

## You Won't Believe What Happened

Easter Sunday, April 5, 2026  
Rev. Dr. Roger Jones, preaching  
Unitarian Universalist Society of Sacramento

Hymns: #203, vs. 1-4, All Creatures of the Earth and Sky; #Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing; #61, Lo, the Earth Awakes Again. Special Music: Heart Wide Open (choral, Lea Morris, arr. Adam Podd), Jesus bleibet meine freude (French horn/piano, J. S. Bach); 'Twas on One Sunday Morning (piano, African American Spiritual, arr. Steven A. Ward).

Reading: Gospel of Mark 16: 1-8. (printed after sermon)

### Sermon

On a Saturday night two years ago at my home, I took a break from writing a sermon for Easter to sit down at dinner with my two housemates. On the table was chickpea curry, or chhana masala, tomatoey and aromatic, as well as a tangy noodle soup with tofu and vegetables. One housemate was from India, and a Hindu. The other was from Thailand, with a Buddhist background. Knowing that Easter was the next day, one of them asked, "What is Easter about?"

My answer was something like this: Jesus was a Jewish prophet and healer in ancient Palestine, which was ruled by the Roman Empire. The regime executed Jesus for treason by crucifixion. Two days later his tomb was found empty. His followers proclaimed that he'd been raised from the dead. In the Christian tradition, I said, Easter celebrates that Resurrection.

"Oh, okay." "Interesting." That was that. They didn't ask me: "Do you believe that happened?" They didn't seem to care; they just wanted to know the story. In the same vein, when I had learned earlier from one of them that the Hindu festival of Diwali celebrates Lord Rama's victory over the tyrant demon Narakasura, I didn't say: "Do you believe that happened, literally?"

Of course, most Christians in the world consider the Resurrection of Jesus to be true, literally, and this faith nourishes and guides them.<sup>1</sup> Upholding our UU value of pluralism, we should respect that faith even if it's not ours. At the same time, we don't have to believe in the literal truth of a story to find meaning in it. Consider that about half of the books sold to adults in the United States are fiction, and ¾ of children's books are fiction. In the stories and characters of those books, readers find role models, inspiration and meaning. Stories open our imagination to new possibilities. The same applies to the story of Jesus, including his resurrection. Thus, even if you don't believe it literally, you can take it seriously.

Here's an overview of the story as contained in the Gospel of Mark, which is the first gospel and the shortest. When he was about 30 years old, Jesus recruited followers from all walks of life, including his famous 12 disciples. He must have been charismatic, for he called on them to leave their jobs and families and hit the road with him for his ministry. They traveled from town to town, learning from him to feed hungry multitudes, heal the sick, cast out demons, and raise those who had been given up for dead.

He taught them to bring people together across lines of culture, lines which had kept them apart. An example is the practice of table fellowship. Jesus dined not only with Jewish friends but also with Roman soldiers and tax collectors for the regime. He spoke to women who were not related to him. Reciting the commandment that you shall love God *and* love your neighbor, he challenged his own culture about *who counts* as a neighbor. With sermons and parables he

upended the categories of who is deserving of God's favor. He urged financially comfortable people to share their money, even give it all away to the poor.

When Jesus' following became too large for the comfort of the rulers, they had him executed in the humiliating way that Rome killed thousands of other criminals. Jesus was nailed to a cross which was erected at 9 in the morning, and he died at 3 p.m. The women in his life kept watch from a safe distance. His male disciples were in hiding, probably fearful of the same fate. A landowning follower of Jesus laid his body in a tomb, which was a hole carved in the side of a hill.

Mary Magdalene and two other women went to the tomb on Sunday, the day after the sabbath, to anoint his body. They found the tomb open, and a young man dressed in white sitting there. "Do not be alarmed," he said; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here." Got tell the disciples, he said. Jesus will meet them in Galilee. The women ran away, "for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid." That is a perfectly understandable response to their traumatic experience.

The original Gospel of Mark ends with that scene. But a century or so later, some writers added a longer ending. Among other things, this additional ending says that on the Sunday that Jesus rose, he appeared to Mary Magdalene first. Then she went out and told this news to his weeping disciples and other friends. But they would not believe it. A few verses later, Jesus appeared to two of his male disciples as a stranger, but soon they realized who he was. These two went to find the other disciples. They told them the news, but they would not believe it either.

That's understandable too. After all, they all had been so committed. Jesus had announced that the kingdom of God was near. Liberation and mercy and peace would rule. "The meek shall inherit the earth," he preached. Now their hopes and their spirits were crushed. It was all so tragic, so disorienting.

I don't want to minimize or downplay the trauma of Jesus' followers after he was taken from them, but I expect many people today can identify with some of their heartbreak, disorientation and fear. That is, so many of us have been working so long for a country that is merciful and fair, for a land where everyone belongs. We have tried to build a world that is sustainable and peaceful. And we have had a violent setback, or a series of setbacks. Hopes have been crushed—and people have, too.

In our own days of disillusionment, it's worth asking how those idealistic followers of Jesus rose from despair to hope. In the New Testament it seems clear that they found hope and strength by sticking together. They shared support and resources, they reached out in hospitality to others, and they kept working toward the vision Jesus had shown them.

They continued the work of healing the sick, feeding the hungry, and raising the dead. They sustained their movement by sharing meals. Indeed, communion became a feature of their small group meetings, as did prayers and songs. From one generation to the next, they recounted the stories and sermons of Jesus. They tried to embody his vision of love and peace. They looked for signs of new life. They generated new possibilities.

Surely, many people scoffed at their efforts. Some of them were persecuted, even murdered. Yet Jesus had told his disciples: if you show up some place and they don't want to receive you, shake the dust from your sandals and move on to the next place. Eventually, their message spread to *every* place.

I don't believe in the resurrection story as literally true, but I think it holds a great symbolic message. The message is: violence does not have the last word. In spite of his cruel death 2,000 years ago, his life and words have kept reminding people of the truth of human kinship. He still invites us to reach across human-created borders. No matter what happens to us or those we care about, when we know that love is at the center, there are always new possibilities. Life always has more to say.

In the midst of the destruction we are currently confronting in this country and in the world, it is important to watch for signs of new life. It is necessary to stay open to new possibilities. We may have to look for signs of life and possibility in places that we wouldn't expect to find them.

The Rev. Sara Lawall is our UU minister in Boise, Idaho. She wants all of us to know how Christian nationalism is endangering human lives in her state. And she wants us to know how people of conscience and faith have embodied compassion and resistance. Last week, Idaho's governor signed the most extreme anti-transgender bathroom bill in the nation, with jail terms and fines for anyone who uses a restroom for a gender that they were not assigned on their birth certificate. Adding insult to injury, the governor signed this on the Transgender Day of Visibility, which was Tuesday.

Rev. Sara spends a lot of time giving testimony at legislative hearings in the State House. The legislators all know who she is. Last week she and eight other citizens went to the State House to meet with Idaho's governor. They were going to ask him to veto a bill that would require schools to tell parents if their child were identifying as transgender or nonbinary. If a child were claiming a new pronoun at school or asking to be called by a different name, they would be turned in to their parents. The governor refused to meet with them, and they refused to leave. All nine of them were arrested.<sup>2</sup>

On that same day, another law took effect in Idaho. It prohibited every public building from flying any flag other than the US flag. This law was targeted at the LGBT Pride flag and at the capital city of Boise, which has flown a Pride flag for a decade. To avoid a fine of \$2,000 a day, the city took it down last week.

Reverend Sara wrote this: "We began our day at City Hall with community leaders watching our City Council members and Mayor take down the Pride flag so as not to incur penalties. They did so with ceremony and intentionality, expressing their unwavering support and commitment to the LGBTQ+ community. There was a heartfelt reading of the city's Transgender Day of Visibility Proclamation. It was given to several trans organizations. There were many tears. The Mayor cried. Council members cried. I cried all morning. Later that evening, City Hall was lit up in the colors of the Trans Flag in solidarity and in community. I am grateful our city is actively pushing back against the hate and working to help LGBTQ+ people feel safe and welcome here. [But] it is hard."<sup>3</sup>

White Christian nationalism is indeed strong in states like Idaho, and it has a presence in every state and now in Washington, D.C. Yet in Idaho and everywhere else, there are signs of new life in every act of care, generosity, and resistance. There are signs of possibility in every proclamation of human dignity, every protest, every act of civil disobedience. The forces of repression and cruelty cannot outlast our longing for human decency and freedom. This longing is being renewed again and again.

We can look for the signs of courage and love that operate in the world--and we can share them. Here's one example: Over in the state of Wisconsin, also on this year's Trans Day of Visibility, their governor *vetoed* five anti-transgender bills. He kept them from becoming law.<sup>4</sup>

To be sure, we can thank the Wisconsin Governor, Tony Evers, for his commitment to fairness and protection. Yet behind the Governor's decision are years of advocacy and action by ordinary citizens. People have spoken out and shown up... for themselves, their loved ones and their neighbors. Not only is that outcome a sign of new life, but so were all efforts that led up to it.

On the last Saturday in March, nearly 8 million people turned out on the streets of this country to say NO to autocracy and YES to democracy. In small towns, suburbs, and big cities, there were 3,000 No Kings rallies and marches. Their purpose was to insist on human decency and insist on following the U.S. Constitution.

According to *Sojourners* magazine, 60 percent of the participants in No Kings demonstrations in the past year identified as people of faith: Protestants, Catholics, and plenty of others, including UUs.<sup>5</sup>

Last Saturday in New York City I went to the Fourth Universalist Society in the morning for a sign-making party followed by practicing songs and chants. Then we set out through Central Park to join thousands of others marching down the streets of midtown Manhattan all the way to Penn Station. A tall young man appeared at my side. His wife was at home with an injury. He didn't want to walk alone, so he joined our UU group. (We did have a conversation about Unitarian Universalism.)

I enjoyed holding up my sign as tourists snapped photos of the marchers. One blessing of the No Kings rallies here at home and in other places has been seeing the vast amount of creativity, humor, and cleverness reflected on the signs that people make and share. They are signs of life.

Walking in New York City, people in a church group held number of identical signs that said *The Only King We Serve Is Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ*. I saw another person with a sign that said *When Cruelty Becomes Normal, Compassion Looks Radical*.

That nationwide outpouring of protest was not only a rebuke to autocracy and a rejection of Christian nationalism; it was a blossoming of community. It was a sign of new life rising up in this country. With love and courage, possibility can blossom into reality.

Our best chance to stay open to new possibilities, and to turn possibility into reality, is through community and solidarity. Get connected. Stay connected.

We should never go it alone. With companions on the journey, let us look for signs of new life and possibility, and share them. And by our deeds, our words and our love, let us remember that we will be leaving signs for others to follow. Amen.

### Reading (given before sermon)

This reading is a resurrection account at the end of the Gospel of Mark in the New Testament. It comes after the trial, torture, and execution of Jesus of Nazareth. His body was buried in a tomb or hole cut out of the side of a hill and a stone rolled in front of it. This passage is from an early manuscript of the Gospel of Mark, showing its original ending.

When the Sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome brought aromatic spices so that they might go and anoint him. And very early on the first day of the week, at sunrise, they went to the tomb. They had been asking each other, "Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?" But when they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had been rolled back.

Then as they went into the tomb, they saw a young man dressed in a white robe sitting on the right side; and they were alarmed. But he said to them, “Do not be alarmed. You are looking for Jesus the Nazarene, who was crucified. He has been raised! He is not here. Look, there is the place where they laid him. But go, tell his disciples, even Peter, that he is going ahead of you into Galilee. You will see him there, just as he told you.”

Then they went out and ran from the tomb, for terror and bewilderment had seized them. And they said nothing to anyone, because they were afraid.

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<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, Yale University New Testament scholar Adela Yarbro Collins has written: “One could dispute that the resurrection of Jesus is the heart of Christian faith.... One could show that entire books of the New Testament do not use resurrection language.” In Adela Yarbro Collins, *The Beginning of the Gospel* (Minneapolis, 1991: Fortress Press), p. 118-120.

<sup>2</sup> Kyle Pfannenstiel, “Nine Protestors Arrested in Idaho Governor’s Office after demanding meeting with Little over anti-trans bills passed by Legislature,” *Idaho State Journal*, April 1, 2026.

[https://www.idahostatejournal.com/news/local/nine-protesters-arrested-in-idaho-governors-office-after-demanding-meeting-with-little-over-anti-trans/article\\_b2111fd9-edee-4b31-978e-716033cd1aef.html](https://www.idahostatejournal.com/news/local/nine-protesters-arrested-in-idaho-governors-office-after-demanding-meeting-with-little-over-anti-trans/article_b2111fd9-edee-4b31-978e-716033cd1aef.html)

<sup>3</sup> Facebook post accessed April 3, 2026.

<sup>4</sup> Baylor Spears, “Evers vetoes GOP transgender bills for not upholding ‘our Wisconsin values,’” *Wisconsin Examiner*, March 31, 2026. <https://wisconsinexaminer.com/briefs/evers-vetoes-gop-transgender-bills-for-not-upholding-our-wisconsin-values/>

<sup>5</sup> Guthrie Graves-Fitzsimmons, “For Millions, ‘No Kings’ Is a Statement of Faith,” *Sojourners*, March 27, 2026. <https://sojo.net/articles/opinion/millions-no-kings-statement-faith>