

Worship transcript for April 4, 2021

Prelude (All Souls Choir)

“Light Everlasting” (Olaf Christiansen)

O light everlasting, o love never failing
Illumine our darkness and draw us to thee

May we, from thy spirit, receive inspiration
That children, together, thy wisdom may see
Make known to all nations thy peace and salvation
And help us, o mother, thy temple to be

O light everlasting, o love never failing
Illumine our darkness and draw us to thee

Call to Worship (Rev. Kathleen Rolenz)

We gather today to welcome a miracle –
For Easter is a holiday of miracles:
It is life from death,
Joy from sorrow,
Celebration from mourning.
Easter reminds us that all is never lost;
That the story continues as long as we are here to tell it.
So gather up your worries—we are going to bury them beneath the ground
And watch them transform into flowers of hope,
Pushing through the earth, reminding us on Easter morning that
Love brings us back to life,
Calls us from sadness, from grief, from anxiety,
Into a world renewed, and alive, and filled with joy
Once again. (words by Peggy Clarke)
Come, let us worship together. This morning, we invite Michael Milano and Wayne Sartis to
kindle the flame of our common faith.

Chalice Lighting (Michael Milano and Wayne Sartis)

Hymn 203

“All Creatures of the Earth and Sky”

All creatures of the earth and sky,
Come, kindred, lift your voices high,
Alleluia, alleluia!

Bright burning sun with golden beam,
Soft shining moon with silver gleam:
Alleluia, alleluia, alleluia, alleluia, alleluia!

Swift rushing wind so wild and strong,
White clouds that sail in heav'n along,
Alleluia, alleluia!

Fair rising morn in praise rejoice,
High stars of evening, find a voice:
Alleluia, alleluia, alleluia, alleluia, alleluia!

Cool flowing water, pure and clear,
Make music for all life to hear,
Alleluia, alleluia!

Dance, flame of fire, so strong and bright,
And bless us with your warmth and light:
Alleluia, alleluia, alleluia, alleluia, alleluia!

Welcome (Morgan Duncan)

Welcome to All Souls Church!

My name is Morgan Duncan and I get to be your Worship Associate the beautiful Easter Sunday.

For nearly 200 years, our congregation has sought to live up to the vision inherent in our name, All Souls. It's a vision of a human community where all people are welcome at the table. Where the divisions that separate us in our daily lives come tumbling down and we recognize ourselves as part of one human family.

We are a Unitarian Universalist congregation, diverse in many ways but united in our belief in the inherent worth and dignity of every person, and in the obligation to express our faith through acts of justice and compassion.

I want to extend an especially warm welcome to all who are joining us for the first time. If you'd like to be added to our e-newsletter mailing list, send a direct message to Gary Penn in the chat. And do stay on afterwards for coffee and conversation.

In an effort to acknowledge and support Indigenous communities, it is important to recognize the land on which our church stands. The closest tribe was Nacotchtank, from which the name Anacostia is derived. They were part of the Piscataway group of tribes.

We acknowledge that indigeneous peoples were here before us, are here with us now, and will continue to be with us, as we look forward to the future. Let's take a moment of silence to reflect

on whose land we each reside, in our individual and collective locations around the U.S. and our planet Earth. [Silence]

If we were in the sanctuary, this is the time when we would turn and physically greet one another. We can still do that – only in a ritual which we are calling “Beholding” We invite you to remain on mute, but to scroll through the gallery of faces. Feel free to greet one another in the chat as we express our joy at being here, together.

Story for All Ages (Dolores Miller and the children of All Souls)

“Amaterasu”

Introduction: There are many stories from ancient times that were told to explain the miracle of spring with its resurrection and new life. One of these, the story of the Sun Goddess, Amaterasu, is found in the most ancient book of Japan, called the Kojiki. It’s in the myths of the Kojiki where the roots of the Shinto religion are found.

Narrator: Long, long ago, high in the heavens, was the land of the gods and goddesses. It was a peaceful land, ruled by the Sun Goddess, Amaterasu. Amaterasu was a kind and gentle ruler. Amaterasu had a younger brother whose name was Susano. One day Susano called up to the heavens.

Susano: Please, sister, may I come up and live in the heavens with the gods and goddesses?

Amaterasu: My dear brother, you have a habit of causing mischief. If you are to live in the heavens, you must promise to behave.

Susano: I promise. (fingers crossed behind back)

Narrator: But before long Susano was back to his old ways. Soon he was stomping through the land, wrecking the gardens and destroying the canals.

Amaterasu: Little brother, you promised me you would behave. You are causing others to be upset and angry. You must stop.

Susano: (hangs head) Sorry.

Narrator: One day Amaterasu gathered the sewers, quilters, knitters, and weavers to make a special cloth for the gods. Suddenly, Susano threw a large heavy ball into the sewing room! The workers flew in all directions. Many were injured. Amaterasu was very angry and sad. She ran to a cave to hide.

But Amaterasu was the Sun Goddess! If she hid, there’d be no light! Crops wouldn’t grow!

Radley: (pleading) Sun Goddess, please come out.

Hazel: (pleading) We need your light.

Thea: (pleading) We need your warmth.

Narrator: Now, everyone knew Amaterasu loved a party. So they threw a party hoping she would look out.

And sure enough she did.

When Amaterasu saw that she had left the others without light she knew she couldn’t hide anymore.

Amaterasu: I will never leave the world in darkness again. (Pause) (All cheer, except Susano)

Susano, you are forever banished from the heavens!

Narrator: And all was right in the heavens.

Announcements (Rev. Louise Green)

Hello, I am Rev. Louise Green, your Minister of Congregational Care. So glad to be with you on this Easter Day!

Announcements

After the service today, we invite you to stay for either social time in Coffee Hour small groups; or After Hour with Rev. Kathleen Rolenz, in a conversation about today's sermon. Both are from 11:45 – 12:30.

A monthly drop-in covenant group with Rev. Keithan is meeting tomorrow, Monday, at 1:00 PM, exploring the April theme of "Miracles" All are welcome; the Zoom info is on the church homepage calendar.

I will be away this week through next Sunday, enjoying spring staycation with my spouse Regina. For any pastoral issues, or to be in the Cong Care list, please contact Rev. Kathleen.

Cong Care

We rejoice that Mel Hardy came home yesterday from a rehab facility, after some weeks of medical issues. I spoke to Mel yesterday, and he was delighted to be home at last. Our love to Mel and Juanita, and lots of healing blessings their way.

Welcome back to our Executive Director Traci Hughes-Trotter, whose two wrist casts are off, and is back to work. We wish her well in the steady recovery process, which involves less action on the computer.

Front Desk staff David Lindsay is also back from Florida, after seeing his mother Adassa Breary in hospice care in a nursing home. I am inviting a card shower for him: please send a card of encouragement to the church, and you could wish him a happy 70th birthday year as well.

Sincere condolences to Dave MacMillan, whose brother-in-law Terry died this last week in hospice care for cancer. We are thinking of Dave, his sister, and the extended family as they work through the arrangements.

And now, your names and situations into this space, either spoken in your heart, or offered in the chat. A time for a moment of shared silence...

Easter Prayer

We hold in our hearts all those impacted by the violence, again at the U.S. Capitol. The family and friends of slain Officer William Evans, and all those who work at the Capitol in many roles. We grieve with those who lament losses to gun violence in Atlanta, Boulder, Wilmington NC, and the toll that these mass shootings continue to take in our country. We hold the cities of Minneapolis and St. Paul in our hearts, and all those nationwide holding the trauma of the ongoing trial for the murderer of George Floyd.

In so much pain, we gather in community to cherish signs of resurrection. Please pray or meditate with me:

Holy One of many wisdom paths, Passover liberation rituals, and Easter abundance: We need the sustenance which comes from family, friends, congregation and celebration.

We long for the moments of renewed life bursting forth in spring blossoms, sunny days, and time in Nature. On this day, we tell a sacred story, of one whose life force did not end in death, and lives in love and memory across centuries. We proclaim the power of the human spirit and all kinds of collective abundance. May we live as ones who claim both the beauty and power of all that rises, Amen.

Hymn 123

“Spirit of Life”

Fuente de amor, ven hacia mi
Y al corazon cantale tu compasion
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.

Readings

Reading from An Ancient Source: Matthew 27: 62-66 (Morgan Duncan)

After the day of Preparation, the chief priests gathered before Pilate and said, “Sire, we remember what the imposter said while he was still alive. “After three days I will rise again.” Therefore command the tomb to be made secure until the third day; otherwise his disciples may go and steal him away and tell the people, “He has been raised from the dead,” and the last deception would be worse than the first.” Pilate said to them “You have a guard of soldiers, go make it as secure as you can.” So they went with the guard and made the tomb secure by sealing the stone.”

Reading from a Modern Source (Rev. Louise Green)

The second reading is an excerpt from a longer poem, written by Julia Esquivel, a Guatemalan poet, theologian and human rights activist. Esquivel was on the frontline of justice movements in the midst of political unrest and genocide in Guatemala in the middle portion of the twentieth century.

They have Threatened Us with Resurrection by Julia Esquivel (excerpt)

It isn't the noise in the streets that keeps us from resting, my friend,
nor is it the shouts of the young people coming out drunk from the "St. Pauli,"
nor is it the tumult of those who pass by excitedly on their way to the mountains.
It is something within us that doesn't let us sleep, that doesn't let us rest,
that won't stop pounding deep inside....

They have threatened us with Resurrection, because they do not know life (poor things!).
That is the whirlwind which does not let us sleep, the reason why sleeping, we keep watch,
and awake, we dream.
No, it's not the street noises, nor the shouts from the drunks in the "St. Pauli,"
nor the noise from the fans at the ball park...

Join us in this vigil and you will know what it is to dream!
Then you will know how marvelous it is to live threatened with Resurrection!
To dream awake, to keep watch asleep,
to live while dying, and to know ourselves already resurrected!

Sermon (Rev. Rolenz)

"Threatened by Resurrection"

The last deception will be worse than the first." That reading from the book of Matthew is not one that is often highlighted on Easter morning. We usually hear the story of the women coming by early Easter morning and not finding Jesus there – or other variations on the theme of resurrection, but this story – these nine words tells us something very important; it describes how great a threat Jesus was perceived to be by the Roman and religious authorities. What on earth were these people so afraid of?

For heaven's sake, he was a scruffy sandled prophet from Nowheresville– and the region was full of scraggly-bearded prophets. Some preached insurrection against Rome; some were executed, but many were just ignored by the Empire and by the leaders of the Temple. And Jesus himself, he didn't lead protests, or try to raise an army. What did he do that was so threatening? "Sire," a Pharisee said, "We remember what the imposter said while he was still alive. 'After three days I will rise again'." They were afraid that he would come back – and if he did that he would PROVE to the world that he was in fact, greater than death, and that he was some kind of superhero – the kind you see in the Marvel Universe who goes through plate glass windows without a scratch; who falls from the sky and shakes themselves off and jets off to save the day. They had heard this Jesus could work miracles, you see, and what's the greatest miracle of all – to appear to die, but not really die. If this prophet could survive the worst that Rome could throw at him – crucifixion, the most horrible and painful way to die – then maybe he could raise an army to overthrow the status quo. If he could come back from that – he could do anything! Marvel Universe watch out!

That's what his followers were hoping for. That's what this little nascent group of believers thought would happen. It would be proof positive that they were following the right guy. Two thousand years later, that question is still being asked, by a lot of people who grew up or who consider themselves Christians? Are we following the right guy?

Now look, I know my UU congregants. I know some of you out there listening today would just as soon skip Easter or focus on other holidays. Some of you would prefer to be hearing about spring rebirth and not resurrection and I don't blame you. The backstory leading up to Easter Sunday is pretty horrible. It's a hard tale to tell children with both honesty and integrity. And the Easter Sunday story has its own unique problems. For most Unitarian Universalists, resurrection, held up against the light of science and all that we know about the human body and death – is just not possible. If it were possible, it would be repeatable, and so far – no one has come back from the dead, or at least come back from the dead in quite the same way, in a way that upset all the intentions and expectations that the Romans and the Pharisees had for what killing Jesus would accomplish.

It's important to remember this on Easter Sunday – that this custom and tradition begins with failure! Not the failure of Jesus, because he could not escape execution and because his followers were scattered far and wide. No, it begins with the failure of Empire! Despite all of these efforts to suppress the Jesus story – to silence the movement that his preaching started – Empire failed. We celebrate Easter today because although the authorities tried their best to keep that body down in its grave, they could not. They failed miserably. They thought that by killing a man, they could also kill this movement that began. They thought that by shutting him up in a tomb/grave that those who were inspired by him would simply go away. But three centuries later, his movement took over the Empire when the Emperor Constantine converted to Christianity. And here we are, still talking about Jesus, standing atop the ruins of empires long gone. Those in charge back then were deeply threatened by the idea and the reality of Jesus' resurrection but they could not grasp what resurrection really meant.

Before I say anything more, you deserve to know where this preacher comes down on the story Christians are telling this morning. I believe what the Biblical scholar Marcus Borg used to say: "I don't know if it happened in exactly this way, but I believe the story to be true." So, with that caveat, I have to tell you, I do believe in resurrection and by the end of this sermon – watch out, you may too. Before we can get to any resurrection, however, we've got to go to the tomb first – and sit for a while in that cave that served as a tomb – that cool, quiet place where the story says Jesus lay for three days.

We know about the tomb, don't we — and some of us may have spent a long time in a tomb-like cave of our own making. And all of us have spent the last twelve months in isolation of some sort. Our pandemic life narrowed to small screens or large monitors; furtive trips never far from home, through a silent, masked, dark winter. Wondering if every breath we take might be the one that would lead to our last – worrying that a hug might be fatal. Some have suffered terribly under this isolation, suffered with loneliness, missing face to face community. Others, despite all the pandemic stresses, have told me they are not quite ready to emerge from this tomb-cave. If I'm honest, there are times when I'm anxious myself about life "returning to normal," because there are some things that we have become accustomed to as normal that I never want to return

to! Wondering if a trip to a grocery store might end in a mass shooting – SHOULD NOT BE NORMAL! A black man driving home from work and worrying about an encounter with the police – SHOULD NOT BE NORMAL! The owner of an Asian restaurant should not fear for her safety – that SHOULD NOT BE NORMAL! And if returning to the breathless, exhausting, headache-inducing fast-paced scurrying around that was life for so many before covid, then – whew – give me the cave, give me the tomb, give me the peace and quiet.

There are novelists and historians who have imagined a different ending to the Easter story where Jesus' supposed resurrection ends in peace and quiet. Maybe you've read one of those scenarios. Jesus somehow manages to survive the cross and is put in the tomb alive. I would not have blamed him if he decided to just stay there for a while. After all the betrayal of his friends, the sham trial, the horrors of crucifixion, staying in a cave where it's quiet and dark and he didn't have to say or do or fix anything – I can understand that. People have speculated what might have happened next if he didn't die on the cross. Maybe he found a tunnel out of the cave. Maybe he could have arranged for a get-away to some remote part of Palestine. Took up basket-weaving. Lived a normal life like you and me. Got married and had kids. But that's not the story that we're telling today. We are trying to figure out what it means to live threatened by a resurrection, threatened by a resurrection – that the story tells us Jesus chose – a choice we too must make.

It's not an exaggeration to state that certain things that we took for granted before Covid hit the world are dead. Gone. Half a million and more people in the US alone – dead. A sense of invulnerability. Dead. A belief in American exceptionalism – that we can fix every problem. Dead. Economy, not dead, clearly on life support, and crawling out of the tomb. Everything changed. But here's the one that hits me and hits us where we live – the church, as we have always known it, is dead. And the church, as we've always known it – is not coming back. We will return to church in person but it will be tentatively, cautiously like Lazarus coming out of his tomb, blinking in the bright light, his grave clothes trailing after him. The church as we have always known it – is dead. And – Long Live the Church.

What do I mean when I say the church as we've always known it is dead? I mean that it has been forever irrevocably changed by this past year. We cannot go back to the old ways of doing church pre-Covid because we've been changed. I know there is a deep longing to be together in person and we will get there and it will be glorious. But now All Souls has even more members who are all over the country – all over the world – and it would be completely against our principles to simply say to them “It was good being with you during Zoom church, but now we're in person. Hope you can come to DC some day.” Hundreds of UU churches, and presumably other churches too are understanding that this pandemic has forced us to change forever and permanently. The resurrection church will now be an experience that has to happen both virtually and in person. To go back to only one medium is to decide to stay in the tomb and to ignore the possibility of a new and different life as a church, a resurrection church. What I am saying is that we are not the same body as we were before – it is new.

There's a line in the book of John, when Mary is weeping outside the tomb and Jesus comes over to talk to her. She is startled and reaches out to hug him, so starved for her beloved teacher was she. He said “no, don't touch me.” He looked the same, but he had a different body. He is saying

“do not cling to your ideas of who I used to be...I am something new NOW.” This is what the church is facing – right now. When we return to shared space so much of what we love the most about All Souls will look and feel and be familiar – but we also must be aware of what is NEW and what has changed in, amongst and beyond us.

We may look the same – but we will have a different church body. It’s the church universal. It’s what our Universalist ancestors dreamed about but could never imagine. We will have worshippers wanting to not only worship with us virtually, but bring their children into the classroom, virtually; to attend meetings, and programs and spiritual direction and board meetings; virtually. We are a new body and we cannot be threatened by this resurrection. Instead, we have to embrace it – to stand out in the light and say We are Risen! Again and again and again – we are Risen! We have a new body and are walking out of that tomb and into the light of Easter morning and that is worthy of a grand and glorious Hallelujah!

Oh, let’s go back to that marvelous poem by Julia Esquivel. She reminds us that this impulse we call resurrection is real – that we have to come back from the grave again and again and again and insist on life with a force that flings open tombs, that strides into the light, that...in Esquivel’s own words...

It is something within us that doesn’t let us sleep, that doesn’t let us rest,
that won’t stop pounding deep inside,
Join us in this vigil and you will know what it is to dream!
Then you will know how marvelous it is to live threatened with Resurrection!
To dream awake, to keep watch asleep,
to live while dying, and to know ourselves already resurrected!

Anthem (All Souls Choir)

“Antiphon” (Ralph Vaughan Williams)

Let all the world in every corner sing!
Let all the world in every corner sing:
My God and king!

The heavens are not too high,
His praise may thither fly!
The earth is not too low,
His praises there may go

Let all the world in every corner sing!

The church with psalms must shout!
No door can keep them out!
But above all the heart must bear
The longest part.

Let all the world in every corner sing!
Let all the world in every corner sing:
My God and king!
My God and king!

Let all the world in every corner sing,
My God and king!

Offertory (Duncan Morgan)

I did something strange on Easter Sunday in 1987. I found myself in the Basilica of St Mary in Minneapolis, and, as I hadn't attended a service in the seven years since I graduated high school, just being in church was unusual. But the strange thing I did that day, was that, for the first time in 18 years, I cried.

You see, I sort of saved up my 'loss of innocence' for one week in August in 1969. There are a number of hard facts that kids must work through during the journey of childhood, hard facts that adults just take for granted – facts like some folks having plenty while others have little or nothing, facts like folks we look to for protection, like the police or the government, actively seeking to harm us, facts like folks being injured or sick for no reason, facts like aging, facts like death. I mean, I 'knew' about all these facts, but for some odd reason, I hadn't internalized them. Why I chose to internalize them all at once when I was seven, I don't know. All I know is that it was overwhelming and I cried for three days non-stop. Then I came up with a strategy help me cope, which was to give myself a moment to rationally examine everything that happened to me before I reacted to it, just a little space to try to truly see what was going on. The effect of that little space was that everything was at enough distance so that nothing was ever immediate enough or close enough to make me angry, or sad, or laugh...or cry.

Fast forward, and I'm a working actor, in a strange city, alone, on an Easter Sunday, and I felt that I should go to church. The Basilica was close to me and the mass familiar from my day in catholic school, so I went – and changed the course of my life.

I was awed by the grandeur of the building and by the beauty and pageantry of the service. I was moved at a very deep level by the music. I felt touched by the sermon. But it was the little girl in her easter dress sitting on her father's lap. The little boys, in their tiny ties, their shirt tails out, minutes after walking into the building, who spent the service merrily ignoring everything that was happening and making faces at each other. It was the older couple sitting holding hands, as I supposed they had done for many years, or the younger couple seemingly unable to put their first baby down, passing the little bundle back and forth the entire service. It was the whole experience, an experience too immense, too powerful to get any emotional distance from.

And so, I started to weep. I remember the hymn the choir was singing, but it wasn't the words or the music. It was the LIFE of that moment.

I find myself here, at All Souls most Sundays now. And I am still moved to tears by the experience. I'm still awed by our beautiful historic building, constantly moved by the music,

regularly inspired by the sermons and always enriched and enlivened by this congregation. I come here looking for that same rebirth I felt in 1987, and I am deeply grateful to be able to find it. It is for these reasons, and others, that I give as generously as I can. And I hope you will, too.

We are in the middle of the “All Souls, All in” pledge drive for the church year of 2021-22. If you have not made your pledge, I encourage you to do so, you can click the link in the chat or on the home page of the website. Last year was very difficult for many of us, and our ability to give may have been diminished. So those of you who can do more might want to consider increasing your pledge by 10% this year to help maintain the health of this church and its work.

This morning’s offering will now be received.

Hymn

“Jesus Christ Is Risen Today”

Jesus Christ is risen today, Alleluia!
Earth and heaven in chorus say Alleluia!
Raise your joys and triumphs high, Alleluia!
Sing, ye heavens, and earth reply, Alleluia!
Hearts are strong and voices sing alleluia!
Where, o death, is now thy sting? Alleluia!
As he died his truth to save, Alleluia!
Where thy victory, o grave? Alleluia!
Soar we now where Christ has led, Alleluia!
Living out the words he said, Alleluia!
Made like him, like him we rise, Alleluia!
Ours the cross, the grave, the skies, Alleluia!

Benediction (Rev. Rolenz)

One thing is certain, the Easter story survives because it sends the powerful message that truth will rise – love does win – and when you got truth and love – there cain’t no grave hold our bodies down! Happy Easter! Go in peace, and speak the truth, with love, always love. Amen and may it be so!

Music (David Cole- guitar and vocals, Corey Null- bass, Gordon Kent- piano and vocals, Dante Pope- drums)

“Can’t No Grave (Hold My Body Down)” (trad. African American gospel)

It was early one morning, just about the break of day
When the angels came from glory and they rolled the stone away
And the women came along and they found the stone was gone
‘Cause can’t no grave hold my body down
Can’t no grave hold my body down

Can't no grave hold my body down
When the first trumpet sounds,
I'm gonna rise up out of this ground
'Cause can't no grave hold my body down
Listen to me, Gabriel: Stand on the land and sea
Don't you blow your trumpet till you hear from me
And the night was almost gone, and the day was coming on
Can't no grave hold my body down
Can't no grave hold my body down
Can't no grave hold my body down
When the first trumpet sounds,
I'm gonna rise up out of this ground
'Cause can't no grave hold my body down
Can't no grave hold my body down
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