

Easter Sunday 12th April 2020 – Rev Sheena Gabriel – Godalming Unitarians

I'll be offering this service via Zoom at 11am for those able to join me online.

This is a version for use at home.

Opening Words & Chalice Lighting *If you have a candle you may want to light it*

What is faith then?

It is a way of living hopefully,

even among the ruins of previous hopes,

of marvelling at the universe and its possibilities...

It is a way of giving oneself to others and learning to receive

more than one is able to give...

It is a way of delighting in the richness and colour of life

and experiencing the undeniable sadness of life

without being utterly overwhelmed.

It is a way of living and dying,

and believing in resurrections

wherever they are found.

Joan Farrow

Introduction: Wouldn't it have been lovely, if the three week lockdown had ended, as we'd hoped, around Easter? That would have been great timing! If we think of our confinement these last few weeks, as something akin to being in a tomb – we could have rolled away the stone, stepped out into the sunshine, met our friends and family, and been back in the Chapel for this service.

That surely would have felt like a resurrection and given rise to 'Hallelujahs'. But as we are finding out - perhaps as never before - the calendar does not always correspond to the inner rhythm of our own experience, nor the outer rhythm of the world we live in.

For many people, what we are living through, feels more like the pains of Good Friday, or at best, Easter Saturday – a time of waiting and uncertainty.

The refrain commonly heard in many Churches today: “Alleluia, Christ is risen. He is risen indeed” whilst a heart-felt statement of faith for those who *can* believe, for the many people who find themselves *unable* to believe these words (at least in a literal sense), what relevance can the Easter story have - right here, right now - in these testing times?

Many people have likened these days we’re living through, to being in a time of war. The ‘enemy’ may be invisible, but the impact on our lives is only too real. And so, in this service, I offer several accounts of Easter spent in wartime; to see how past generations have found courage, hope and meaning in times of restriction and challenge.

Reflection: Etty Hillesum

Etty Hillesum, a young Jewish woman, began keeping a diary in 1941, nine months after Hitler invaded the Netherlands – her home country. Her diary chronicles her social, intellectual and spiritual growth, and ongoing search for God and truth. At the time of writing, Etty was lodging with an accountant called Hans - with whom she had an intense relationship. She was still able to leave the house, but it was not quite ‘business as usual’ and later diary entries indicate how anti-Jewish measures increasingly impacted her life.



Extracts from ‘The letters and Diaries of Etty Hillesum: 1941-1943’

Good Friday 3rd April 1942

Last night when I came back to my little room, where the curtains at the one large window are always left open, there it stood, my poor, ravaged, lonely tree. A hesitant star climbed up its austere body, rested for the moment in the crook of one of its limbs and then lost itself in the wide sky, no longer caught up in the branches....

Something I have been wanting to write down for days, perhaps weeks, but which a sort of shyness - or perhaps false shame? - has prevented me from putting into words. A desire to kneel down sometimes pulses through my body... as if my whole body had been meant and made for the act of kneeling.

Sometimes in moments of deep gratitude, kneeling down becomes an overwhelming urge, head deeply bowed, hands before my face. It has become a gesture embedded in my body, needing to be expressed....

For week, Hans' blue eyes have again been as radiant and lively as before. We are sure to get over our financial problems. A little while back I said to him "one really ought to ask oneself first thing every morning, 'is there a roof over my head today and do I have enough food?' And if so one, ought to be thankful." And so, day follow days. We shall manage. "A coward dies a 1000 deaths."

Saturday morning 4th of April 1942

I've been wrestling for days warding off the flu, a sore throat, headache, a cold in the head, stomach-ache - a most remarkable collection of petty complaints...and yet I'm not, or scarcely not bothered by it. Certainly, my spirits are not affected. My patience still has to grow. I have already acquired enough though, to wait for what is coming, to have trust in the fact that something is coming...

I still lack the patience to pass my time with flowers and to listen to music and look at paintings and read the Bible. I still have to learn all that, learn a whole life long. But I do believe that I'm making a start and every so often there comes that great patience, the ultimate source on which I can draw for any creative work...I must learn to gather up all the patience that is in me, gather together all the fragments ...into one great patience.

5th of April 1942 (Easter Sunday)

I shall pursue my struggle against the 'flu' vigorously today... The best way to fight sickness is to be as passive as possible about it, to make yourself as small as you can. I am shrinking inwardly a little, taking life's blows meekly and hoping it will all be over tomorrow. Outside, rain, grey, cold. Last night. On my desk were small narcissi that lit up my jet-black Moroccan [desk?] like radiant stars.

I bought a little bunch of snowdrops... they're standing right here in front of me in a small dark-green coffee cup, trembling in the cold Sunday air. There is a large bunch of twigs, some with catkins... in a brown earthenware pot...and when I look at the twigs they're just like a forest in which you can walk very deep and far.... Hans is still asleep far behind me, breathing calmly under his blue divan cover. I have been living in this room for three years now, and am grateful for every day I am left to live and work...

Sometimes I wonder, my God, what have I done to deserve so good and beautiful and rich a life, but then I am also Your most satisfied dweller on earth!

I'm struck by Etty's immense gratitude and faith in these diary entries – despite the times she lived through. As the Nazi menace increased, she refused to go into hiding, saying she wished “to share her people's fate.”

Six days before being put on a train to Auschwitz, she wrote in a letter: “We have become marked by suffering for a whole lifetime. And yet life in its unfathomable depths is wonderfully good... I have to come back to that time and again. And if we just care enough, God is in safe hands with us, despite everything. On 7th September 1943 Etty and her family were put on the ‘transport’. On the day of departure, she wrote to a friend:

“Christine, opening the Bible at random I find this: “The Lord is my high tower. I am sitting on my rucksack in the middle of a full freight car. Father, Mother and Mischa [her brother] are a few cars away. In the end the departure came without warning. On sudden special orders from ‘the Hague.’ We left the camp singing. Father and mother, firmly and calmly, Mischa too. We shall be travelling for three days. Thank you for all your kindness and care... Goodbye for now from the four of us.”

Etty died at Auschwitz on 30th November 1943 – but her diaries and letters, which she passed on for safe keeping - are an extraordinary legacy of faith forged from the crucible of suffering; living words which speak of a resurrection of the spirit.

From the Netherlands we turn to the English war poet – Siegfried Sassoon. One of his most famous poems was published in 1919, after the end of the First World War. The jubilant singing has been interpreted as a reference to the Armistice, but Sassoon when he wrote it, may have had in mind the soldiers singing in the trenches – expressing hope, finding cause for joy (perhaps at the sight of a bird in flight?) amidst the horrors of war. I invite you to read the poem slowly as a meditation:

Everyone Sang - By Siegfried Sassoon

*Everyone suddenly burst out singing;
And I was filled with such delight
As prisoned birds must find in freedom,
Winging wildly across the white
Orchards and dark-green fields; on - on - and out of sight.*

*Everyone's voice was suddenly lifted;
And beauty came like the setting sun:
My heart was shaken with tears; and horror
Drifted away ... O, but Everyone
Was a bird; and the song was wordless; the singing will never be done.*



**If you have access to a computer or smart phone you may like to listen to this piece of music:
Lark in the Clean Air (traditional Irish melody)**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xof8f6CD3XU>

Reflection: Dietrich Bonhoeffer

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a Lutheran pastor, opposed the Nazi regime in Germany during the second World War, and was arrested in April 1943 by the Gestapo. Allowed to send one letter every ten days, he wrote an Easter letter to his parents during his first month in prison. He refers to his fiancée, Maria von Wedemeyer, who was 19 at the time. He was 37.

Easter Sunday, April 25, 1943

"Today the tenth day is finally here again, so that I may write to you. How glad I am to let you know that I am celebrating a happy Easter here. The liberating thing about Good Friday and Easter is that one's thoughts turn far away from one's personal fate toward the ultimate meaning of life, suffering, and everything that happens, and one clings to a great hope.

Since yesterday it has been amazingly quiet in this prison house. The only sound heard is "Happy Easter" as everyone calls to each other with no envy, and no one begrudges the fulfillment of their Easter wishes to those who labour here in these difficult conditions.

Good Friday was Maria's birthday. In the past year she bore the death of her father, her brother, and two especially beloved cousins with such a firm heart. If I didn't know that, I would worry about her. Now Easter will console her, her large family will stand by her, and her work in the Red Cross will keep her completely occupied. Greet her warmly, tell her that I long for her very much. Tell her not to be sad but brave as she has been til now. She is so very young! That is the hard part."

Bonhoeffer knew the pain of separation from everyone he loved; that feels especially poignant as today, as we think of the many separated from loved ones because of the risk of the virus. Even so, Bonhoeffer in his confinement, found joy and meaning at Easter.



Bonhoeffer never got to be reunited with his fiancée. Shortly before his execution his fellow prisoners asked him to hold a service for them. Those present recalled how he encouraged them - Christians, atheists and communists alike - to look forward hopefully to the future. One of them later said "he touched the hearts of all of us". On the day of his execution on 9th April 1945 the prison doctor saw him kneeling in prayer, and wrote: "The devotion and evident conviction of being heard that I saw in the prayer of this intensely captivating man, moved me to the depths."

Prayer - by Rev. David Doel (edited)

Eternal Spirit of Life and Love:

green and dying is the world about us, and the world within.

Green is the world in the fullness of its beauty...

in the birth of tree and flower,

the springing into life of creatures great and small.

Green is the mind in the continuous surging reparation of the power of Love.

Dying is our world as leaves mulch the land...

and the great oceans come and go.

Dying is our world as loved ones leave at painful, untimely moments.

Dying is the world within, as old delusions fail...

and intellects, like limbs, lose their agility.

But even in its dying the world fares green again

and even in our dying we may be born again;

dying and rising many times before our end.

Through dream and vision, and the subtle flow of intuition,

our minds may intimate another world within our own...

beckoning us to a new and greener world whose name is Love -

a greenness and a dying beyond our place of time and space -

back to the Womb from which we came,

back to the Love beyond all comprehension,

where in this life or any other, all things are made one in You. Amen

Musical meditation

If you have access to a computer or smart phone you may like to watch/listen to this youtube video: Frédéric Chopin - Spring Waltz -

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a0hFZPvanMs>

Or listen to a piece of music of your own choosing that evokes the season of Spring

Reading: (source - anon)

Ethel Mulvaney was a Canadian working with the Red Cross in Singapore when it fell to the Japanese in February 1942. She was interned in Changi jail. As the first Easter approached she petitioned the Prison Commandant for permission for a group of women to sing in the courtyard (so that all could hear) on Easter morning. "Why?" demanded the officer. "Because Christ rose from the dead on Easter morning" she replied. "Request denied" he barked, "return to your compound."

This drama of request and refusal was made 12 times as Easter drew near. Each time Ethel Mulvaney suffered the same rough manhandling. Then to their utter astonishment and joy, the day before Easter Sunday, came the order over the loudspeakers: "Women prisoners may sing for five minutes in courtyard No.1 at dawn tomorrow".

The next morning for 5 precious minutes the women praised God for raising up Jesus. In that hell they sang of their hope and what was a fact in their experience. Silently they filed back to their compound. As they passed through the gateway a guard stepped up to Ethel and from inside his brown tunic he drew out a tiny orchid. Handing it to her he whispered in broken English: "He is risen indeed!"



Reflection

This passage shows the reality of faith 'in extremis'. Many Unitarians, with our theological scruples, cannot say with conviction, 'He is risen indeed', but we cannot deny the power of that lived experience for millions across the centuries – and today.

And consider the response of the prison guard who in witnessing the faith of the women, seemed to experience a resurrection of the heart. Through the gift he offers - a tiny orchid, symbol of beauty - he concurs with their faith that 'Christ is risen indeed'.

Perhaps it can be so for us, even with our theological doubts and questions? That Christ - whatever 'Christ' may represent for each of us - as a symbol of hope, joy, love and transformation - is risen –as we recognise those inner moments of 'easterings' and resurrections – those internal shifts towards beauty, or joy, or new possibilities - even in these times of challenge?

These women were granted 5 minutes to sing – imagine waiting 12 years to do so! This reminds us of the enormous freedoms we still enjoy in our own confinement. And we are rediscovering the power of music to lift spirits; news clips of Italians singing from balconies and open windows... in this country too... musicians offering online concerts for free...

And celebrating this freedom to sing as often as we please – you are invited to sing a hymn which speaks of the resurrection of the Spirit.

Hymn: Give Thanks for Life (Purple book - Sing your Faith no. 44)

Tune - Sine Nomine ('For all the Saints)

Give thanks for life, the measure of our days,
mortal, we pass through beauty that decays,
yet sing to God our hope, our love, our praise,
Alleluia, Alleluia!

Give thanks for those whose lives shone with a light
caught from the Christ-flame, gleaming through the night,
who touched the truth, who burned for what is right,
Alleluia, Alleluia!

Give thanks for all, our living and our dead,
thanks for the love by which our life is fed,
a love not changed by time or death or dread,
Alleluia, Alleluia!

Give thanks for hope that a seed of grain
lying in darkness, does its life retain
to rise in glory, growing green again,
Alleluia, Alleluia!

Shirley Erena Murray b.1931

At this point in the service those meeting online will be invited to share briefly joys and concerns. You are invited to think for a few minutes of your Meadow Chapel friends, as we will think of you.

Reflection:

After reflecting on the faith and courage of those who lived through war, yet still found cause for rejoicing, we return to our own times – Easter Sunday 2020. As I said earlier, many right now, are still living through Good Friday; those in the throes of sickness, those dying alone, those newly bereaved, exhausted medics and care-workers, those who've lost their income, those facing homelessness and hunger – not to mention those enduring countless ills and injustices nothing to do with Covid 19.

Good Friday is not just about one man, 2000 years ago, dying a horrible death, important though this story is. Good Friday encompasses all those who in extremis, cry out like Jesus, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

Some of us are fortunate, cushioned from the worst of it – in leafy Surrey, with gardens and green spaces on our doorsteps - perhaps the impact of the pandemic hasn't really hit us yet. But whilst we might not be enduring Good Friday, we may still feel stuck at Easter Saturday; the place of waiting, not knowing what's to come.

We are probably wishing our lives were back to 'normal' – yet sensing they never will be. Just as it was for the disciples of Jesus, their world turned upside down, having lost everything that was most precious, with little hope of resurrection.

Whether we're living through Good Friday or Easter Saturday, we find ourselves - as a community, a country, and as a world – suddenly confined in a 'tomb' not of our choosing. But consider the metaphor of the tomb - not just as a place of death, but as a place of rebirth. How about we see this confinement as a time of gestation – thinking of the tomb as a womb?

We might anticipate 'resurrection' as being able to leave our homes, meet once more in the flesh, return to our jobs and leisure pursuits. There's been much talk of getting back to 'business as usual' – but I for one, hope and pray, we *won't* go back to business as usual - because business as usual has not been healthy for ourselves or our planet!

There have been many articles and poems in recent weeks, exploring the mess we've got ourselves in, and how this virus, awful though it is, could be seen as a wake-up call to new ways of being. Here's one such poem sent to me by Jenny Miller:

An Imagined Letter from Covid-19 to Humans by Kristin Flyntz (edited)

Stop. Just stop.

It is no longer a request. It is a mandate.

We will help you.

We will bring the supersonic, high speed merry-go-round to a halt

We will stop the planes, the trains,

the schools, the malls, the meetings

the frenetic, furied rush of illusions and "obligations"

that keep you from hearing our

single and shared beating heart,

the way we breathe together, in unison....

We will interrupt this...endless cacophonous broadcast of

divisions and distractions,

to bring you this long-breaking news:

We are not well.

None of us; all of us are suffering.

Last year, the firestorms that scorched the lungs of the earth

did not give you pause.

Nor the typhoons in Africa, China, Japan.

Nor the fevered climates in Japan and India.

You have not been listening.

It is hard to listen when you are so busy all the time,

hustling to uphold the comforts and conveniences that scaffold your lives.

But the foundation is giving way,

buckling under the weight of your needs and desires.

We will help you....

Despite what you might think or feel, we are not the enemy.

We are Messenger...We are a balancing force.

We are asking you: To stop, to be still, to listen;

*To move beyond your individual concerns and consider the concerns of all;
To be with your ignorance, to find your humility, to relinquish your thinking minds
and travel deep into the mind of the heart;
To look up into the sky, streaked with fewer planes, and see it,
to notice its condition: clear, smoky, smoggy, rainy?*

*...To look at a tree, and see it, to notice its condition:
how does its health contribute to the health of the sky,
to the air you need to be healthy?
To visit a river, and see it, to notice its condition: clear, clean, murky, polluted?
...How does its health contribute to the health of the tree,
who contributes to the health of the sky, so that you may also be healthy?*

*Many are afraid now.
Do not demonize your fear...and do not let it rule you.
Instead, let it speak to you—in your stillness, listen for its wisdom.
What might it be telling you about what is at work, at issue, at risk,
beyond the threats of personal inconvenience and illness?
As the health of a tree, a river, the sky tells you about quality of your own health,
what might the quality of your health tell you about the health of the rivers, the trees,
the sky, and all of us who share this planet with you?

Stop....*

So here's what I hope and pray, when we're out of this crisis; that softer ways of walking on the earth and appreciating small blessings, will continue; that the neighbourliness and looking out for one another, we've seen these last few weeks, becomes the norm; I hope and pray that we'll resist the urge to take twice as many flights to 'make up for lost time', and tempting though it may be to shore up economy - I hope we before we start to buy once more, all the things we're learning to live without, that we at least consider the impact on the environment and the world's poorest. I hope that governments won't go back to business as usual, when 'as usual' marginalises the most vulnerable.

Already there are green shoots of hope springing up from this pandemic, aside from cleaner skies and less pollution. Liverpool and Birmingham councils have managed to house all their homeless in flats – something once considered impossible, has suddenly become possible! I hope once this is over, they're not turned back out on the streets.

Already the tomb is becoming a womb. But this doesn't mean to say it will be easy; there will be pain and struggle - birth pangs – and a new world is far from guaranteed. But I hope and pray that when we come out of this tomb, however long that might take, it will be as if we've been 'reborn'; having died to ways that no longer serve us, and giving birth to a new consciousness - as individuals, as communities, as a nation, and as a world - so that we can collectively cry 'Hallelujah, we are risen' and know that we are changed for the better, by this experience. May it be so, Amen

Hymn: 'Spirit of Life, Rising up Green'

(tune - 'Skye Boat Song' ...Speed Bonny Boat)

*Spirit of Life rising up green,
In bud and leaf and flower,
Help us to sense you, though unseen,
E'en in our darkest hour.*

In times of fear, through days of doubt,
Give us the strength to stand,
Whate'er befalls, may we still know
Spring rises through the land.

*Spirit of Life rising up green,
In bud and leaf and flower,
Help us to sense you, though unseen,
E'en in our darkest hour*

Just as the grain buried in earth
Springeth forth after rain,
So may our hearts watered with tears,
Grow green and strong again.

*Spirit of Life rising up green,
In bud and leaf and flower,
Help us to sense you, though unseen,
E'en in our darkest hour.*

(lyrics by S. Gabriel)

Closing words:

Remembering the great truths at the heart of this season – truths that go deeper than proven ‘facts’ – I end with a poem by John Oxenham (edited) - which speaks to me of the risen Christ (whose name is Love) let loose in all the world:

Great-Heart is dead, they say -
Great-Heart the Teacher,
Great Heart the Joyous,
Great Heart the Fearless...

But the Light shall burn the brighter.
And the night shall be the lighter, for his going;
And a rich, rich harvest for his sowing....

Great-Heart is dead, say they?
Not dead nor sleeping! He lives on!
His name shall kindle many a heart to equal flame.
The fire he lighted shall burn on and on,
Till all the darkness of the lands be gone,
And all the kingdoms of the earth be won.
And one.

A soul so fiery sweet can never die,
But lives and loves and works through all eternity.

Thank you for sharing this time with me. I invite you to sing or read aloud the following blessing for all in our Meadow Chapel family, and all those you care about.

Sung Blessing: (from purple hymn book ‘Sing your Faith no. 102)

*May the road rise with you,
May the wind be always at your back,
May the sun shine warm upon your face,
May the rain fall soft upon your fields
And until we meet again, may God hold you
In the hollow of His/Her hand.*

