

“EASTER SUNDAY & FLOWER COMMUNION”
Olympic Unitarian Universalist Fellowship
April 20, 2025

Guest Speaker: Rev. Bruce A. Bode
Service Leader: Dianne Whitaker
Musicians: Harmony Rutter, LeRoy Davidson
Zoom Tech: Matt Mahowald
Sound Tech: Dan Parrish

Sermon Title & Description: “Easter Sunday & Flower Communion” – Easter is a spring festival recognizing and celebrating new life springing up all about us and within. Our Easter service will conclude with a Flower Communion ritual.

Lighting the Chalice

We come together this Easter morning:
To renew our faith in the holiness, goodness, and beauty of life;
To reaffirm the way of the open mind and the full heart;
To reclaim the vision of an earth more fair, with all her people one.

Welcome, Introduction of Service Theme, Opening Words

Greetings on this Easter Sunday, both to those of you present here in this sanctuary and to those of you tuning in virtually. Easter is a spring festival, a celebration of renewed life springing up all about us and, hopefully, within us as well. The 20th century American poet e. e. cummings speaks to such an experience of spiritual re-birth and renewal in his own life, which is at one with the exuberant life in nature about him, exclaiming:

i thank You God for most this amazing
day:for the leaping greenly spirits of trees
and a blue true dream of sky;and for everything
which is natural which is infinite which is yes

(i who have died am alive again today,
and this is the sun’s birthday;this is the birth
day of life and of love and wings:and of the gay
great happening illimitably earth)

how should tasting touching hearing seeing
breathing any – lifted from the no
of all nothing – human merely being
doubt unimaginable You?

(now the ears of my ears awake and
now the eyes of my eyes are opened)

(“i thank You God for most this amazing,” e. e. cummings, 1894-1962)

Responsive Reading

On this Easter Sunday morning in mid-April, please join me in a responsive reading from Thomas Wolfe.

MINISTER: Some things will never change. Some things will always be the same.

CONGREGATION: The glitter of sunlight on roughened water, the glory of the stars, the innocence of morning, the smell of the sea in harbors;

MINISTER: The voice of forest water in the night, a woman's laughter in the dark, the clean hard rattle of raked gravel, the cricketing stitch of mid-day in hot meadows, the delicate web of children's voices in bright air;

CONGREGATION: The leaf, the blade, the flower, the wind that cries and sleeps and wakes again, the trees whose stiff arms clash and tremble in the dark, and the dust of lovers long since buried in the earth;

MINISTER: The feathery blur and smoky buddings of young boughs, and something there that comes and goes and never can be captured;

CONGREGATION: The tarantula, the adder, and the asp also will never change. Pain and death will always be the same.

MINISTER: But under the pavements trembling like a pulse, under the buildings trembling like a cry, under the waste of time, under the hoof of the beast above the broken bones of cities, there will be something growing like a flower –

CONGREGATION: Something bursting from the earth again, forever deathless, faithful, coming into life again like April. (Thomas Wolfe, *The Web and the Rock*, adapted)

Opening Hymn #61: “Lo, the Earth Awakes Again”

1. Lo, the earth awakes again – Alleluia!
From the winter's bond and pain.
Alleluia! Bring we leaf and flower and spray – Alleluia!
to adorn this happy day. Alleluia!

2. Once again the word comes true,
Alleluia! All the earth shall be made new. Alleluia!
Now the dark, cold days are o'er, Alleluia!
Spring and gladness are before. Alleluia!

3. Change, then, mourning into praise, Alleluia!
And, for dirges, anthems raise. Alleluia!
How our spirits soar and sing, Alleluia!
How our hearts leap with the spring! Alleluia! (Words: Samuel Longfellow)

“EASTER: FOUR CELEBRATIONS” (Part I)

Introduction

Today is Easter! And what is it that we recognize and celebrate on Easter?

As a way of bringing to mind your own Easter meditations and reflections, I'll speak briefly of four things that Easter means to me. Then, we'll have a musical break, followed by a fifth meaning of Easter for me. And we'll conclude our Easter service with a Flower Communion ritual.

1) Easter as a spring festival

First of all and at its root, Easter is a spring festival, a recognition and celebration of new life springing up all about us at this time of the year.

Is there anyone in this sanctuary or tuning in virtually this morning who does not catch something of the wonder and glory of spring?

To me, spring is the most amazing time of the year – and the most surprising time! It may be long awaited, but still I find it comes with such suddenness. All of a sudden there are shoots out of the apparent barren ground, and blossoms and leaves springing forth from seemingly dead branches and twigs.

Why, it was wonderful! Why, all at once there were leaves,
Leaves at the end of a dry stick, small, alive
Leaves out of wood. It was wonderful,
You can't imagine. They came by the wood path
And the earth loosened, the earth relaxed, there were flowers
Out of the earth! Think of it! And oak trees
Oozing new green at the tips of them and flowers
Squeezed out of clay, soft flowers, limp
Stalks flowering. Well, it was like a dream,
It happened so quickly, all of a sudden it happened –

(Archibald MacLeish, excerpt from “The Sowing of the Dead Corn”)

Those lines from poet Archibald MacLeish marvelously express the suddenness, the surprise, and the wonder of spring.

2) Easter and renewed physical life in us

Secondly, Easter is about renewed physical life in us.

Just as we see physical life springing up around us, we feel ourselves physically come to life.

The power that sends shoots out of the earth and blossoms out of branches is the same power in our bodies. This is beautifully expressed by poet Dylan Thomas when he says:

“The force that through the green fuse drives the flower/ Drives my green age;...”

And so at Easter, we recognize and celebrate our physical connection to the life that is springing up about us. And, like nature about us, it’s time for us to rise up and spring into action:

Time to get outside.

Time to exercise. (Play ball!)

Time to plant a garden.

Time to go for a hike.

Time to do some spring cleaning.

3) Easter as a reminder of the wonder of being itself

Thirdly, the wonder of spring puts me in mind of the greatest wonder of all, which is the wonder at the fact that there is anything at all.

The wonder of spring – “Leaves at the end of a dry stick” – can awaken one to the wonder of Being itself, the miracle that there is something when there didn’t have to be anything.

More than any other season, spring puts me in touch with the mystery and wonder of Being itself – there is Being rather than non-Being!

Some years ago, in an interview with Bill Moyers, poet Jane Kenyon put it this way:

“Why, when there could have been nothing, is there something? This is a great mystery. How, when there could have been nothing, does it happen that there is love, kindness, beauty?”

(quoted in *A Hundred White Daffodils*, p. 171)

4) Easter: The celebration of the triumph of love

And so, fourthly, following Jane Kenyon’s sense of the wonder of love, Easter is a celebration of the triumph of love, the understanding and experience that love does not end even with the physical deaths of those we love.

This was the discovery by Jesus’ followers in the depths of their despair: namely, that the life of his spirit, the message of his teaching, and the essence and quality of his presence and person did not utterly disappear with the death of his physical body.

The Easter story in the Christian religious tradition is a story and a model of spiritual triumph available to all of us at the passing of loved ones.

The ties of love, the strings of spirit that bind us together, are stronger and more elastic than even the death and decay of the body.

Easter is – or can be – a symbol and a celebration of the fact that physical death does not destroy or eliminate love.

Even the empty space left by the departed loved one – an emptiness that needs to be recognized and grieved – even this empty space can be an invitation to fill in the vacuum of that loss in the spirit of the one who has departed.

You see this happening all the time: After the devastating loss, and out of the ashes, new qualities are called forth in those left behind.

The disciples and followers of Jesus were an example of this; they were able to do things they didn't know they were capable of doing.

This can be the meaning of the symbol of the “empty tomb”: The tomb is empty. The essence of the departed loved one is not to be found here – “He is risen; she is not here.” The spirit of the departed loved one now lives on in you and in what you create out of that empty void in memory and in devotion to that loved one.

Easter, thus, is a celebration of the triumph of the spirit, the triumph of love, and the creative renewal out of the empty void of the tomb.

Hymn #266: “Now the Green Blade Riseth”

There's a hauntingly beautiful hymn in our hymnal that has to do with the triumph of such love. I've asked Harmony to sing this hymn for us this Easter Sunday.

1. Now the green blade riseth from the buried grain,
wheat that in dark earth many days has lain;
Love lives again, that with the dead has been:

Chorus: Love is come again like wheat that springeth green.

2. In the grave they laid him, Love by hatred slain,
thinking that never he would wake again,
laid in the earth, like grain that sleeps unseen:

Chorus: Love is come again like wheat that springeth green.

3. When our hearts are wintry, grieving, or in pain,
Love's touch can call us back to life again,
fields of our hearts that dead and bare have been:

Chorus: Love is come again like wheat that springeth green.

“EASTER: A FIFTH CELEBRATION” (Part II)

5: Easter: the celebration of spiritual and psychological renewal

There is yet a fifth Easter celebration I would bring forward on this Easter Sunday, one that has to do with spiritual and psychological renewal through seeing and experiencing that we are mystically part of one universal body.

This renewal is needed because we humans struggle with the knowledge of our mortality. We humans are a part of Being that has evolved the self-conscious awareness of our mortality – the knowledge that the individual life we work on and value will one day come to an end and we will return to the SourceLand from which our individual life has emerged.

In the Christian liturgical tradition, Good Friday sets before us the fact of impending death – both our own and that of those whom we love and live for – while Easter provides a response to this difficult fact.

Easter doesn't stand by itself; it's always linked to Good Friday – two poles of one larger process: crucifixion & resurrection; death & new life; despair & new meaning – two interconnected poles of a one larger process.

So, I typically say or write “Good Friday/Easter” – one event!

(Incidentally, before I retired, when I was an active minister, I always insisted on leading a Good Friday service – whether or not very many attended. If you wanted me on Easter, there had at least had to be a nod to Good Friday. Actually, some folks, myself included, found those services to be at least as meaningful as Easter services.)

Anyway, Easter is always connected to Good Friday; it's a response to Good Friday and to our human confrontation with our conscious awareness of our mortality.

Jane Kenyon's Easter

Let me present the Easter response to Good Friday through a poem of Jane Kenyon, whom I quoted from earlier in an interview with journalist Bill Moyers.

Jane Kenyon was born in Ann Arbor, Michigan in 1947 and spent most of her adult life with her husband and fellow poet, Donald Hall, on his family farm in Wilmont, New Hampshire, and died all-too-soon from leukemia in 1995 at the age of 48.

Jane Kenyon also suffered all her life from depression, finally diagnosed as bi-polar manic-depression when she was 38. But it was the depressive side of that polarity that she mostly lived with.

In one of her most courageous and stunning poems titled “Having It Out with Melancholy,” she addresses the depression directly.

In the opening section of this nine-part poem titled “From the Nursery,” she writes:

When I was born, you [depression] waited
behind a pile of linen in the nursery,
and when we were alone, you lay down
on top of me, pressing
the bile of desolation into every pore.

And from that day on
everything under the sun and moon
made me sad – even the yellow
wooden beads that slid and spun
along a spindle on my crib.

You taught me to exist without gratitude.
You ruined my manners toward God:
“We’re here simply to wait for death;
the pleasures of earth are overrated.”

I only appeared to belong to my mother,
to live among blocks and cotton undershirts
with snaps; among red tin lunch boxes
and report cards in ugly brown slippers.
I was already yours – the anti-urge,
the mutilator of souls. (Jane Kenyon, “Having It Out with Melancholy,” *Jane Kenyon: Collected Poems*, p. 231)

Her poem then goes on to describe the kind of endogenous depression that afflicted her life and made her question its value and whether she should stay or leave. The reason she did stay is because she also found enough of the Easter light to illuminate her Good Friday darkness.

She wrote about this experience in section five of this poem on Melancholy titling it “Once There Was Light.”

Once, in my early thirties, I saw
that I was a speck of light in the great
river of light that undulates through time.

I was floating with the whole
human family. We were all colors – those
who are living now, those who have died,
those who are not yet born. For a few

moments I floated, completely calm,
and I no longer hated having to exist.

(Jane Kenyon, “Having It Out with Melancholy,” *Jane Kenyon: Collected Poems*, pp. 232-233)

Again, journalist Bill Moyers in the interview of Jane Kenyon to which I referred earlier, asked her: “Tell me about “Once There Was Light.”

Kenyon responded:

“I really had a vision of that once. It was like a waking dream. My eyes were open and I saw these rooms – [Moyers was interviewing her in her home] –, this house, but in my mind’s eye, or whatever language you can find to say these things, I also saw a great ribbon of light and every human life was suspended. There was no struggle. There was only this buoyant shimmering, undulating stream of light. I took my place in this stream and after that my life changed fundamentally. I relaxed into existence in a way that I never had before.”

Moyers: “Relaxed into existence?”

Kenyon: “Having had lifelong struggles with depression, there have been long periods in my life when being in this world hasn’t seemed like any great bargain, but after this wave of buoyant emotion, my understanding was changed fundamentally.”

(quoted in *A Hundred White Daffodils*, p. 160)

Jane Kenyon’s vision of a “river of light” brings to my mind an account of one of the great dream visions of humanity with which I will end my Easter message this Easter Sunday.

It’s a dream-vision that came to British writer J. B. Priestley – John Boynton Priestley, 1894-1984 – which he recorded in his book titled *Man and Time*. The dream could be called “The Tower and the Birds.”

Here’s J. B. Priestley’s account:

The Tower and the Birds

I was standing at the top of a very high tower, alone, looking down upon myriads of birds flying in one direction; every kind of bird was there, all the birds in the world. It was a noble sight, this vast aerial river of birds.

But now in some mysterious fashion the gear was changed, and time speeded up, so that I saw generations of birds, watched them break their shells, flutter into life, mate, weaken, falter, and die. Wings grew only to crumble; bodies were sleek and then, in a flash, bled and shrivelled; and death struck everywhere at every second. What was the use of all this blind struggle towards life, this eager trying of wings, this hurried mating, this flight and surge, all this gigantic meaningless biological effort?

As I stared down [from my tower], seeming to see every creature’s ignoble little history almost at a glance, I felt sick at heart. It would be better if not one of them, if not one of us all, had been born, if the struggle ceased forever. I stood on my tower, still alone, desperately unhappy.

But now the gear was changed again, and time went faster still, and it was rushing by at such a rate, that the birds could not show any movement, but were like an enormous plain sown with feathers. But along this plain, flickering through the bodies themselves, there now passed a sort of white flame, trembling, dancing, then hurrying on; and as soon as I saw it I knew that this white flame was life itself, the very quintessence of being; and then it came to me, in a rocket-burst of ecstasy, that nothing mattered, nothing could ever matter, because nothing else was real but this quivering and hurrying lambency of beings.

Birds, humans, or creatures not yet shaped and coloured, all were of no account except so far as this flame of life travelled through them. It left nothing to mourn over behind it; what I had thought as tragedy was mere emptiness or a shadow show; for now all real feeling was caught and purified and danced on ecstatically with the white flame of life. I had never felt before such deep happiness as I knew at the end of my dream of the tower and the birds.

(J.B. Priestley, *Man and Time*; also found in a book by Marie-Louise von Franz titled, *On Dreams and Death*, pp. 13-14.)

To me, this is ultimately what Easter is about – a celebration of this white flame of life that is the essence of all things, ourselves included!

FLOWER COMMUNION

Introduction

To conclude this Easter Sunday service, I'd like to invite you to participate in what is called a Flower Communion, a simple ritual in which each of you is invited to bring a flower to the service, place it in a vase along with flowers that others have brought, and then, in a processional, select a flower that is different than the one that you brought.

In this simple ceremony we are called, first of all, to observe and pay attention to the flower that we have chosen.

Then, one step further, we are called to see ourselves as flowers – each of us – as fragrant, fragile, and holy forms of life that have sprung from the earth, that have arisen from out of the deep mystery of Being, and which are here upon this earth for a short time to care, to love, to serve, and to be a witness to the beauty of things, such as the simple beauty of flowers in the spring.

This Flower Communion ceremony was created by the Rev. Norbert Capek (1870-1942), who founded the Unitarian Church in what was then Czechoslovakia, and who was executed in a concentration camp in Dachau, Germany in 1942. But, prior to that, on June 4, 1923, he created a Flower Communion service, which later found its way to Unitarian congregations here in the United States.

When Rev. Capek would lead this ceremony, he would offer a prayer of consecration for the flowers that were brought to the service. So, before we come forward to select a flower from these vases, let us join together in reciting Rev. Capek's "Prayer for the Consecration of the Flowers."

Prayer for the Consecration of the Flowers (in unison)

Infinite Spirit of Life, we ask thy blessing on these, thy messengers of fellowship and love.

May they remind us, amid diversities of knowledge and of gifts, to be one in desire and affection and devotion to thy holy will.

May they also remind us of the value of comradeship, of doing and sharing alike.

May we cherish friendship as one of thy most precious gifts.

May we not let awareness of another's talents discourage us or sully our relationship, but may we realize that whatever we can do, great or small, the efforts of all of us are needed to do thy work in this world. Amen.

Flower Processional

Now, I invite each of you to come forward in silence beginning with the back rows and coming down the outside aisles. Please select a flower from one of vases, a different flower than the one you brought – one that attracts you – and then return quietly to your seat up the center aisle.

After everyone has selected a flower and returned to their seat, we will stand and sing "Mother Spirit, Father Spirit," a hymn composed by Rev. Čapek.

May I ask those in the back of the sanctuary to now please come forward down the outside aisles to select their flower.

Concluding Hymn #8: "Mother Spirit, Father Spirit"

1. Mother Spirit, Father Spirit, where are you?
In the sky song, in the forest, sounds your cry.
What to give you, what to call you, what am I?

2. Many drops are in the ocean, deep and wide.
Sunlight bounces off the ripples to the sky.
What to give you, what to call you, who am I?

3. I am empty, time flies from me; what is time?
Dreams eternal, fears infernal haunt my heart.
What to give you, what to call you, O, my God?

4. Mother Spirit, Father Spirit, take our hearts.
Take our breath and let our voices sing our parts.
Take our hands and let us work to shape our art.

(Norbert F. Capek, words and music; Paul & Anita Munk, tr.; Richard Boeke, English version)

Closing Words

“To see a World in a Grain of Sand
And a Heaven in a Wild Flower
Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand
And Eternity in an hour...”

(William Blake, from “Áuguries of Innocence”)

Extinguishing the Chalice

We extinguish this flame,
But not the Light of Truth,
The Warmth of Community,
The Fire of Commitment,
Or the Power of Transformation;
These we carry in our hearts
Until we are together again.

(NOTE: This is a manuscript version of the service led by the Rev. Bruce A. Bode at the Olympic Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Sequim/Port Angeles, WA on “Easter Sunday,” April 20, 2025. Rev. Bode retired as senior minister of the Quimper Unitarian Universalist Fellowship in Port Townsend, WA in June 2018, and is now minister emeritus there.)