**April 4, 2021 Easter Worship Service**

Prelude: Dawn of Triumph (organist: Jeff Hobart)

Welcome

Friends, he is risen! He is risen indeed! Happy Easter! Philip Brooks writes this poem:

Tomb, thou shall hold Him no longer;

Death is strong, but Life is stronger;

Stronger than the dark, the light;

Stronger than the wrong, the right;

Faith and Hope triumphant say,

Christ will rise on Easter Day.

Welcome, and happy Easter. Friends, no matter who you are or where you are on life’s journey, you are welcome here at the First Congregational Church of Randolph. I hope you will join us next week as well for part 2 of Easter as we celebrate Holy Humor Sunday. As a preview of that:

What's the best way to make Easter easier?

Put an "i" where the "t" is.

What do you call a rabbit with fleas?

Bugs Bunny.

What do you get when you pour hot water into a rabbit hole?

Hot cross bunnies.

I promise the jokes next week will be better- maybe. But for now, will you join with me in the invocation? Let us pray.

Lord of resurrection surprises, open our hearts this day to the presence of Jesus Christ. Erase our excuses for unbelief and exchange them for strong witness to the power of Your mercy and love. Give us courage and challenge us to walk the path of discipleship, knowing that Jesus goes before us, leading and guiding our steps. And it is in His name, the name of the risen Christ, that we pray, amen.

Hymn: Christ the Lord is Risen Today

Christ the Lord is risen today, Alleluia!

Sons of men and angels say, Alleluia!

Raise your joys and triumphs high, Alleluia!

Sing, ye heavens, and earth reply, Alleluia!

Lives again our glorious King, Alleluia!

Where, O death, is now thy sting? Alleluia!

Dying once, He all doth save, Alleluia!

Where thy victory, O grave? Alleluia!

Love's redeeming work is done, Alleluia!

Fought the fight, the battle won, Alleluia!

Death in vain forbids him rise, Alleluia!

Christ has opened paradise, Alleluia!

Soar we now where Christ hath led, Alleluia!

Following our exalted Head, Alleluia!

Made like him, like him we rise, Alleluia!

Ours the cross, the grave, the skies, Alleluia!

Amen!

Children’s Message

So I wanna spend a moment with the kids today for part of our time with Easter, kids as well as people who are young at heart, and introduce you to Charlie. I don’t know if you can tell from where you’re at, but Charlie is a caterpillar. And throughout the Lenten season, we had talked about the candles, about the things that people do that make other people feel sad, or mad, or just feel bad. And Charlie lived in that world, but Charlie was looking for something more. Charlie didn’t wanna be involved with fighting and bullying and name-calling. Charlie had had enough of rudeness and teasing and ignoring. So Charlie figured that he might wanna make a change. So Charlie began to do what caterpillars do, and began to enter into a place of change. He thought he would just sort of let go of the things that had been bothering him. He would stop with bullying, he would stop with the fighting, he would stop with the name-calling, he would stop with the rudeness, until he ended up inside his own little chrysalis.

But that wasn’t enough for Charlie. Charlie really wanted to do something more than that. Charlie wanted to bring about, in him and around him, a different world. So he figured that maybe what he would do is change fighting into forgiving, finding ways to make peace, and change bullying into benevolence, finding ways that he could bring kindness into the world. And he would change name-calling into name-complimenting, helping other people to feel better. That he would change rudeness into respect, he would change teasing into tenderness, and ignoring to inclusion. And Charlie came out a whole different and changed person.

Jesus entered the tomb on Good Friday, but on Easter Sunday, he came out. He was alive again, hoping that he could help us bring more of peace and more of kindness and more of compliments and more of respect and more of caring and more of tenderness and inclusion into the world. I hope that you can help Jesus out. Thank you.

Easter Poem

John Updike wrote a poem, The Seven Stanzas at Easter. Let me share it with you.

Make no mistake:  If He rose at all

it was as His Body;

if the cells' dissolution did not reverse,

     the molecules reknit,

the amino acids rekindle,

the Church will fall.

It was not as the flowers,

each soft Spring recurrent;

It was not as His Spirit in the mouths and

     fuddled eyes of the

eleven apostles;

it was as His flesh; ours.

The same hinged thumbs and toes,

the same valved heart

that -- pierced -- died, withered, paused

   and then regathered

out of enduring Might

new strength to enclose.

Let us not mock God with metaphor, analogy;

sidestepping, transcendence;

making of the event a parable,

a sign painted in the failing and fainting

credulity of earlier ages;

let us walk through the door.

The stone rolled back, not papier mache

not a stone in  story,

but the vast rock of materiality that in the

     slow grinding of

time eclipsed for each of us

the wide light of day.

And if we will have an angel at the tomb,

make it a real angel,

weighty with Max Planck's quanta,

     vivid with hair,

     opaque in the dawn light,

    robed in real linen

    spun on a definite loom.

Let us not seek to make it less monstrous,

for our own convenience, our own sense of beauty,

lest,

    awakened in one unthinkable hour,

     we are embarrassed by the miracle, and crushed by remonstrance.

Anthem: Easter Bells (performed by Chapel Chimes)

Scripture (reader: Davine Holness)

A reading from John, chapter 20, verses 1 through 18.

Now on the first day of the week Mary Magdalene came to the tomb early, while it was still dark, and saw that the stone had been taken away from the tomb. So she ran, and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, “They have taken my Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him.” Peter then came out with the other disciple, and they went toward the tomb. They both ran, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first; and stooping to look in, he saw the linen cloths lying there, but he did not go in. Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb; he saw the linen cloths lying, and the napkin, which had been on his head, not lying with the linen cloths but rolled up in a place by itself. Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; for as yet they did not know the scripture, that he must rise from the dead. Then the disciples went back to their homes.

 But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb, and as she wept she stooped to look into the tomb; and she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had lain, one at the head and one at the feet. They said to her, “Woman, why are you weeping?” She said to them, “Because they have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him.” Saying this, she turned round and saw Jesus standing, but she did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to her, “Woman, why are you weeping? Whom do you seek?” Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, “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.” She turned and said to him in Hebrew, “Rab-bo′ni!” (which means Teacher). Jesus said to her, “Do not hold me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father; but go to my brethren and say to them, I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.” Mary Magdalene went and said to the disciples, “I have seen the Lord”; and she told them that he had said these things to her.

United Methodist pastor and artist Jan Richardson wrote a poem about the empty tomb that she entitled “Risen”.

If you are looking

for a blessing,

do not linger here.

Here

is only

emptiness,

a hollow,

a husk

where

a blessing used to be.

This blessing

was not content

in its confinement.

It could not abide

its isolation,

the unrelenting silence,

the pressing stench

of death.

So if it is

a blessing

you seek,

open your own

Mouth.

Fill your lungs

with the air

this new

morning brings

and then

release it

with a cry.

Hear how the blessing

breaks forth

in your own voice,

how your own lips

form every word

you never dreamed

to say.

See how the blessing

circles back again,

wanting you to repeat it,

but louder,

how it draws you,

pulls you,

sends you

to proclaim

its only word:

RISEN.

RISEN.

RISEN.

Sermon: He Is Risen

I have to keep saying it: Happy Easter, folks. He is risen! He is risen indeed! Will you join with me in prayer?

Holy and gracious God, we give You thanks on this Easter morning for the new life that has emerged around us. Help us in this moment to set aside all the distractions of our lives and focus on the word, the words, that you want us to hear and perceive and understand. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable to You. Amen.

A man dies and finds himself in a small room furnished with a couch and a TV. There's another guy sitting on the couch watching TV as well.

"So is this heaven or hell?" the newly deceased man asks.

"Well, there are no windows or doors and no apparent way out," the man on the couch answers.

"So this is hell?" the newcomer responds.

"I don't know," says the other guy without looking up.   "They did give us this big-screen high-def TV."

"So maybe this is heaven?" says the newbie.

"Maybe, but the TV only gets one channel."

“Oh, so maybe this is hell."

"I'm not sure. The only station the TV gets is PBS."

"So maybe this is heaven after all!" exclaims the relieved newbie.

"Yeah, except for one thing,” says the guy.

"Ooh, what's that?"

"It's always pledge week."

A year ago in the middle of March we asked all of our churches in the Conference to suspend in-person worship, in-person, in-building worship, for 2 weeks. We hinted and hoped that we would be able to hold worship in our Sanctuaries last Easter. We soon realized that was not possible. So then we hoped for Mother’s Day, and then we hoped for Pentecost, and then we hoped for the freedom of the 4th of July, or maybe we hoped for Labor Day and the end of the summer, and then possibly we hoped for Christmas. We did not think that we would still be following COVID safety guidelines for the second Easter in a row as we watched, again, the number of cases and deaths on the rise in yet another surge.

It has been an amazing year. It has been a challenging year. And we’re gonna be processing and analyzing and learning and integrating and recovering from this past year for a long, long time. Because along the way, we have developed some new habits.

In Homiletics Online, they write, “she checks her social media around 10 times a day. Twitter and Facebook are her main sites, but she also looks at Google for news. Since part of the pandemic, since its very start, her habit has increased significantly. “I’m a doom-scroller,” she admits to the Healthline website. Yes, this 26-year-old speech therapist confesses that she has a problem: doom-scrolling. It’s the act of endlessly scrolling down news apps, Twitter, and social media, reading all of the bad news. “The pandemic has exacerbated these habits in many ways,” says a New York psychologist, “including the fact that there is no shortage of doomsday news.”

“If doomsday-scrolling is part of your daily routine, you are not alone. Twitter has jumped 24 percent and Facebook 27 percent.” The problem with doom-scrolling is that it can lead to a greater sense of stress, a greater sense of anxiety, and a greater sense of fear. More pessimism.

In a major analysis of 15 studies that involved almost 230,000 participants published in the Journal of the American Medical Association, it described the biological effect of pessimism.

Pessimists bathe their bodies in damaging stress hormones like cortisol and norepinephrine all day long. Pessimism increases the inflammation in the body and fosters metabolic abnormality, leading to things like diabetes. Pessimism can also lead to depression, and combining all of those things together, pessimism has a higher incidence of cardiovascular disease.

On the other hand, Julia K. Boehm, a psychologist at Chapman University in Orange, California, offers insights on optimism.  She said: “Optimism promotes problem-solving. It helps people deal with challenges and obstacles in more effective ways. Optimists tend to pursue strategies that make for a healthier future, and it makes that healthier future a reality. Their hearts are not constantly pounding. They are not bathing themselves in those hormones. They live a healthier and a longer life.”

Heaven or hell. Pessimism or optimism. Doom-scrolling makes pessimism the frame through which we begin to observe all of the world. As linguist George Lakoff describes in David John Seel Jr.’s book, The New Copernicans he notes that  “people think in frames … . To be accepted, the truth must fit people’s frame. If facts do not fit the frame, the frame stays and the facts bounce off.” Have we not seen that in the politics of the last year and years? That truth-telling, that question about facts, alternative realities, and facts? People think in frames, and if it doesn’t fit their frames, the facts bounce off.

On February 27, 1991, during the Desert Storm War, a woman by the name of Ruth Dillow received the worst call of her life. Her son, Clayton Carpenter, Private First Class, had stepped on a land mine and was dead. For the next three days she grieved as only a mother can grieve, and no one could comfort her. She had to be in that frame of grief. On the third day after receiving that terrible news, the phone rang. On the other end of the phone there was a voice that said, “Mom, it’s me. I’m still alive.” At first she thought it was a cruel joke. She could only think and see within her frames. But eventually she realized that her son who was dead had come back to life. Later she said she laughed and cried and rejoiced because what seemed to be a hopeless situation turned out to be the greatest day of her life.

That morning, they came to the tomb. They were completely immersed in doom-scrolling. They were completely immersed in pessimism. They were completely immersed in a frame: dead people do not come back to life. We don’t even know how we’re gonna roll that stone away. We wanna come and express our grief in some way for Jesus, who had been our hope and now was taken away, and now was dead.

The stone rolled away did not fit their frame. They entered the empty tomb, but it doesn’t fit their frame. They can’t find the body, but it doesn’t fit their frame. Even the angels who speak to them doesn’t fit their frame. Even Jesus, when he speaks to them, doesn’t fit their frame. But the world has changed, and their frame is about to change.

On one occasion Michelangelo, the great artist, turned on his fellow artists in a spirit of indignation. And he said: “Why do you keep filling gallery after gallery with endless pictures on the one theme of Christ in weakness, Christ on the Cross, and most of all, Christ hanging dead? Why do you concentrate on the passing episode as if it were the last work, as if the curtain dropped on Him with disaster and defeat? That dreadful scene lasted a few hours. But to the unending eternity, Christ is alive; the stone has been rolled away and He rules and reigns in triumph!”

That is what God wants for you on Easter. To change your frame. Not some Pollyannish rose-colored glasses way of looking at the world, but a reality that Christ is alive, that the very essence and nature of God has come alive again and is here within our world.

William H. Willimon, in the book Undone by Easter: Keeping Preaching Fresh, tells the story. He wrote, “I am still haunted by a long conversation I had with a man who was a member of one of my early congregations. He had a stunning vision of the presence of the risen Christ [and] had never told anyone about it before. He explained, “The reason why I told no one was I that was too afraid that it was true. I was afraid that it was true, and if it’s true that Jesus was really real, that he had come personally to me, what then? I’d have to change my whole life.”

Folks, I hope you can change your whole life. Because Jesus is risen. That tomb is empty. He has come back. He is here, right now, with you, whether you’re sitting in a sanctuary or sitting in your living room or sitting in your car. Wherever you are, whatever time it is, if you’re hearing these words, know that Jesus is here right now with you. He has come out of the tomb.

There will be a time when we will come out of the tomb of this COVID pandemic. But when we come out we have work to do. The world on the other side of the pandemic needs to be different from the world before that, just as the world on the other side of Easter is called to be different from the world before Easter. As we have looked at that pandemic of COVID matched with the pandemic of racism, matched with the pandemic of sexism, matched with the pandemic of heterosexism, matched in a world where essential workers now have a whole different role and have beared and borne the brunt of this time. We are coming out of a tomb into a world where Christ is calling us to walk with Christ and change that world. We can do that. We don’t need to worry about doom-scrolling; we have a Christ who walks with us. We are a risen Easter Jesus people. May you let the story of Easter so fill your hearts and your souls that its light can help you and the world around you burst forth from its tombs into the world that Jesus calls us to. Amen.

Anthem: Risen Indeed

Christ is risen,

Christ is risen,

Alleluia!

Sing alleluia,

Sing alleluia,

He is risen!

Lift up your voices,

Sing alleluia,

Alleluia!

Christ is risen indeed,

He is risen from the dead.

He is alive, he is alive,

Alleluia!

Sing alleluia,

Sing alleluia,

He is risen!

Lift up your voices,

Sing alleluia,

Alleluia!

He died for us,

Our sinful souls to save.

Now he is risen,

Risen from the grave!

The tomb stands empty,

The stone was rolled away.

Darkness has vanished,

The night has turned to day.

Jesus will meet us when our death is near.

He gives us hope eternal.

We need not fear!

Sing alleluia,

Sing alleluia,

He is risen!

Lift up your voices,

Sing alleluia!

Christ is risen, is risen, risen indeed.

Christ is risen!

Christ is risen!

Alleluia!

Pastoral Prayer

O, you beautiful risen Jesus Easter people. We’re coming into a time of prayer, we are invited into a time of prayer, who are called by a God who longs to be in intimate relationship with us. In this time, you have a chance to bring- I invite you to remember those places where God has moved in your life this past week. To remember the very story of Easter and its power and possibility for you. And to bring into our time of prayer your joy, your gratitude, and your thanksgiving.

We also know this is a difficult time for many in the world. COVID is still around, and many are dealing with diagnoses and illness and struggles in their lives. Our Facebook page is one of the places where you can share some of those requests for prayers, and we will hold you in prayers. And I hope you can bring that with you into this time of prayer together. So, you beautiful risen Jesus Easter people, let us be together in prayer.

God, we give You thanks for a tomb that was empty. We give You thanks for an empty cross, to remind us that death does not have the last word, that evil does not have the last word, that decay does not have the last word, that life is the last word, that your love is the last word, that the empty tomb, the resurrected Jesus, is the very word that comes into us in this moment. God, we give You thanks for the gift of this story, for the gift of Your presence with us.

We bring before You the entire world. You know far better than we do, God, the places where there is oppression and injustice, where there is pain and suffering. And you call us to be a people who will respond, who will make a difference in the world.

We bring before You our own worlds, God, where words like “cancer” or “hospital” or “diagnosis”, where places of abuse, bullying, sadness, and grief are part of our lives. We bring that to You, God, because we can trust in You, a heart that will hold our concerns, arms that will embrace us and comfort us, a touch that can heal, and a voice that can call us forth from all the tombs of our lives into the life and light of Your new dawning.

So God, we come to You in this moment, this Easter celebration morning, to pause and lift our joy, our hope, and our prayers to you in a moment of silence.

Holy God, O Risen Christ, hear our prayers that we lift to You, in the name of the one who taught us when we pray to say:

*Our Father, who art in heaven,*

*hallowed be Your name;*

*Your kingdom come;*

*Your will be done,*

*on earth as it is in heaven.*

*Give us this day our daily bread.*

*And forgive us our debts,*

*as we forgive our debtors.*

*And lead us not into temptation,*

*but deliver us from evil.*

*For yours is the kingdom,*

*the power, and the glory,*

*For ever,*

*Amen.*

Offering

Bring yourself to this altar of Christ. As we’ve said throughout the weeks, the offering is not about giving money to the church. It is about coming together and making an impact on the world. It is about learning and engaging in a practice of generosity that sets our souls free. And it is about honoring and celebrating the risen Christ. So we invite you to give whatever gift you want, of time and talent and treasure, whatever it is that authentically represents you. Will you join with me in prayer?

O holy and risen one, we give You thanks for all the gifts that You have given us, for the ways You take all of us out of our tombs into life. And we return to you just a portion of the abundance You have given to us, and ask You to guide its use, that Your realm of love and justice may be made real throughout the world. We ask in Jesus’ name, amen.

Anthem: Forever (We Sing Hallelujah)

The moon and stars they wept;

The morning sun was dead;

The Savior of the world was fallen.

His body on the cross,

His blood poured out for us,

The weight of every curse upon Him.

One final breath He gave,

As heaven looked away,

The Son of God was laid in darkness.

A battle in the grave,

The war on death was waged,

The power of hell forever broken.

The ground began to shake.

The stone was rolled away.

His (perfect) (reckless) love could not be overcome.

Now death where is your sting?

Our resurrected King has rendered you defeated.

Forever He is glorified.

Forever He is lifted high,

Forever He is risen.

He is alive, He is alive!

The ground began to shake.

The stone was rolled away.

His (perfect) (reckless) love could not be overcome.

Now death where is your sting?

Our resurrected King has rendered you defeated.

Forever He is glorified,

Forever He is lifted high,

Forever He is risen.

He is alive, He is alive.

Forever He is glorified,

Forever He is lifted high,

Forever He is risen.

He is alive, He is alive.

You have overcome the grave,

You have overcome!

We sing hallelujah, we sing hallelujah,

We sing hallelujah, the Lamb has overcome!

We sing hallelujah, we sing hallelujah,

We sing hallelujah, the Lamb has overcome!

We sing hallelujah, we sing hallelujah,

We sing hallelujah, the Lamb has overcome!

We sing hallelujah, we sing hallelujah,

We sing hallelujah, the Lamb has overcome!

We sing hallelujah, we sing hallelujah,

We sing hallelujah, the Lamb has overcome!

We sing hallelujah, we sing hallelujah,

We sing hallelujah, the Lamb has overcome!

Forever He is glorified,

Forever He is lifted high,

Forever He is risen.

He is alive, He is alive.

Forever He is glorified,

Forever He is lifted high,

Forever He is risen.

He is alive, He is alive.

Benediction

Christ has left the tomb. The tomb is empty. And as we emerge from the tomb, we know that Christ is with us, Christ is beside us, and Christ goes before us. So carry with you out of the tomb the very presence of Jesus Christ into the world that so longs for the joy and the hope and the possibilities that Jesus brings. And may the love of God, the grace of Jesus Chrsit, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you evermore, O Easter people. Go in peace. Amen.

Postlude: Hallelujah Chorus (performers: Rhode Island Association of the United Church of Christ Virtual Choir)

Hallelujah! Hallelujah!

Hallelujah, hallelujah, hallelujah!

Hallelujah! Hallelujah!

Hallelujah, hallelujah, hallelujah!

For the Lord God omnipotent reigneth

Hallelujah! Hallelujah! Hallelujah! Hallelujah!

For the Lord God omnipotent reigneth

Hallelujah! Hallelujah! Hallelujah! Hallelujah!

For the Lord God omnipotent reigneth

For the Lord God omnipotent reigneth

Hallelujah! Hallelujah! Hallelujah! Hallelujah! Hallelujah!

For the Lord God omnipotent reigneth

Hallelujah!

The kingdom of this world

Is become

The kingdom of our Lord

And of His Christ

And of His Christ

And He shall reign for ever and ever

And He shall reign for ever and ever

And He shall reign for ever and ever

And He shall reign for ever and ever

King of kings

For ever and ever, hallelujah, hallelujah!

And Lord of lords

For ever and ever, hallelujah, hallelujah!

King of kings

For ever and ever, hallelujah, hallelujah!

And Lord of lords

For ever and ever, hallelujah, hallelujah!

King of kings

For ever and ever, hallelujah, hallelujah!

And Lord of lords

King of kings and Lord of lords

And He shall reign

And He shall reign

And He shall reign

He shall reign

And He shall reign for ever and ever

King of kings (For ever and ever)

And Lord of lords (Hallelujah, hallelujah)

And He shall reign for ever and ever

King of kings and Lord of lords

King of kings and Lord of lords

And He shall reign for ever and ever

For ever and ever (King of kings)

And ever and ever (and Lord of lords)

Hallelujah!

Hallelujah!

Hallelujah!

Hallelujah!

Hallelujah!