Sermon: The Resurrection and the Life
Easter Sunday, April 5, 2026
First Unitarian Church
The Rev. Sarah C. Stewart

What a joy to be here with you this morning, celebrating resurrection and joy on Easter. On our high holy days, I feel especially the presence of our ancestors, all those Unitarians who have filled the pews of this Church for 240 years and sung "Hallelujah!" together. I often think that they're not that different from us. The Church's archives are at the American Antiquarian Society, and there you can see that church life in the 18th and 19th centuries was much like church life now: committees and suppers, budgets and fundraising, baptisms and funerals.

Last winter I attended a meeting hosted here, and led by members of the Worcester Friends Meeting, the Quakers. It was just after the president's inauguration, and the threats to immigrants and refugees had already begun. People of many different faiths gathered in the Bancroft Room to talk about how we could be there for our neighbors. What could we do if ICE came to our doors? How could we assert our rights and protect our neighbors' rights? The leader of the meeting was a small, no-nonsense woman from the Friends meeting with gray hair, wearing a brown skirt suit. She looked a little old-fashioned but formidable, and I could imagine her peacefully resisting arrest as easily as I could imagine her knitting at a religious meeting. I was struck by the echoes of our history at that moment just as I am this morning. For how long have the Unitarians and the Quakers been meeting to stir up good trouble on behalf of our values? Over the many decades, how long has a woman of dignity and purpose stood before her fellow citizens in her sensible shoes, planning what must be

done to serve justice? What a long legacy we inherit; what broad shoulders we stand on today.

There's joy and a sense of rightness in that feeling. We know our causes are just, and we know our ancestors would smile on, say, the free medical program we host here on Monday nights, or our work serving as mentors to incarcerated college students. But if I'm honest with myself, there can also be a kind of despair. In the 1840s, Worcester activists worked to get African Americans who had fled slavery to freedom in Canada. Today, community members alert when ICE has been spotted in Worcester, to witness and protect immigrants who might be at risk of deportation. In 1868, the 14th amendment to the U.S. Constitution guaranteed citizenship to every baby born in this country. Today, that principle is being challenged before the Supreme Court. We perceive our good work as "progress," and believe a fight has been won, only to discover the enemy was merely biding his time, just out of sight.

Our own work for justice can feel this way, too. Sometimes all our hard work, policy making, incremental wins, and small victories can feel more like death than like life. Ask me what my vision is for a refugee mother struggling to raise her family in America, and I will tell you: work with dignity, money for necessities with some left over, a home of safety and joy, respect from her fellow Americans. Yet from experience I can tell you the reality: discrimination based on skin color and accent, never enough money even to buy food, minimally adequate housing, a constant struggle to meet the demands of life in America. And this reality is the result of advocacy and striving for justice. Trying to make the world a better place doesn't always feel life-giving. Sometimes it feels like we are all still playing into death's hand.

I'm sorry to bring us down on Easter Sunday, but I want us to feel this weight of the world on our shoulders as we hear the story of Jesus of Nazareth today. Because the story of Jesus is not a story of someone working the system or racking up wins for an agenda. Jesus was not an activist. He was something more. Jesus was like someone with the cheat code to reality, someone who could actually solve people's problems for good. I'm struck that Jesus healed people of things we still can't cure people of today: blindness since birth, legs that don't work, endometriosis, mental illness. He didn't set up a feeding ministry with donations from the wealthy corporations in Galilee; no means testing; he fed people when they were hungry. He didn't reduce mortality; he reached into the kingdom of death to bring people back. It's what we long for. And it seems impossible. Not just to us today, with our knowledge of science and our modern sensibility. It seemed impossible and terrifying to Jesus' community then, too. Throughout Mark's gospel, Jesus' followers react to his miracles with fear and confusion. When the women encounter the empty tomb, they know that their strange and terrifying leader doesn't even have to obey the laws of death himself. None of the rules apply to him. They run away and tell know one, the story says. And yet we have Mark's gospel, so they must have told someone. They must have been able to transform their fear into joy. Mark's gospel begins by saying "The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ"; so somehow, terror became the good news to be shared.

Just as we know that working for justice is hard and progress is incremental, we also know that fear and despair can be transformed into joy. This is the promise of community, and it is often done through art. It is not achievement; it is inspiration. In our own time, we have seen death made into life again.

I think of one of the most moving scenes in the Oscar-winning movie *Sinners*, which came out last spring. In 1930s Mississippi, an old Black pianist named Delta Slim (played by Delroy Lindo) tells a story that transforms suffering. He tells the story of how he and his friend Rice were once arrested for nothing, really, by White sheriffs and then ordered to play music for their entertainment. “I thought for sure they were going to kill us that night,” Slim says. But instead the sheriffs took them to a party and had them play—play for a White audience. A hat was passed, and at the end of the night the two Black musicians even got a cut of the money. Slim spent his share on liquor. But Rice saved his. He planned to go to Arkansas and start a church. But on his way, Rice was waylaid by the Klan, accused of stealing the money, and lynched. Telling the story, the grief and fury all comes back to Slim. He begins to moan so he doesn’t cry. Moan and slap his leg. Then out of the moan a hum. Out of the slap a rhythm. Out of the pain a song. Out of the trauma of violence and racial hatred, the Blues. The music doesn’t undo the suffering or the injustice. It doesn’t make up for the loss. It transforms the pain into something that can be shared and understood and passed on through community. Slim takes Rice’s death and makes life from it.

Or consider the work of community and joy during the AIDS epidemic. Activists in the LGBTQ community in the 80s and 90s protested, were arrested, raised money and lobbied the CDC to pressure political leaders to take prevention and treatment of HIV seriously, as tens of thousands of gay men were dying of the disease. People found joy, solidarity and companionship in activist organizations like ACT-UP, and they raised money and resources while dancing at gay nightclubs (sometimes the only places queer

people could be out in community). As one oral historian put it, following his interviews with older members of the Orlando LGBTQ community,

> …place yourself there: feel the music pulsing beneath your skin, your friends and lovers dancing and dying side by side. Imagine buying a drink for the cute butch at the bar, knowing every 50 cent [drink] will go toward potentially life-saving medication for a friend, or toward affording someone a degree of comfort in their final days. Hold both of these realities within yourself, all while facing the knowledge that you could be the next beneficiary of the fundraisers, the next desperately ill person in need of community care. Feel that enormous precarity, then open yourself up to the release of dancing,…of feeling good in defiance of that fear.

African Americans during Jim Crow and the LGBTQ community during the AIDS epidemic both stood at the foot of the cross. They watched good people die for no good reason, and they knew they might be next. They lived under the burden of empire and witness the death of hope. And also, the resurrection took place in them, in their communities, life after death, life despite death, because joy and the imperative of life are reborn in community. The resurrected Christ does not appear in Mark's gospel; only the empty tomb. Where is he? He is in Galilee, with his community. He is in the women, who do tell, after all, even though they're afraid. He is in the story and memory of his life. He is in the community. He is in us. We are the resurrection and the life.

Some Christians believe Jesus is coming back to earth; some believe he'll be here very soon, and they use that belief to get them off the hook of having to do anything about this world's problems. Speaking for myself: I am not waiting on a heavenly Jesus to descend to earth with a brown beard and a white robe and fix everything for us. In fact to hope for that is to worship death instead of life. Life is here in this world, for all its messiness. It is up to us to be the resurrection and to carry out Jesus' continuing ministry to the dispossessed.

That ministry and work must include joy. Without joy, the ongoing work for justice can seem endless and become tiresome, and if we are privileged enough, we can be tempted to opt out entirely. Not accomplishing as much as we want, and not sustained by the work, it is easier to choose entertainment over compassion. This way, too, is a pathway to death. As one theologian said, "The early church did not say, 'Look what the world is coming to!' They said, 'Look what has come into the world!'" Look what has come into the world! Look, here we are. We have this day before us. We get to be kind, and show love, and go to organizing meetings, and raise money, and march in protests, and keep non-profits going, and help people get housing, and visit people in prison, and care for those who are ill. Look at the beautiful faces of the people we will meet, and the opportunity to celebrate being in the world together. Being the resurrection is not just working together for justice, it is opening our hearts to the profound joy and blessing of our lives on this earth.

Don't get me wrong. Death pushes on every side. Physical force pushes back against soul force. Immigrants show up to their citizenship ceremonies and get arrested for deportation instead. Peaceful protestors are shot. Trans people are denied care and

sea levels rise. Safety is an illusion. Tomorrow it might be us in the streets marching against ICE, or our homes in the path of the superstorm. Our safety is not guaranteed.

To be the resurrection we must choose joy and action in the face of death—because of death. Because death must not have the final word. Not because life isn't scary but because we have faith that love is stronger than fear. Not in spite of the losses but because the love of those we have lost lives on in our hearts. Not a life lived in fear of our own inevitable death, but a life lived in the pure joy of knowing that we all will die but we get to live first. Christ is risen among us—hallelujah! We, too, will die, yet joy is reborn—hallelujah! Look what's coming into the world!

I love you all. Amen.