthew Chapter 28 Verses 5-8.

'The angel said to the women, 'Do not be afraid, for I know that you are looking for Jesus, who was crucified.

He is not here; he has risen, just as he said. Come and see the place where he lay.

Then go quickly and tell his disciples: He has risen from the dead and is going ahead of you into Galilee.

There you will see him. Now I have told you.'

So, the women hurried away from the tomb, afraid yet filled with joy, and ran to tell his disciples.'

Hymn One

Our first hymn is called 'Jesus Christ is Risen Today' – a well-known and much-loved Easter hymn.

As Unitarians, this is not a hymn we would sing in our own services, though many of us would have heard it – and perhaps sung it – at some point in our lives.

I doubt any of us here today would describe ourselves as Christians, as many including Steve have chosen to step away from mainstream Christianity for a variety of reasons.

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Some might even feel slightly uncomfortable with elements of today's service – I hope not – but if so, perhaps you might simply be a visitor for this hour, appreciating the music, the reflections, and the spirit in which they are offered.

The hymn is a recording from YOUTUBE performed by King's College Choir, Cambridge. Please remain seated.

Video: King's College Choir – Jesus Christ is risen today – YOUTUBE (2.45m)

Find it here : <https://youtu.be/rMwPEmUMP7U?si=L7YI6MJHxI4oaoGn>

Part A

If you were to ask the average person in Britain what the most important festival in the Christian calendar is, many would probably say Christmas.

From a theological perspective, however, it is Easter that holds that place of significance. The resurrection of Jesus stands at the heart of Christian belief in salvation and eternal life. In the New Testament, 1 Corinthians chapter 15 verse 14 states:

'And if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith.'

These words underline how central the resurrection is within Christian theology.

From a cultural and societal perspective, however, Christmas is more widely and visibly celebrated in Britain.

On a personal level, many people might say they prefer Christmas – with its time off work or school, opportunities for socialising, the exchange of presents, and the enjoyment of festive food and drink.

Easter, like Christmas has become something of a tapestry, weaving together Christian meaning with much older seasonal symbolism. Among these are the Easter bunny – linked to ideas of fertility and abundance, and sometimes associated with the Germanic goddess EOSTRE, also known as Ostara – and eggs, whether chocolate, or brightly painted, which are among the oldest symbols of new life.

Flowers too play their part, representing renewal and fertility as the earth awakens from its winter slumber. And we mark the Spring Equinox – the gradual lengthening of days and the returning strength of the sun – all reminders of light, growth, and new beginnings.

For many of us - especially those who feel the weight of the cold, dark winter months – spring, with its longer days and gentle warmth, comes as a real blessing. It lifts the spirits and invites us back into the light.

How Easter is celebrated, of course, depends greatly on the country in which you live and the Christian denomination to which you belong.

Within the Eastern Orthodox Church, Easter – or Pascha – is taken particularly seriously. It is the very centre of the Church year. The midnight Paschal service can last for several

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hours. Imagine arriving at church late in the evening and remaining there into the early hours of the morning.

Steve remarks that, from his vantage point at back of the church managing the technology, he can see people beginning to grow restless after an hour - and positively squirming in their seats by ten past twelve. And those joining on Zoom, of course, sometimes reveal even more than they realise on camera!

Next up would be the Catholic Church. For Catholics, the Easter vigil is the most sacred Mass of the entire year – rich in symbolism, candlelight, scripture, and celebration. Both the Catholic and the Eastern Orthodox Church traditions also observe Lent with a particular seriousness. This forty-day season – recalling Jesus's forty days of fasting in the wilderness - begins on Ash Wednesday and is intended as a time of spiritual reflection, repentance, and preparation.

Many people choose to give up certain luxuries for Lent, such as sugar, chocolate, or meat. It is a period of inward preparation leading into the solemn events of Holy Week.

Among Protestant denominations, it is perhaps the Anglicans and the Episcopal Church who retain a strong liturgical emphasis on Easter.

Many other Protestant traditions place less focus on extended ritual or the observance of Lent, and some – such as the Jehovah Witnesses – do not celebrate Easter at all. Later in the service, we will reflect more specifically on what Easter might mean within a Unitarian context.

For now, we turn to a brief summary of the events in the New Testament gospels that are commemorated at Easter.

The Easter story centres on the final days of Jesus of Nazareth, culminating in his crucifixion, burial, and – in Christian belief – his resurrection.

It is Passover week in Jerusalem.

On Palm Sunday, Jesus enters the city to public acclaim, greeted by crowds who hail him as King, messiah, and deliverer.

In the days that follow, he teaches openly, challenges the religious authorities in the Temple, and speaks of the suffering and death that lie ahead.

On the night before his crucifixion, he shares a final meal with his disciples - the Last Supper. During this meal, he interprets the bread and wine as symbols of his body, and blood, a moment that later becomes the foundation of the Christian practice of Holy Communion. He tells his stunned disciples that one of them will betray him and that the others will abandon him.

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Later that evening, Jesus goes to pray in the Garden of Gethsemane on the Mount of Olives. There, he expresses deep fear and anguish yet ultimately accepts what he understands to be God's will.

He is betrayed by his disciple Judas Iscariot, arrested, and brought before the Roman governor Pontius Pilate. Under political pressure, Pilate authorises his execution.

Jesus is crucified on the Friday, the eve of the Sabbath – the day Christians have come to call Good Friday.

The Gospels emphasise the public humiliation, suffering, and apparent defeat of Jesus.

This suffering is portrayed vividly in the 2004 film, *The Passion of the Christ*. It is a difficult and often distressing film to watch, focusing intensely on the final hours of Jesus's life, and particularly on his crucifixion. The graphic depiction of torture and execution led to controversy, with some critics describing the violence as overwhelming and deeply unsettling. Despite this, the film proved especially popular with many Christian audiences, particularly in the United States, and became one of the highest grossing religious films of all time.

Following the death of Jesus, the Gospels describe dramatic and symbolic events: darkness covering the land, and the veil of the Jerusalem Temple being torn in two.

A powerful earthquake is said to occur; tombs are opened, and there are accounts of the dead being seen alive in Jerusalem – all signs, within the narrative, that something world-changing has taken place.

Jesus's body is taken down from the cross and laid in a tomb owned by a follower, Joseph of Arimathea.

On the third day - what we now call Easter Sunday – several women disciples go to the tomb to complete the burial rituals, intending to anoint the body with spices.

Instead, they find the tomb empty.

According to the Gospel accounts, angels appear to them and announce that Jesus has been raised from the dead.

The risen Jesus is then described as appearing to his followers on a number of occasions, offering peace, reassurance, and further teaching, and commissioning them to carry his message into the world.

For Christians, their victory over death is the cornerstone of their faith.

And so, the message of Easter is this: that suffering and death do not have the final word; that beyond despair, there is hope; and beyond loss, the possibility of new life.

Interlude

So, instead of a second hymn, we are now going to have a short piece of music.

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It's none other than the wonderful Dame Vera Lynn singing: 'My Two Easter Sunday Sweethearts.'

The song is sung twice; the first time solo, the second time as a singalong. The words are available if you want to join in the second singalong part.

The title of the song is based on Easter in bygone days being a popular time for young couples to meet and engage in what we used to call courting.

Video: 'Two Easter Sunday Sweethearts' – YOUTUBE - 2.48 minutes.

Find it here: <https://youtu.be/s1t0GTSXLRw?si=yfaqkPrvILUPqL4Z>

Lyrics to EASTER SUNDAY SWEETHEART

The folks in town will all start talking
When arm in arm they see me walking
With two Easter Sunday sweethearts

What happy smiles we'll all be wearing
No millionaire could buy a caring
My two Easter Sunday sweethearts

And after church we'll go parading
We'll all be dressed up in our Sunday best
Happily, I want the world to see my happiness

That happiness will be no other
Than dear old Dad and darling Mother
My two Easter Sunday sweethearts

Reading

We now have a short reading from the book by Cliff Read called Unitarian? What's That? The reading is called Do Unitarians celebrate Easter?

"Most Unitarians do, but with perhaps three separate, although not mutually exclusive, perspectives.

First there is the view that in the stories of Jesus's resurrection we have a powerful myth. This celebrates the triumph of the human spirit, exemplified in Jesus, over all that would crush it, and even over death.

Second, from a more specifically Christian standpoint, is the belief that the loving spirit of Jesus triumphed over death and passed into the community of disciples who formed the early church. The body of the faithful thus became the physical resurrection, the risen body, of Christ. Inasmuch as a religious community continues to embody that loving spirit, then it continues to embody the resurrection.

Most Unitarians would doubt the literal veracity of the Gospel resurrection accounts.

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Some, though, see them as based on vivid spiritual experiences undergone by several of Jesus's followers in the aftermath of his death.

These then played an important part in convincing the disciples that his spirit was still among them.

The third principal way in which Unitarians celebrate Easter is as the festival of life's renewal in the spring.

The earth's resurrection after winter's apparent death is something that affects us profoundly as dependent children of nature. Many Unitarians therefore feel that it is a time of deep spiritual significance in itself. They point out the word Easter is derived from EASTRE, the name of the Anglo-Saxon goddess of spring, fertility, and renewal."

Part B

The second part of our service describes how the celebration of Easter has changed in Britain in the last century. But before that, we have a short video clip to watch.

Video: 'Maundy 1955' – Pathe News – the Queen and Prince Philip YOUTUBE (0.51



seconds).

That footage was from 1955. Didn't look a handsome couple?

Maundy Thursday remains one of the monarch's most personal religious duties, reflecting the sovereign's role as supreme Governor of the Church of England. The Maundy Service, with its ancient traditions, continues to symbolise service and humility.

Over the last century, Easter celebrations in Britain have undergone significant change.

Once a predominantly religious festival, rooted in Christian belief and marked by church attendance, Easter has gradually become more secular, family-orientated, and certainly more commercial.

It remains the high point of the Christian year for believers, yet – as mentioned earlier – it is now something of a tapestry woven from older seasonal symbols, consumer culture, changing work patterns, and the realities of a more religiously diverse society.

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Easter Sunday in 2026 looks quite different from Easter Sunday in 1926.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, Easter in Britain was overwhelmingly religious, and church attendance was far more common than it is today.

Easter Sunday was one of the most important dates in the church calendar.

Many people observed Lent carefully, giving up luxuries in preparation for Holy Week.

Churches were often packed on Good Friday and Easter Sunday, with services focused on prayer, solemn reflection, and the message of the resurrection.

In many ways, Easter was less about outward celebration and more about spiritual discipline and observance.

As church attendance has declined over the decades, Easter has gradually shifted in character, becoming as much of a cultural tradition as a religious one.

Today, for many people, Easter is marked by the two bank holidays - Good Friday and Easter Monday – as by its theological meaning.

Many people now use the Easter break to visit family, enjoy outdoor activities made possible by the longer days and improving weather, or take a short city break, rather than focus primarily on worship.

Easter is no longer a shared, nationwide religious experience in the way it was in 1926.

As a result, celebrations often centre on broader themes such as springtime, renewal, and family time rather than explicitly on Christian theology.

Food traditions have also evolved. Hot cross buns – traditionally eaten on Good Friday - are marked with a cross to symbolise the crucifixion. We have some to enjoy after the service. Sorry to those on Zoom.

These spiced sweet buns typically made with currants or raisins, are closely associated with Easter. Their history, however, reaches back further. In pre-Christian Europe, small, sweet cakes were baked in honour of the Germanic spring goddess EOSTRE.

These cakes were sometimes marked with symbols representing the changing seasons or the four quarters of the moon.

As Christianity spread across Europe, certain customs were adapted and reinterpreted within a Christian framework.

The spices used in hot cross buns were later said to symbolise the spices used in the burial of Jesus.

The buns became so popular that in Elizabethan England they were restricted to religious occasions. Today, they are enjoyed around the world, particularly in countries influenced by British traditions.

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Other countries, of course, have their own distinctive Easter foods and seasonal treats.

One thing we in Britain do share with much of the world is a love of chocolate.

Chocolate eggs first emerged in the 19th century in countries such as France and Germany. Naturally, Britain soon joined in. There is nothing the British hate more than the Europeans getting one over on us.

The first chocolate Easter egg in Britain was created in 1873 by the company JS Fry & Sons. Cadburys followed suit in 1875, introducing their own version – and the rest as they say, is history. By modern standards, those early eggs would have been modest in size, and they were certainly expensive. Chocolate and sugar were once luxuries, beyond the reach of many households. Easter treats were simpler and far less extravagant than those we now take for granted.

After the end of rationing in the 1950s, rising living standards made chocolate more affordable and widely available. Businesses increasingly marketed Easter as a time of consumption – a time to buy. Shop displays began to focus more on chocolate rather than religious imagery, contributing to Easter's transformation into a consumer-driven festival, much like Christmas.

Today, social media often promotes Easter crafts, recipes, and gift ideas, rather than church attendance.

Supermarket advertising centres on the traditional family Easter lunch, encouraging celebration around the table. Easter food and drink now generate significant revenue for the modern British economy. It is one of the most profitable times of year for retailers, second only to Christmas. Sales of themed gifts, decorations, flowers, and traditional meats such as lamb and roast beef all rise sharply.

Chocolate sales are especially striking. Last Easter in Britain, consumers spent around £325 million on chocolate and purchased nearly 100 million chocolate eggs. Worldwide, it is estimated that around 1.5 billion chocolate Easter eggs are produced each year.

In modern Britain, Easter could perhaps be described – with a touch of humour – as a full-blown, socially sanctioned chocolate bender. A festival of excess wrapped up in foil and denial. While it remains an important occasion for many people, it has clearly adapted to the needs and interests of successive generations.

Over time, it has become increasingly secular, reflecting modern Britain's complex and sometimes ambivalent relationship with religion.

So, talking of chocolate and Easter eggs, we now have a short video clip about a British chocolatier who used to send an egg each year to Queen Elizabeth II.

The clip refers to the Queen, but it means Elizabeth II – not Queen Camilla – as it was produced before 2022. By all accounts, she had quite a fondness for chocolate!

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Video: Watch how the Queen's Easter egg is made (YOUTUBE – 2.18 minutes)

Watch here: <https://youtu.be/aHKJQ9DahSY?si=Np1d1lcgN9o80e7l>

Interlude

We now have a musical interlude – it's about six minutes long and displays the 50 most famous paintings of the Resurrection of Christ. Take this period for your personal reflection and meditation.

Video 'The Resurrection of Christ – 50 Famous Paintings' – YOUTUBE (6.22 minutes)

Watch here: <https://youtu.be/jyswrwGyD3Q?si=6Pjj6fJ73s3RvDam>

Part C

In the final part of our service, we will explore a few traditional Easter customs.

When Steve offered to write today's service, he had what he thought was a brilliant idea, inviting all the ladies in the congregation to wear Easter bonnets or hat. In his enthusiasm, he imagined it would be warmly received – how delightful it would look! However, the response was rather less enthusiastic than he had hoped.

The reactions ranged from polite hesitation to firm refusal. 'I don't think so – not happening', 'I don't have a hat.' 'Are you mad?'

In many Easter Sunday services, though, wearing an Easter bonnet or hat is part of the tradition. It is a light-hearted nod to the changing seasons. Adorning oneself with flowers, wearing green, or choosing new clothes symbolises renewal and the fresh beginnings associated with spring.

In the Middle Ages, Christians believed it was unlucky to attend Easter services without wearing something new. There was even a saying – 'At Easter; let your clothes be new, or else be sure you will rue.'

The idea that misfortune might follow those who failed to wear something new at Easter persisted in various forms until the early 19th century.

People dressing up in their Easter Sunday remains especially popular in the United States. One significant moment in American history associated with Easter is often remembered as the Sunday of Joy in April 1865 - the first Easter Sunday following the end of the Civil War, when Confederate General Robert E. Lee surrendered to Union General Ulysses S. Grant.

News of the surrender spread rapidly, and many churches – already gathered for worship - erupted into spontaneous celebration. After four years of brutal conflict, sombre clothing associated with mourning was replaced with colour and festivity, symbolising new hope for a fractured nation. In the Gilded Age that followed, wealthy New Yorkers would promenade down Fifth Avenue in their finest attire. Men wore tailored suits and top hats;

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women displayed elaborate Easter bonnets decorated with flowers, ribbons, and lace. It became a highlight of the Easter weekend among New York's social elite.

This tradition continues today as the annual Easter Parade and Bonnet Festival. The more imaginative and extravagant the bonnet, the better. It takes place each Easter Sunday along Fifth Avenue in Midtown Manhattan, from around 49th to 57th Street, and remains a lively springtime celebration enjoyed by both locals and visitors to the city.

One tradition not widely practiced in Britain but really should is the tradition of the Easter witch. Popular in Finland and Sweden, this custom involves children dressing in colourful headscarves, long skirts, and painted freckles, rather than the black costumes associated with Halloween. These Easter witches go door to door exchanging drawings, poems, and blessings for sweets, in a tradition similar to trick-or-treating.

In folklore and legend, witches were believed to be especially powerful in the lead-up to Holy Week, where the boundary between the spiritual and earthly worlds was thought to be thinner. During this time, hot cross buns were sometimes regarded as protective symbols against evil spirits.

There was also the tradition of lighting Easter fires and ringing church bells to ward off darkness and negativity.

All these customs connect to the deeper symbolism of Easter as a season in which light triumphs over darkness, and hope overcomes despair.

Hymn 3 Our final hymn is one of Steve's favourites and is Hymn 280 in the green hymn book – 'Morning has Broken.' This hymn, first published in 1931 was made famous by the folk singer Cat Stevens, now called Yusuf Islam, who included a version in his 1971 album Teaser and the Fire-cat.

Green Book 280. 'Morning has broken'

Morning has broken
Like the first morning,
Blackbird has spoken
Like the first bird,
Praise for the singing!
Praise for the morning!
Praise for them, springing
Fresh from the Word!

Sweet the rain's new fall
Sunlit from heaven,
Like the first dewfall
On the first grass.
Praise for the sweetness
Of the wet garden,
Sprung in completeness
Where his feet pass.

Mine is the sunlight!

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Mine is the morning
Born of the one light
Eden saw play!
Praise with elation,
Praise every morning,
God's re-creation

Tune: 'Bunessan' Old Gaelic Melody arr. Martin Fallas Shaw 1875 – 1958
Words: Eleanor Farjeon, 1881 – 1965
From the Children's Bells published by Oxford University Press by permission of David Higham Associates, Ltd

Of the new day!

Closing words

Our closing words are a reflection on the role of women in the Easter story.

Women stand at the theological heart of the narrative in a society where they had little formal power or public voice. They lived in a patriarchal world in which their lives were often governed by male authority figures, from fathers and brothers to husbands, and in widowhood, by sons or other male relatives.

In the Easter accounts, the male disciples have fled. It is the women who remain faithful witnesses to the suffering, crucifixion, and burial of Jesus, quietly challenging the social expectations of their time.

The Gospel of Matthew records that during the crucifixion many women stood watching from a distance - those who had followed Jesus from Galilee – including Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Joseph, and the wife of Zebedee.

The Gospel of Mark also names Salome.

The Gospel of John refers to Jesus's mother Mary, his aunt, and Mary the wife of Clopas.

The Gospel of Luke highlights the significant role women played in the burial preparations, noting that they went home and prepared spices for the body.

Most importantly, in all four Gospel traditions, the first witnesses to the resurrection are woman – particularly Mary Magdalene.

In this way, women are the original bearers of the Easter message.

Their presence, faithfulness, and testimony remain central to the story, and the voices of women continue to be essential to the life and the future of ALL denominations of the church.

Thank you for listening, and Happy Easter.

Closing music

Our closing music is a clip from the 1948 film called Easter Parade

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Chalice is extinguished

'Happy Easter' – Fred Astaire and ensemble from the film Easter Parade from 1948 -
YOUTUBE 2 minutes 12 seconds

Watch it here: <https://youtu.be/orMVP7SdbNY?si=G7uu3giiGmd14NQe>