

Worship transcript for April 12, 2020

Opening music (All Souls Choir; Rochelle Rice, Gordon Kent, and Patee Roper, soloists; Fred Katz, percussion)

“Yonder Come Day” (Georgia Sea Islands spiritual)

Yonder come day
Day is a-breakin’
Yonder come day, o my soul
Yonder come day
Day is a-breakin’
Sun is a-risin’ in my soul

Welcome (Rev. Robert Hardies)

Hello All Souls! And Happy Easter!

I know that Easter is an especially hard Sunday for us to not be worshipping all together in our sanctuary. It’s my favorite service of the year. And one of the most beautiful and joyful Sundays at All Souls. So we’ve tried to make this online Easter service special in its own way. We’ve got a few surprises in store for you today that we hope will warm your heart and bring you some joy. And for those of you for whom it wouldn’t be Easter without hearing All Souls’ organ, we are delighted to bring you an archived edition of our organist John Strang playing our postlude.

But what we’re really trying to wrestle with in this service is this: What does it mean for us to observe Easter—a holiday filled with such promise and hope—in difficult times like these?

Friends, these times would be so much more difficult if we didn’t have each other. I continue to be moved by all the ways that we are reaching out, connecting, caring, and serving one another and the broader community during this pandemic.

And I’m also moved by your generosity during this time. I know that on Easter, many of us make a special gift to the church in gratitude and support for its ministry. If you are moved to make a gift today, you will find ways to do that later in the service during our offertory.

And thank you, again, for your generosity.

At this time, friends, I invite you to make yourself comfortable, and prepare your home chalice. if you have one. As I invite Rev. Tony Coleman to share our chalice lighting and opening prayer.

Chalice Lighting (Rev. Tony Coleman)

Friends, as we prepare for this time of Easter worship, I invite you to join me in a chalice lighting.

With this flame we celebrate the light that shines anew each day; we invoke the warmth of Spring; we rekindle the power of the Fire that never stops burning. With this flame we make space for the Holy—in us and with us.

Will you join me in prayer?

Pastoral Prayer

Ever-changing, ever-present Spirit of Life, be with us now—

As the weeks wear on, as we move from social distancing mandates to stay-at-home orders, it can be easy to forget that each new day is just that—a new day. As our anxieties continue to mount, as our fear feels as persistent as it ever has, as we grapple with the realities of joblessness and loneliness and death, we ask, Gracious Spirit, that you help us remember the power of Life.

Help us remember the examples of that power enshrined in holy texts. Help us remember the story of the Israelites' liberation, the story of Jesus's resurrection, how the lotus flower grows up and out of the mud.

As Spring unfolds around us, even as we might feel stuck in a set of circumstances we cannot change, help us remember the daffodils and the tulips, the ginkgos and the oaks, the colorful creatures of this planet that resurrect with new life each and every Spring.

It is the blessing of new life that we pray for this morning. Gracious Spirit we pray that you share that blessing with Roy Barber who recently began radiation and chemotherapy treatments. We pray for Emily Dyer as she continues to grapple with photophobia and isolation in the midst of this pandemic. We pray for Teal Penrod, her husband, and everyone living at the Woodner who is fearing infection.

And just as we seek the blessings of new life, let us also give thanks for all the ways that the power of new life has blessed us. Let us give thanks for the stories of those recovering from COVID-19 and other illnesses. Let us give thanks for a church community that holds us, even when it's hard. And let us give thanks for the special blessings that altogether surprise us with joy, like Annmarie Hansen's admission to Virginia Theological Seminary.

Let us come together now for a moment to speak the names, prayers, or celebrations that are on our hearts this Easter Sunday.

For these and other gifts, for the blessings of new life and others we may be seeking, let us say together: Amen.

Music (All Souls Virtual Choir)

“Spirit of Life” (words and music by Carolyn McDade) (sung in English and Spanish)

Fuente de amor, ven hacia mi
Y al corazon cantale tu compassion
Sopla al volar, sube en la mar
Hasta moldear la justicia de la vida
Arraigame, liberame
Fuente de amor, ven a mi, ven a mi

Spirit of life, come unto me
Sing in my heart all the stirrings of compassion
Blow in the wind, rise in the sea
Move in the hand, giving life the shape of justice
Roots hold me close, wings set me free
Spirit of life, come to me, come to me.

Reading and Sermon (Rev. Hardies)

Our reading is from the Easter morning narrative of the Gospel according to Mark, Chapter 16, verses 1 through 8.

“When the sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices, so that they might go and anoint [Jesus’ body].

And very early on the first day of the week, when the sun had risen, they went to the tomb. They had been saying to one another, “Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?” [But] when they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had already been rolled back.

As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man, dressed in a white robe, sitting on the right side; and they were alarmed. But he said to them, ‘Do not be alarmed; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified.

He has risen; he is not here. Look, there is the place they laid him. Now go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you.’

So the women went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them;

and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.”

Sermon

Friends, Easter has arrived this year at an inconvenient time. A time that public health officials warn is one of the deadliest and most difficult of this pandemic. Right now, our world bears more resemblance to Good Friday—the day Jesus died—than to Easter Sunday. Good Friday is the story of loss, loneliness and death. Still, Easter has come, and brought with it, its refrain of Alleluia. Easter has come and brought with it, it’s promise of life after death—life beyond this grave threat that we find ourselves in.

This Easter, how can we find our way to Alleluia? How do we be Easter people in a Good Friday world?

You know this pandemic has seared many images into my mind's eye. Images of crowded hospitals. Of health care workers dressed in masks, gowns and gloves. Of public officials at lecterns delivering unwelcome news and stern warnings.

But the images I've been most captivated by are the ones of empty spaces. Images of public buildings and spaces usually crowded with people, but that now stand empty. Airports and train terminals. Empty. Museums and libraries. Empty. The great esplanades and plazas of Europe. The busy streets of Shanghai. The baseball stadiums on Opening Day. Places that usually brim and bustle with life in all its glorious diversity. They're all empty now.

On one hand, I find these images haunting. Haunting because all of these places were created for people. For us. To be with one another and to share our lives together. The eerie absence of human beings in these images makes them look like scenes from some awful apocalyptic movie.

Where have all the people gone?

Yet I also find something beautiful about these images. The Golden Gate Bridge, framed by the Marin Headlands, with not one car to blemish the landscape. The architectural splendor of New York's Grand Central Station, with no commuters. The cherry blossoms at their peak, circling the Tidal Basin. And not one tourist to sully their pink perfection.

Ironically, it's the emptiness of these spaces that reveals a different dimension of their beauty. That reveals the exquisite care and attention we lavish on designing and creating the spaces we want to be together in. So I find these images both haunting and, strangely, beautiful.

I had a similar experience recently when I stopped by church to pick up a few things. After gathering what I needed from my office, I couldn't resist going into the sanctuary to meditate and pray. Of course, I was alone. Our sanctuary is a beautiful place to be alone in.

There's a dimension of its beauty that is more easily appreciated when it's near empty. The way light and shadow move through the space. The sculptural beauty of the Corinthian columns, and the organ pipes. When its empty, you can see all the ways that our sanctuary was carefully designed to encourage souls to contemplate the beautiful and the sublime.

But friends, as I prayed there by myself, I started to weep. To sob, really. I wept for all the pain and suffering and grief that so many are experiencing right now. I wept for the loneliness, the anxiety, the depression, the sickness, the death.

And I wept because I so desperately miss all of you. I miss us all being together in that sanctuary praying, crying, making a joyful noise, trying to find our way together. I was haunted by the emptiness of our sanctuary. I was grieving your absence.

And then I thought about the women at the tomb on Easter morning. At dawn, they returned to the place where they had laid Jesus' body, in order to anoint and prepare it for burial. And though it grieved them to do so, it was important to them that they offer these last ministrations to their rabbi and friend. But when they got to the tomb it was empty. Their friend's body wasn't there. And you'll recall from our scripture reading, that they were confused and afraid. Where was his body? Who had taken it? After losing so much, were they going to be denied even this last moment of care and tenderness for their beloved friend?

For Jesus' friends, the empty tomb, at first, foretold only more suffering and loss. More bad news. But we know that, in the end, the empty tomb wasn't bad news at all. It was good news! Very good news. The empty tomb meant, of course, that on that very morning their friend Jesus had been raised up from the dead.

The empty tomb meant that Jesus and his friends would celebrate a reunion in their future.

That they would see one another again. Touch one another again. Embrace one another again. The good news of the empty tomb was that beyond all the suffering and death there would, indeed, be more life.

Friends, if you, like me, have been grieving the empty spaces in our lives and our world. If you, like me, have seen in these empty spaces only loss, grief and absence. If you, like me, have wept bitterly in these empty and lonely spaces... then what the Easter story can remind us is that empty spaces can sometimes foretell great things. And lonely places can sometimes point toward the great reunion that awaits us. When we can once again be with one another, touch one another, embrace one another. And it is the very fact that these spaces are now empty and lonely, that will make our long-awaited reunion possible. That will allow many of us—if not all—to survive this pandemic.

So friends, maybe Easter hasn't come at an inconvenient time after all. Maybe Easter came just when we needed it most. To bear witness to the promise of empty spaces. To point ahead to the joyful reunions that await us. And to remind us again of all the ways that—in spite of death—life persists.

To be an Easter Person in a Good Friday world is to be able to look around and see the promise of empty spaces. To be an Easter Person in a Good Friday world is to rejoice in life's resilience. Life awaits us on the other side of this pandemic.

Not unchanged. Not unscarred. Not without losses.

Nonetheless, life persists. We persist.

Alleluia. And Amen.

Music (Dante Pope)

“Lovely Day/Giant (meditation)” (Bill Withers/Dante Pope)

When I wake up in the morning, love
And the sunlight hurts my eyes
And something without warning, love
Bears heavy on my mind
Then I look at you
And the world's alright with me
Just one look at you
And I know it's gonna be

A lovely day
A lovely day

When the day that lies ahead of me
Seems impossible to face
When someone else instead of me
Always seems to know the way
Then I look at you
And the world's alright with me
Just one look at you
And I know it's gonna be

A lovely day
A lovely day

We are here, in this world to make a change
We're predestined, are you ready to take your place?
Just let go of the fears you have
and confront those convictions inside you
Even though I can't predict your future
I know there's a bright one in front of you.
So know it's gonna be

A lovely day
A lovely day

Offertory/Benediction (Rev. Coleman)

Friends, we hope that this video will brighten your day and lift your spirits. We will continue to do everything we can to ensure that our community stays whole and bonded during this time, because, as it has already been said, though our building is closed, our church is open. Because of this, friends, it's as important now as it ever has been to do what you can to support All Souls. Your gifts support the gift of our church.

So I invite you now to join me in a benediction...

This is a new day. Despite whatever set of circumstances you're in; no matter what challenges you may be facing, they will not last forever. Joy, Peace, Hope—like the flowers of Spring—these gifts of the human spirit live on, even when we cannot see them. So go forth, friends, and grow, blossom, and bless this world.

Benediction Music (John Strang, organ)

“Birkalaten” (Gunnar Idenstam)