

Sunday Service at UU Falmouth, for March 31, 2024, Easter Sunday
Guest speaker: Jessica Mark Welch; Service Associate: David Mark Welch

Welcome and Announcements

Prelude

Chalice Lighting:

Eternal Light, shine into our hearts.

Eternal Goodness, deliver us from evil.

Eternal Power, be Thou our support.

Eternal Wisdom, scatter the darkness of our ignorance.

Alcuin of York, 735-804 AD (8th Century)

Let us now read the affirmation of our covenant together, as printed in your order of service.

Affirmation: Love is the spirit of our fellowship, and service its law. This is our covenant: To dwell together in peace, To seek the truth in love, And to help one another.

Hymn 266: "Now the Green Blade Riseth"

Opening Words: Death, be not proud, by John Donne (written in 1633)

Death, be not proud, though some have called thee
Mighty and dreadful, for thou art not so;
For those whom thou think'st thou dost overthrow
Die not, poor Death, nor yet canst thou kill me.

From rest and sleep, which but thy pictures be,
Much pleasure; then from thee much more must flow,
And soonest our best men with thee do go,
Rest of their bones, and soul's delivery.

Thou art slave to fate, chance, kings, and desperate men,
And dost with poison, war, and sickness dwell,
And poppy or charms can make us sleep as well
And better than thy stroke; why swell'st thou then?

One short sleep past, we wake eternally
And death shall be no more; Death, thou shalt die.

JOYS, CONCERNS, AND MILESTONES

Time for meditation / Silent reflection

Sung Response "Spirit of Life"

READINGS – (Jessica)

One thing that I love about Unitarian Universalism is its emphasis on seeking the truth wherever it is to be found. We seek truth in science, and reason; we seek it in poetry and art. We seek it in nature.

And we seek truth in the world's religions. We look for the insights that each of the religious traditions holds within itself.

It can be relatively easy to look for insights in a tradition that we didn't grow up in. We are perfectly comfortable looking to Buddhism for insights on how to let go of worrying and just be in the moment. We can practice meditation adopted from Buddhism, without feeling uncomfortable about the ideas that may seem strange to us, about reincarnation or the soul.

Today is Easter, the highest holy day of the Christian tradition. So today I'd like us to try to apply that attitude to Christianity. Some of us are perfectly comfortable with Christianity, some of us aren't, but today let's delve into some of the rich history and writings of the Christian tradition, and look for the insights and what they might tell us about our own lives and how we live together in community.

There are four accounts of the life of Jesus in the Bible, four gospels. In an amazing act of open-mindedness, when the Bible was put together, these four different gospels all were included, even though in some ways they directly contradicted each other.

The Christmas story, the story of the birth of Jesus, for example, is completely absent from two of the gospels, and is quite different in each of the other two. They have different casts of characters – shepherds in one, magi in the other – and two different and contradictory explanations of how it was that Jesus of Nazareth was born in Bethlehem.

The people who put the Bible together just threw all four gospels all in there, and said, you figure it out. In other words, they trusted us to look at these texts not as factual history, but as stories with a point. They trusted us to take meaning from each story in its different way.

In contrast to the Christmas story, the Easter story, the story of the resurrection of Jesus, the foundational story of Christianity, is basically the same in all four gospels: The women who had been with Jesus go to the tomb to prepare his body for burial. But the heavy stone in front of the tomb has been rolled away, the body is gone, and a heavenly being appears to the women and says, "he is not here, he has risen."

The women were the first to know that something world-changing had taken place. And then they go and tell the men what happened.

That gendered aspect of the story is very interesting, and maybe that's the subject of a future sermon. Today I want to focus on something different, the way in which people don't recognize the risen Jesus when they first meet him.

Here are the stories: I'm going to read from the book of John, and then from the book of Luke.

John 20

20 Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb. ² So she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him."

³ Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went toward the tomb. ⁴ The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. ⁵ He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in. ⁶ Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there, ⁷ and the cloth that had been on Jesus's head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself.

⁸ Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed, ⁹ for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead. ¹⁰ Then the disciples returned to their homes.

¹¹ But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look^[a] into the tomb, ¹² and she saw two angels in white sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet. ¹³ They said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping?" She said to them, "They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him."

¹⁴ When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus.

¹⁵ Jesus said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?" Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away." ¹⁶ Jesus said to her, "Mary!"

She turned and said to him in Hebrew, "Rabbouni!" (which means Teacher). ¹⁷ Jesus said to her, "Do not touch me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.' "

¹⁸ Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, "I have seen the Lord" .

Luke 24: The Walk to Emmaus

¹³ Now on that same day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem, ¹⁴ and talking with each other about all these things that had happened. ¹⁵ While they were talking and discussing, Jesus himself came near and went with them, ¹⁶ but their eyes were kept from recognizing him.

¹⁷ And he said to them, "What are you discussing with each other while you walk along?" They stood still, looking sad. ¹⁸ Then one of them, whose name was Cleopas, answered him, "Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have taken place there in these days?"

¹⁹ He asked them, "What things?" They replied, "The things about Jesus of Nazareth, who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people, ²⁰ and how our chief priests and leaders handed him over to be condemned to death and crucified him. ²¹ But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel..."

²⁵ Then he said to them, "Oh, how foolish you are and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared! ²⁶ Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?" ²⁷ Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures.

²⁸ As they came near the village to which they were going, he walked ahead as if he were going on. ²⁹ But they urged him strongly, saying, "Stay with us, because it is almost evening and the day is now nearly over." So he went in to stay with them. ³⁰ When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them.

³¹ Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him, and he vanished from their sight.

³² They said to each other, "Were not our hearts burning within us^[k] while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?" ³³ That same hour they got up and returned to Jerusalem, and they found the eleven and their companions gathered together. ³⁴ They were saying, "The Lord has risen indeed...!" ³⁵ Then they told what had happened on the road and how he had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread.

[Here ends the reading.]

SERMON – "Recognizing the Life-Giving Spirit in One Another"

In the stories about Jesus told in the Bible, Jesus went around Israel teaching and preaching, prodding people to cast off restrictive rules and hierarchies.

The message was: Love your enemies, and do good to those who hate you. Blessed are the poor. Treat those who are powerless as if they are just as important as the rich and powerful – because they are. It was a turning upside down of social norms, a call to love one another across boundaries.

His movement gathered steam, it became more and more popular; he rode into Jerusalem and was greeted by cheering crowds.

And then, in a shocking and frightening turn of events, he was arrested, and was publicly executed. His friends and followers were terrified.

And then, two days later, on Easter, *something* happened.

I grew up with these Bible stories, and the thing that always struck me about the stories is that after the resurrection, Jesus's closest friends and followers didn't recognize him when they saw him. Not at first. They only recognized him when a moment of person-to-person connection happened.

Mary, standing outside the empty tomb, saw Jesus and thought he was the gardener, until he said her name. The disciples, walking along the road to Emmaus, talked with Jesus for hours; they marveled at this understanding of the scriptures and his ability to explain them, and still they didn't recognize him until they went in to dinner and he took bread, and broke it, and shared it with them.

To me, these stories are sending a clear signal that the resurrection does not have to be understood as a literal rising of a body from the dead.

It was a different kind of transformation.

People recognized in each other the living spirit of Jesus: they recognized that even though he was gone, they could continue challenging the social order and practicing radical, inclusive love.

And notice **when** they recognize it. When they are together. Saying each other's names. Sharing a meal together. In the breaking of the bread, suddenly Jesus is there.

There is a saying of Jesus, from the gospel of Matthew (chapter 18 verse 20): "Wherever two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them."

We used to repeat that saying often, when I was growing up. Sometimes you said it when you had a Sunday service, and maybe there was a big snowstorm or something, and only 5 people showed up, you'd say, well, "Wherever even two or three are gathered, God is in the midst of them."

But you would also say it whenever just a few people came together for a religious purpose.

It is in the gathering that sacred things happen. It is in gathering that we can be transformed.

Religion is something we do together.

The transformation that happened at Easter was that people began to see that the spirit that was at work through Jesus was alive again, in and through the people **when they came together** to do the work of the spirit.

I think *that life of the spirit* is the victory over death, that the apostle Paul wrote about in his first letter to the church he had founded a few years earlier in the city of Corinth.

Paul talks about being transformed from a physical body to a spiritual body. Paul writes: I Corinthians chapter 15:

"What is sown is perishable; what is raised is imperishable. ⁴³ ... It is sown in weakness; it is raised in power. ⁴⁴ It is sown a physical body; it is raised a spiritual body. ...

The first man, Adam, became a living being; the last Adam [Jesus] became a life-giving spirit."

[I'm going to interrupt Paul for a minute to point out that this is the same idea that Daniel Mark Welch was talking about at the Christmas Eve service. Jesus is the opposite of Adam, Jesus is the completion of the story that began with Adam and Eve.

The world has come full circle and we are no longer separated from the spirit of life and love.

OK, now back to Paul:]

"The first man, Adam, became a living being; the last Adam [Jesus] became a life-giving spirit.

... ⁵¹ Look, I will tell you a mystery! We will not all die,^[a] but we will all be changed, ⁵² [*we will all be changed*], in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. ...

... ⁵⁴ When this perishable body puts on imperishability and this mortal body puts on immortality, then the saying that is written will be fulfilled:

"Death has been swallowed up in victory."

⁵⁵ "Where, O death, is your victory?

Where, O death, is your sting?"

Words for Easter, from Paul's first letter to the Corinthians.

So what does all this mean for UUs? I think for us, the message of Easter is:

When we come together, when we see the divine that is in each other,
that is when the spirit of love, of radical acceptance of one another, can grow in the world, through us.
That spirit, that radical spirit of love, is in our being together.

By listening to each other with open hearts, we can be transformed,
so that together, we can work to transform the world.

The world has been through a lot recently:

The world, and the country, and all the people have been through a lot, and that has repercussions within congregations as well.

Like the people who were with Jesus who at his crucifixion saw their world collapsing around them, I think many of us have felt disoriented, and isolated, and afraid.

But now I sense a different spirit, an optimistic, an Easter spirit of renewed hope and confidence.

We now know that we **need** to be together, and that this congregation is precious -- because it is the group of people **with whom** we can become more than we could ever become by ourselves alone.

It is never easy. And it has never been easy, for two thousand years. Paul founded the church in Corinth, in Greece, in about the year 50, and he wrote his letter to this new little church, the letter I just read from, about 3 years later. That letter begins with Paul beseeching them to *stop arguing with each other*. He writes, in this letter, "I thank God I didn't baptize any of you, because then you would be boasting to each other, 'Well, I was baptized by Paul!'" Some things never change. And I think Paul may not have realized that this letter he was writing was going to make it into the Bible.

Living together in any community takes work, it takes patience and forbearance.
And it is also enriching beyond measure.

I'll speak for myself: this congregation has opened my heart.

Being in community with all of you,

Noticing the friction points,

The decisions you make, that I disagree with;

the things that you believe are obviously true, that I don't see;

But trusting you,

and believing that you are showing me another side of reality that I can't see from where I'm standing.

That has changed -- me.

Made me, I think, a little more open, a little less sure of myself and more sure of you.

In community we become more than ourselves alone.

We become transformed into something deeper and greater.

We build something that lasts.

So, for this Easter, let us see the life-giving spirit in one another, and treasure that spirit.

And let us celebrate, and strengthen, the renewal and rebirth of our lives, the renewal and rebirth of this congregation that we have built, and the bright future we have together.

Amen.

OFFERING:

Now is the time for our offering – a time to recognize that it is the generous support of each and every member and friend of this fellowship that fuels our community and our mission.

We give to remember that we are part of something bigger than ourselves.

[from Jesus’s sermon on the mount, slightly edited]

Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal, but store up for yourselves treasures in the strength of our community, which neither moth nor rust consumes and which thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

The offering for the work of this congregation will now be given and received.

Choir: Joy in the Morning

Ceremony of Commitment:

For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

Giving enough that it matters to you is a spiritual practice and an act of stewardship. Today we celebrate the generosity that members and friends of this congregation have made to our future. We are profoundly grateful.

At this time the shepherds will guide us forward by rows to symbolically express our commitment by placing our pledge cards in this bowl.

Unison Response: As those who came before us gave their time and treasure to create and strengthen our Fellowship, today we freely commit our resources to further the vital presence of liberal religion on the Upper Cape, to empower spiritual freedom, and to create a bright future together.

Closing Hymn #271: “Come Down, O Love Divine”

Extinguishing the Chalice: We extinguish this flame, but not the light of truth, the warmth of community, or the fire of commitment. These we carry in our hearts until we are together again.

Benediction: [from Paul’s letter to the Corinthians]: Be watchful, stand firm in your faith, be courageous, be strong; let all that you do be done in love. Amen.

Postlude: “May the Longtime Sun”