

Easter Sunday
Rev. Carol Allman-Morton
UUMSB
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I live in an area rich with birds. The man who first lived in our house was a high school science teacher, and he built birdhouses that are scattered all over the area. There is a bluebird box under a magnolia that has occupants every year, and some starlings nest in a box in the front yard. Last fall we had birds and squirrels all over the sunflowers in the garden and it was the final push for me to get a bird feeder. I had avoided it for years because of the squirrel and bear situations that so many face with feeders, but I saw the setups that a lot of my neighbors have and copied it. I have a rope going over a high branch of a tree near the house. The rope is thin and strong and the squirrels have steered clear. I suppose technically a bear could climb the tree and jump for the feeder, and if they do, it will be an amazing show. I had heard that bluejays could be jerks at the feeder, but I always scatter some seed on the ground when I fill it and they seem happy with that, and leave the feeder to the little birds, and to the enormous woodpeckers that precariously perch and grab snacks. I get to look at the feeder much of the day, it is close to lots of windows. I love that when I fill the feeder the chickadees call out to their friends that there is new stuff to be had. When there is no one to sing about it, I have taken to calling the chickadees like my grandma taught me, so they are sure to know it has been refilled. The bird feeder has been a symbol of accountability for me through this winter. I listen and watch out for the birds, and pay attention to my strand in the fragile, and infinite, web of life. I *wonder* at the birds slowly returning from places so far away, and at the tiny beings who make it through the whole winter right here. In their own way, birds are small miracles, calling out to remind us they are there and that we are in this together.

An old friend from seminary, Rev. Ellen Cooper wrote a reflection on Easter called, "Let the Alleluias Rise Up." Ellen was a former clown with Ringling Brothers in addition to her call to ministry, and had a great gift for story. She passed away very young at 41 about four years ago. This is an excerpt from her reflection:

..."No Alleluias until Easter," my daughter told me solemnly. "Shhhh. The alleluias are sleeping." She pointed to the small raised garden bed being warmed by the spring sun, where I could see the sprouts of trumpet lilies pushing up through the soft dirt. "Before Easter," she summed up, "no alleluias. After Easter...alleluias again..."

...This is Easter stripped down to its most central, heart-of-hearts message. We have alleluias in our lives--moments of triumph and wonder, of insight and rebirth. These are moments of transformation, when our way of being in the world is fundamentally changed. Strengthened. Deepened. When we feel more whole; more connected. The exuberant and joyful Alleluia is a good way to think of these moments. But as my Christian colleagues are fond of saying, you can't get to Easter without Good Friday.

The story of the resurrection cannot go forward without a death. Sometimes, the most profound transformations are the ones that emerge out of the deaths that we face in our lives. It may be a literal death, the hole left in your life when a beloved has gone, and you feel unmade by the loss. It may be any one of a thousand lesser losses -the loss of a job or a friendship; the death of a marriage or partnership; a change in physical or mental

ability; even the death of a long-held dream. These places of grief are barren places in our lives, God-forsaken places that teach us sorrow and suffering and lamentation.

...But feeling forsaken is not the same as being forsaken. The story of Easter tells us that death doesn't win...Love wins. Like the saplings that sprout among the ruins of a forest fire, like the phoenix who is born from its own ashes, like the crocus that pokes through the snow each spring, like the banana tree...which dies, but lives on in its children, hope rises. Hope rises up even in the face of death. Even in our wilderness, we are never completely lost.¹

I love Ellen's image, "feeling forsaken is not the same as being forsaken. The story of Easter tells us that death doesn't win...Love wins." While it is true that at any moment we may experience loss and grief, and it is uncommon for us to experience that loss and grief and holding of dramatic change as humans across the world at the same time. Out of this experience of communal loss due to the pandemic, while everything may not transform into what we might hope for in a beloved community, if we pay attention, we may find transformation, hope, and miracle.

For Christians, Easter is a day of celebrations and Alleluias. In the stories of Jesus' ministry he *had* resurrected some people, as part of the miracles that were proof of his power and connection to God. And then on Easter morning, after three days in the tomb, when the women in the Gospel of Luke go to anoint Jesus' body, he has risen, angels explain what happened, and the women rush off to tell the story. The gospel writers anticipate a lot of the questions that folks might have about what happened, and offer explanations in advance. In the next chapters, the disciples will know that he was resurrected because they encounter him after his death, and are able to touch him and talk with him, before he ascends bodily to heaven. The stories of the disciples throughout the gospels are often about them getting things wrong, and needing to be corrected, and as a teaching technique in the retelling of the story, this is effective. Most folks who grew up *in* any kind of Christian or UU environment probably know the story of Thomas and his doubt, or at least know the expression Doubting Thomas. Thomas was the disciple in the Gospel of John who would not believe the testimony of the other disciples that Jesus had bodily risen without touching side of Jesus for himself. One of these teaching moments is clear in the text from Luke this morning, When Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women go to the other disciples to tell them what happened, at first the disciples don't believe, and the text seems to point to lack of faith as the reason why, or perhaps misogyny. And then Peter goes to see for himself and sees the body is gone and he was amazed. The disciples get stuff wrong so we can learn *with* them as we retell the stories.

Another loss we are experiencing together is the loss of voices of Black, Indigenous, and People of Color--of Asian grandparents, Indigenous parents, Black siblings, and Latinx children--to violence. There are people crying out to share their experience, and sometimes, even when we go for ourselves to the tomb to see whether it is indeed empty, or we touch the side of people who testify to harm, treating victims of violence as criminals--even when there are multiple videos and accountings of what happened--the power of prejudice, bias, and white fear of the weight of accountability for centuries of oppression and unearned privilege, often thwarts just outcomes. It can feel that justice is forsaken. In the coverage of Derek Chauvin's trial this week, one of stories that broke my heart *and* helped me see love in the world, was learning of all the women, the mothers, sisters, and loved ones of other victims of police violence, who are on

¹ Rev. Ellen Cooper, "Let the Alleluias Rise Up", <https://www.uua.org/worship/words/sermon/let-alleluias-rise-up>

site at the trial to support George Floyd's family. A tragic community of love and care in the face of such pain and suffering.

On Easter, we hear again the story that Love wins. On Easter, we hear again of resurrection, of miracle. And each day we can pay attention to the little miracles all around us. Signs of hope in spring, in bird song, and in ways we see hope and love manifest in our world. Whose stories will we amplify? How we will respond in the face of loss? We are not forsaken, *and* we are responsible to one another and to our world. Rev. Robbie Walsh reminds us:

The stories make it clear that God does not do it alone. The motions of the spheres will produce a sunrise, but the springtime of the spirit, the springtime of love and justice and peace, depends on our human response to the gift of life. Let us tell the stories again.²

So may it be. Happy Easter and may you be filled with Alleluias. Amen.

² Rev. Robert Walsh, "Easter Week 1982,"
<https://www.uua.org/worship/words/meditation/easter-week-1982>