

UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST CONGREGATIONAL
Wallace, Idaho

WORSHIP

Easter Sunday

April 12, 2020

SONG “Halle, halle, halle-lu-ja”

Halle, halle, halleluja. Halle, halle, halleluja.

Halle, halle, halleluja. Halleluja, halleluja.

ANNOUNCEMENTS

Alleluia! Christ is risen! Christ is risen indeed! Welcome to our celebration of this great and glorious good news at the United Church of Christ Congregational in Wallace. This is not the way we usually gather to celebrate Easter, but it is the place we have found ourselves for several of the Sundays leading up to this day. And where we will most likely gather for a few Sundays more. If it were up to us, this is not the way we would choose to worship, but I for one give thanks that the modern gifts of technology make it possible for us to come together even while we're isolated and quarantined, and I trust that the gift of God's Spirit knits us together as one even as we are scattered to separate and sometimes to far and distant places. We are still the body of Christ, held together by the love of God, and for that, I give thanks.

I invite you, if you like, to find the PDF of the printed resources so that we can again join together in the responsive and unison pieces and share in singing the songs. Let us worship God.

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CALL TO WORSHIP

We are still isolated, still feeling like we have been left alone in a shadowed place, but this is the day:

hope tiptoes us awake; light guides us through the shadows.

We are keeping a safe distance from others, we are quarantining ourselves, we are not gathering as God's people, but this is the day the Lord:

plants joy in our winter hearts; drowns out despair's cries with laughter.

This is a time of uncertainty and fear, we wonder what today will bring, we worry about the coming tomorrow, but this is the day the Lord has made

**the day grace does cartwheels in graveyards; resurrection wonder outshines the brightest sun;
an empty tomb fills us with good news.**

(Thom M. Shuman, LectionaryLiturgies.blogspot.com)

SONG “Christ the Lord is Risen Today”

Christ the Lord is risen today, Alleluia! Mortal tongues and angels say: Alleluia!

Raise your joys and triumphs high, Alleluia! Sing, glad heavens, and earth reply: Alleluia!

Love's redeeming work is done, Alleluia! Fought the fight, the battle won, Alleluia!

Death in vain forbids Christ rise, Alleluia! God has opened paradise, Alleluia!

PRAYER OF INVOCATION (in unison)

Good News God, In the midst of deep sorrow and grief your angels appeared to the faithful women of Jesus' company, bringing them news more awe-inspiring than they could imagine –

Christ is Risen! Surely your angels can interrupt our lives, too, breaking into our losses and sorrows and offering a message of tremendous joy to change our lives. Come this Easter morning, we pray, and fill us with the joy of the women disciples, the first witnesses to your resurrection, that our lives may also be renewed in hope and glory. Let us roll back the stone of the grave and sing Alleluia once again! In Christ we pray. Amen.

(Rev. Elizabeth Dille, United Church of Christ Worship Ways)

SCRIPTURE READING

Matthew 28:1-10

After the sabbath, as the first day of the week was dawning, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb. And suddenly there was a great earthquake; for an angel of the Lord, descending from heaven, came and rolled back the stone and sat on it. His appearance was like lightning, and his clothing white as snow. For fear of him the guards shook and became like dead men. But the angel said to the women, "Do not be afraid; I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. He is not here; for he has been raised, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay. Then go quickly and tell his disciples, 'He has been raised from the dead, and indeed he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him.' This is my message for you." So they left the tomb quickly with fear and great joy, and ran to tell his disciples. Suddenly Jesus met them and said, "Greetings!" And they came to him, took hold of his feet, and worshiped him. Then Jesus said to them, "Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me."

MEDITATION

This is a first. I've seen lots of Easters in my day, but never one quite like this. More than one has involved snow. I remember trumpets and handbells, a large choir and even the Hallelujah Chorus. I remember being squeezed into the front pew in the only small space that was left, and fussing because it seemed like there ought to be reserved seating for the regulars. There was the Easter when I made a pastoral call between the sunrise service and regular worship, because a parishioner's leukemia was back and we all knew the end was near. And then there was the Easter when we'd just buried my brother and the very next day, we'd gather at the funeral home for calling hours around my mother's remains. I've led three services before noon with a host of characters I knew well and didn't know at all, and cherished the small, intimate gathering of a few faithful followers in a quiet celebration of new life. But never have I sat in our guest room converted to studio and stared into a camera to send off my Easter Alleluia's while hoping someone out there was singing along on the songs. Not the Easter any of us would have chosen, and not an Easter I could have imagined. But here we are.

I can't begin to tell you how many preachers and teachers I consulted who looked at our current context and said, the only choice before us is to go biblical. And ironically, this Easter holds the potential for us to appreciate better than we often do what that very first Easter dawn was like for Jesus' friends and followers. We may think that lilies and handbells, a gathering of friends and an Easter egg hunt and meal with family are essential for a proper observance of Easter, but none of that was there the first time around. They were wandering in the dark. When all the ugliness and gore were finished on Friday, they'd scattered and spent the sabbath in lonely isolation. The disciples were still reeling from the brutal heartache and loss they'd experienced just two days earlier. They were unsure what the future held and had absolutely no vision for how their lives would ever return to normal. Overwhelmed by fear, mired in isolation and death, reeling with the magnitude of just how ugly and hopeless it all was, absolutely stunned by all they had lost and clueless about where the road ahead lie, or if there even was one.

Easter began in that darkness. The Gospel of John reports that Mary headed out while it was still dark. Matthew slept in just a tad and tells us that the two Marys were underway just as the first day of the week was beginning to dawn. You know, that time of day when color is just starting to push into the

sky, but it's still dark enough that it's hard to see where you're going, and hard to be sure what you're seeing. When we're writing the script, Easter opens in full blazing brilliance, a gift where we can bask in the warmth and beauty, joy and promise of a great new day, but the story gives us murky lostness and shell shocked emptiness. The gift to us is that when we're living on a planet reeling in loss, it's comforting to be facing into a story that assures us there's something stirring in all that death and destruction, pain and ugliness; and that indeed, when we begin to fear that the darkness may be all there is, we've got a story that asks us to listen a bit longer.

If I asked you what the women were up to in those early hours of dawn, I suspect that most of you would tell me that they're going to prepare Jesus' body for burial. That's what I would have told you if I hadn't taken another look at Matthew's story. He doesn't say anything about embalming spices; he tells us they went because they wanted to see the tomb. At least one writer says that's because they hadn't given up on God yet, and that when they came to see the tomb, they actually came to see it open. (SALT's Lectionary Commentary) When the earth shakes for a second time in three days, when the tomb's stone is thunderously rolled away, they aren't surprised. Awestruck and overjoyed yes, but not surprised. The Roman guards faint with terror at the sight of an angel who looks like lightning, but the women stand strong, despite their fear. They meet the angel's gaze. They see what they came hoping and expecting to see. The angel showed them around the empty tomb, and then sent them out to tell the disciples, promising that Jesus was going ahead of them and would meet them again in Galilee. They turned to do as they were told, quickly and with a mix of fear and great joy; but before they got very far, the women met Jesus on the road. They fell at his feet and worshiped him, and then he repeated the message of the angel: there's no need to be afraid; go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; I will meet them there.

One of the pieces of Matthew's story that I really like is all of the earthquakes. Last Sunday, we remembered Jesus' entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. Matthew reports that that was such a momentous parade that the whole city was in turmoil in response. The word that is translated there as turmoil is actually more like the word "shaken" as in seismic activity, or an earthquake. The reference is far less subtle by the time we get to Jesus' death on the cross, when Matthew reports that at the moment Jesus drew his last breath, the earth shook, rocks were split, the curtain in the temple was torn in two, tombs were opened and spilled out and raised up saints who had died years before. Three days later, there's another earthquake, perhaps an after shock, but more likely it was its own event, one that rolled away the stone, opened and emptied the tomb that had once held a man very much dead. Now he was up and off, and headed down the road to Galilee.

This was no every day occurrence, nothing predictable or reasonable, no repeat occurrence from another time in history. The tectonic plates of God's creation were on the move, and nothing would ever be the same. These are the kinds of moments when holes can be blown in the sides of mountains, that rearrange far more than furniture and wall hangings, but that have the power to push the rock of mountains higher on one side of the continent while they settle and sink on the other. A new day was dawning, new power was being unleashed, unprecedented promise and possibility were coming to life. Jesus who had been very much dead on Friday was alive again, and on the road headed for Galilee. As Ann Weems wrote in a poem years ago, *We can rock a Baby, We can weep for a Dead Man; But what can we do with a 33-year old old who won't let the story end? ("Come to the Easter Party")*

Living in to the mystery of the miracle that happened that first Easter morning wasn't easy and didn't come naturally. Some of Jesus' disciples, the ones who knew him best, initially refused to believe, others wanted evidence and proof. And I think it's every bit as true now as it was that first time around: Easter faith is often a mix of trust and doubt, belief and disbelief. As one writer said, there are at least two ways to miss a miracle: first, to dismiss it, to reject it too readily, as if astonishing things never

happen; or secondly, to domesticate it, to accept it too readily, as if isn't astonishing at all. (SALT Lectionary Project) The disciples struggled, while the two Marys went to work and did as they were told, proclaiming the mystery and announcing the good news. And what we do with it all is still unfolding.

Both the angel and Jesus told the women that Jesus was headed to Galilee and would meet them there. Galilee was where he and the disciples had already been, where he had taught and healed, embraced and challenged, fed and visited, served and welcomed, called and empowered, forgiven and loved. He wasn't done, but starting all over again, and if they wanted to continue the journey they'd started together, they were welcome to find him in the places he'd always been, out and about among the people, doing the work he was sent to do.

It's an offer that's given to us as well. Especially as we face into all of the statistics and trauma of COVID-19, Jesus continues to go ahead of us, offering healing and hope, transformation and promise. We can despair over all that is lost, give in to the fear and anxiety of where this is headed and who will be next, grow impatient and decide prematurely to get on with life, work to make things like they used to be and restore an old normal, or watch and listen for signs of Christ's presence and transforming gift of new life. I have no idea what the resurrected Jesus has in mind for us, but I see signs that give me hope: signs of kindness and compassion, of health care workers running into danger in order to do everything they can to protect life, of strangers helping strangers and neighbors learning again how to be neighbors. Pollution is retreating so people can see mountains for the first time in decades, and bird song is emerging out of the silence of cities that have become still. I dare to believe that God is just getting started with us, and I pray we will watch for the miracles and do all we can to encourage and nurture their presence among us.

Idaho had an earthquake recently. What if that was one of the early signs of the shifts and changes, transformation and possibility headed our way? What if Jesus is still going ahead of us, offering new life, sharing unprecedented hope, living an unconditional love the likes of which will leave our heads spinning and our hearts smiling? I pray we'll keep our eyes and ears open to the signs and sounds of God's presence, and do all we can to share the good news and join in the mysterious, miraculous new life. Amen.

SONG *“Goodness is Stronger than Evil”*

Goodness is stronger than evil; love is stronger than hate;
light is stronger than darkness; life is stronger than death.
Victory is ours, victory is ours through him who loves us.
Victory is ours, victory is ours through him who loves us.

PRAYER REQUESTS

Prayer request for the people involved in domestic violence situations during these abnormal times...prayers for reaching out for help, strength to sustain them through the rough transition period..and a future of God's great unveiled to them.

John Theilman for improvement on his balance and well being

A prayer for all the people who desperately are in the need for food. One food bank in the (Gainesville, FL) area had less than 100 families to feed last month and this past had over 600. It's a problem all over the country but especially bad in areas like ours that have been hit hard by the virus and also closures. The poor continue to be the hardest hit. On this Easter my hope is that we who are so fortunate can pray for and help for those in need.

“Lord make us a means of your Peace”

PASTORAL PRAYER

We thank you, Redeeming God, for the glorious message that you bring new hope out of despair, resurrection out of defeat, and new life out of death. You call dry bones to dance. You give living water so that new life blossoms. You urge flowers to push their way through winter-hardened soil.

We bring before you the dead and dried-out places in our lives, that through your touch we may discover newness of life. Forgotten dreams, lapsed intentions, hardened resentments, griefs to which we cling like children cling to a worn but cherished toy or blanket: these we hand over to you, knowing that you will return them, mended, washed, renewed and transformed. We bring before you the places in our lives and in our world where despair reigns unchallenged. With grief we bring our concerns for our community, country and every corner of our world racked by the coronavirus, where death and destruction run rampant and fear threatens to rule the day.

Point us toward actions, however small, which lead to a more hopeful future for ourselves and for our world. Gracious God, we thank you that you walk beside us as we journey through life. Because you are with us, we accept each new day, with its joys and sorrows, as a gift. Because you are with us, we gain courage to meet the challenge of the day, choosing life and not death as we move through time. As you raised Jesus from the dead, raise us to new life day by day. For we pray in Jesus' name, and using the words he taught, saying: Our Father...

PRAYER OF OUR SAVIOR (debts)

OFFERING

At this time when we turn to our offering, I want to thank you for all that you do: your willingness to stay home in order to stop the spread of the virus, acts of kindness and compassion you offer to those who are lonely and in need of a helping hand and a friendly voice, help setting up a shelf of books that are free for the taking on the street outside a business, putting bears in your window so they're waiting for a child on the hunt, Facetiming grandchildren you can't visit. Thank you for your investment and involvement in this church and all you do to strengthen and encourage our ministry.

I also want to invite you to consider two ways you can express your care for others. One is if you know anyone in a nursing home or locked down and alone, pay them a visit. Stand outside their window, wave and smile, talk on the phone with them while you can see their smile and they can see yours, make a large card or banner and take it with you to wish them a good day, a Happy Easter, the sureness that they are not alone.

Secondly, our local food bank is working to meet the growing needs in this community. They've decided to increase the size of the vouchers they give out, and to allow people to receive them twice a month: the first Thursday in Osburn and the third Thursday in Wallace. In order to do that, they are working to raise additional money. Our Trustees are in the process of providing some money from the Emergency Aid Fund, that you've already helped create. Thank you for making that money available. In addition to that, the best thing you can do is buy the bags of food that are already prepared at both Harvest Foods and Steins. Folks from the Food Bank pick those up every week, and they are an invaluable part of the food they distribute to those in need.

Let us pray:

Though alone, separated from others, we can still offer our gifts on this joyous morning, praying that they may bring light to those in the shadows, laughter to all who mourn, and hope to those longing for life anew. In Jesus' name, we pray. Amen.

SONG *“Halle, halle, halle-lu-ja”*

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BENEDICTION

May the God who shakes heaven and earth,

whom death could not contain,

who lives to disturb and heal us,

bless you with power to go forth

and proclaim the gospel. Amen.