

***O LIFE THAT MAKETH ALL THINGS NEW***  
***Easter for All Souls***

Sermon by Rev. Jack Donovan, April 16, 2017  
Unitarian Universalist Church of St Petersburg

<b>READINGS</b>	(see addendum)
<b>Invocation</b>	Hymnal #628 <i>Rolling Away the Stone</i>
<b>Meditation</b>	<i>Once I Began Going to Church, <u>Returning</u></i> by Dan Wakefield
<b>Reading</b>	<i>Teacher</i> from the Gospel of John 20 & Mark 16

**SERMON**

It is so good to have our younger people with us again this morning. After the service, you all will be our leaders on the spectacular Easter egg hunt. I'm looking forward to that.

But first, why do we hunt for eggs and chocolate bunnies and jelly bean seeds on Easter? Why is it important for us to do that? Candy is cheap these days, right? What, after all, is special about Easter that we should pay attention to it?

Many Sunday School teachers have asked their students that question. Year after year, some kids give the same answer. They say, "Well, Easter is about Jesus." Yes, yes, says the teacher, what about him? "Well, he was, like, in a cave, with a big stone blocking the door and the stone got rolled away and he came out." Yes, yes, and then what? "Well, then he saw his shadow and went back for six more weeks of winter!"

It is confusing. For many ancient peoples, long ago, that was part of Easter. Easter or Estra (as in estrogen) was the name of the Goddess of Springtime and Dawning New Light – and Easter was her sacred time, from Groundhog Day to May Day. Looking for eggs and bunnies and seeds and holding spring equinox sunrise services were an important part of Easter's festival – and people might even say in appreciation of each other that they were good eggs (you know, full of truth and light).

For many, Easter has been about a belief that the life of Easter maketh all things new, like we sang in our opening hymn – the blooming, the gladness, the turning into the season of light, the flow and grow and glow, the celebration of freedom from frozen, of adventure, discovery, vitality, a great wideness in how we see the world, an understanding and trust of the Source of our lives that inspires a more confident step, a fuller breath – life going on, transcending even death, making all things new in the seed from which life grows – which seed some call the soul. That hymn was written by Unitarian minister Samuel Longfellow in 1874, at about the hundredth anniversary of the American Revolution.

There are other ways that people have understood Easter and paid attention to it. In this morning's Opening Words Unitarian Universalist minister Sara Moores Campbell sees Easter as being about the soul as a tomb. Like a seed kernel inside a shell inside the earth, the soul is closed in darkness. Rev. Campbell's question is, will this casing around us be a place where we withdraw in fear of both life and death? Or will it be a place for a baby spirit to grow strong, protected, nourished, prepared to sprout in new birth?

Rev. Campbell finally encourages us to choose coming out into the light with new possibilities for life. That would be Easter. When people say they are born again, is that not Easter? You have realized that you can be a blessing to the world and that you would love to be – to elevate the spirit of the world to the highest heaven on earth. Is that not Easter?

In this morning's meditation, we read from Dan Wakefield, a member of King's Chapel Unitarian Church in Boston. He describes finding a home in the church as a returning and a rebirth – an Easter. Coming to that church for the first time on an Easter morning, searching for something, he discovered a feeling that he was part of a much vaster reality than he had realized. He experienced the wonder of connection with not only the journey of the seasons and the journey of the spirit, but with the caring and seeking of other people.

Inside the walls of a church with other people, Wakefield discovered that his spirit was bigger than the walls of his body, and bigger than the walls of the church. He realized he was a participant in a grander scheme, a grander system of being, to his great benefit and blessing.

Is this not the truth that passes understanding – the joy of sharing in a community that will outlast loss and that will carry on your contribution to the spirit of life, that will share and care in joy and woe, weaving together the clothing for the soul divine? I believe so. Is this not the hope of the world of which Dr. Georgia Harkness sang? Compassion rising up in your soul to overflowing and easing the thirst of the wider world of souls? I believe so.

These are all forms of salvation, and that is what I believe Easter is about – salvation. What is salvation?

The hymn we sang earlier, "O Life That Maketh All Things New," we noted was written by the Unitarian minister Samuel Longfellow on the eve of the 100<sup>th</sup> birthday of the American Revolution – an up-rising somehow appropriate, I think, for Easter. And it was his brother, William Wadsworth Longfellow who wrote one of America's most famous poems, "The Midnight Ride of Paul Revere," written on the eve of the American Civil War – also, I think, appropriate for Easter. Do you know that poem? *"Listen my children and you shall hear of the midnight ride of Paul Revere. On the 18<sup>th</sup> of April in '75, hardly a man is now alive who remembers that famous day and year."* The

people rose up when they heard Paul Revere's call, as they began to rise up again in 1860 when they heard Longfellow's call.

Coincidentally, Easter in 1775 was on April 16<sup>th</sup>, just as it is today. April 16th was two days before Paul Revere rode into the night to signal the coming day. In response to the warning call that everyone had been awaiting, Captain John Parker called his militia to the Lexington green to meet the overwhelming British army. Some men died that morning.

But their spirit lived. For example, two generations later, Captain Parker's grandson, the Unitarian minister Theodore Parker led a charge on the Boston City Jail to free an imprisoned fugitive from slavery. Theodore Parker later preached and gave us what I'd call the Easter message that "the moral arc of the universe is long, but it bends toward justice," which Martin Luther King so often quoted – and Rev. Parker also preached an Easter-type message that Abraham Lincoln famously quoted, that the way to bend that moral arc was "government of the people, by the people, for the people."

Can we think of Easter in those terms?

The powerful British army marched over the dead Americans in Lexington on to Concord in pursuit of their original purpose - to confiscate the supplies of weapons stored by the American militia in that town. Two generations later, the Unitarian minister Ralph Waldo Emerson called the response of the embattled farmers and minutemen of Concord "the shot heard 'round the world" It was the start of a worldwide movement for the people's democracy – an Easter uprising that gave hope to all and spread everywhere.

The morning of April 19, 1775, Ralph Waldo Emerson's grandfather, the early American Unitarian William Emerson, stood at the window in the church manse, his home as the Unitarian minister in Concord, and he watched the battle at the Old North Bridge just 100 yards away. After the battle he joined General George Washington's army as its chaplain. He died of pneumonia during the winter campaign in Vermont.

I've always wondered what he preached on Easter Sunday, 1775, two days before the battle of Concord, for everybody knew that the British army would attack the town very soon. Here's what I think he said.

"Brothers and Sisters, at the Passover feast we call the last supper, celebrating the people's liberation from the pharaoh's oppression, Jesus told his followers that freedom and justice depend on taking care of one another – of everybody taking care of everybody, in fact – to live always, as it says in Deuteronomy, with an open hand and an open heart so you will have no impoverished among you, for you will always have some impoverished among you.

"People of Concord, Jesus was speaking for all the people. He knew that all people are equal children of God, all full of the divine grace that gives life its possibilities and the power to fulfill them. Jesus believed all souls should be held in the heart of compassion for the very reason of their shortfalls and should be empowered by caring to use their grace for good.

"After the Seder meal, Jesus was arrested by the Roman rulers and was tried and was crucified. So it may not be that all souls are guaranteed salvation on this Earth. It may be that divine providence cannot even guarantee that every person will be fulfilled in spirit. But we can see that divine providence is unceasing and unconditional in providing the gracious power of life to all, with both the potentials and the power to fulfill them.

"We as children of providence, of Nature and Nature's God, should do no less in securing equal blessings of liberty for ourselves and our posterity and all posterity, allowing no abuse or usurpation of that power.

"You have heard in scripture today that one person deeply believed in the raised spirit of Peace and Love. Mary Magdalene – perhaps despite severe limitations – spread the Good News that Jesus taught – of God's gracious empowerment of all and of the heaven on earth that comes when we use that power well.

"People of Concord - this, I believe, is the true, endlessly new and renewing Easter Rising. It may be an up-rising. We may die. But we will die saying the words, "It is completed" – that is, "It is completely done, perfected." A life lived with complete understanding and complete caring for all souls, even one's killers, even at the most tormented moment. In spirit, such life transcends death.

"Whatever comes, let us stand as witness to our truth -- of life, liberty, and justice, of new grace forever full, for all souls. May we in Concord and in America say with Mary Magdalene, 'I have heard the teacher and his compassion has risen in my heart.'"

That would be the end of Rev. Emerson's sermon. The end of mine is to repeat the question: Why pay attention to Easter? Because it is a visible sign of an invisible reality? – the constancy of new life, the reality of free-flowing connection to the limitless source of grace, the openness to the ever renewing spirit of compassion, belief in the unseen blessings in every seed and egg? Are we not the church of all souls? Do we not believe in every seed? I believe that is our Universalism. I believe that is our salvation. I believe that is the thought we must inspire 'round the world. I believe that is our Easter.

In that, I, for one, am with you. Happy up-rising.

## **READINGS**

### **Invocation**    *Rolling Away the Stone* by Sarah M. Campbell - Hymnal #628

In the tomb of the soul, we carry secret yearnings, pains, frustrations, loneliness, fears, regrets, worries. *In the tomb of the soul, we take refuge from the world and its heaviness. In the tomb of the soul, we wrap ourselves in the security of darkness. Sometimes this is a comfort; sometimes it is an escape.* Sometimes it prepares us for experience. Sometimes it insulates us from life. *Sometimes this tomb-life gives us time to feel the pain of the world and reach out to heal others. Sometimes it numbs us and locks us up with our own concerns.* Sometimes this season where light and dark balance the day, we seek balance for ourselves. *Grateful for the darkness that has nourished us, we push away the stone and invite the light to awaken us to the possibilities within us and among us – possibilities for new life in ourselves and in our world.*

### **Meditation**    *Once I Began Going to Church - Returniiing* by Dan Wakefield

Once I began going to church, the age-old religious rituals marking the turning of the year deepened and gave a fuller meaning to the cycle of the seasons and my own relation to them. The year was not only divided now into winter, spring, summer, and fall, but was marked by the expectation of Advent, leading up to the fulfillment of Christmas, followed by Lent, the solemn prelude to ... the dark anguish of Good Friday that is transformed in the glory of Easter. Birth and death and resurrection, beginnings and endings and renewals, were observed and celebrated in ceremonies whose experience made me feel I belonged – not just to a neighborhood and a place, but to a larger order of things, a universal sequence of life and death and rebirth....

Going to church, even belonging to it, did not solve life's problems – if anything, they seemed to escalate again around that time – but it gave me a sense of living in a large context, of being part of something greater than what I could see through the tunnel vision of my personal concerns. I now looked forward to Sunday because it *meant* going to church; what once was strange now felt not only natural but essential.

### **Reading**    *Teacher* from the Gospel of John 20 & Mark 16

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

Some of the disciples went to the tomb, saw it empty, and returned to their homes. But Mary remained, weeping outside the tomb. When she looked around, she saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was him. He said, "Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?"

Mistaking him for the gardener, she said, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away." Jesus said to her, "Mary!" Turning to face him, she said, "Teacher!" He said, "I am ascending to the Father." She went and told the others she had seen the Lord and what he had said, but they would not believe it.