

EASTER SUNDAY: RISE UP!

Final Week of Our 3-Week Easter Series

April 4, 2021

Rev. Richard Maraj

Guest artists Sally Jo Bannow and Rusty Ferracane sing “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!

By thy dazzling, radiant rays; Alleluia!
Shine, illuminate our days; Alleluia!
Constant be, the Truth will dawn; Alleluia!
Now arise! Ascend! Shine on! Alleluia!

OPENING/ANNOUNCEMENTS

Rev. Richard Maraj: Good morning, everyone, and welcome to Unity of Phoenix Spiritual Center! And a Happy Easter to each and every one of you! Thank you so much for joining us for our Easter services. We’ve got some great music – a lot of wonderful music! I’m so excited that you’ll get to hear that today.

Also really excited that we are officially opening for indoor services again on Sunday, June the 6th, for 9 a.m. and 11 a.m. services right here in the Sanctuary again. I can hardly wait for that experience!

And also, next week we will start a new series called “The Psychology of Success.” So a lot of good things going on. But we are so happy today to have you here for our Easter services.

And to kick us off with a reading of some Scripture, Rev. Lori will now begin.

SCRIPTURE

Rev. Lori Fleming: Our Scripture on this glorious Easter morning comes from Matthew.

“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 was as white as snow. For fear of him, the guards shook, and became like dead men. But the angel said to the woman, ‘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 with 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.’”

I invite you to listen as the Choir prepares us for meditation by singing “Surely the Presence.”

Unity of Phoenix Choir sings “Surely the Presence”

Surely the presence of the Lord is in this place
I can see God’s mighty power and God’s grace
I can feel the brush of angels’ wings

I see glory on each face
Surely the presence of the Lord is in this place

MEDITATION

Rev. Lori Fleming: I invite you to close your outer eyes, to take in a deep, cleansing breath, and release it slowly. Take in another breath and, as you exhale, begin to move your awareness within: to that quiet, still place. That place of peace at the depths of our very soul.

On this Easter morning, we remember to let go of everything that no longer serves us. Just gently give it to God. Any thoughts of anger; any worries or cares. Just gently release them. And take in another deep breath, and move into the silence: into your own inner cave. To that place of rest. Of restoration. Just as the caterpillar moves into the cocoon, we move into the quiet of our own being: into the soul depths of peace that passes understanding. Where we rest; where we enjoy the quiet. Where we feel the Spirit and the power and presence of God working within us, changing our hearts. Letting go of anger and frustration, and replacing it with unconditional love.

In this quiet, still place, we truly know the God of our being. We recognize the Christ presence within that loves God and loves each and every one of us. For love is God's nature! And in this cave of our being, on this Easter Sunday morning, we rise up as new beings with God working in every cell of our bodies, bringing us to wholeness. Illuminating every cell, lighting the way: the new way of being as we rise up in consciousness.

And so we take just a few moments to move more deeply into the silence: into God's great unconditional love.

SILENCE

Sweet Spirit, we come in gratitude for every cave of our lives. For the rejuvenation that, when we roll away the stone and when we rise up, we are completely new beings with a new consciousness. With a new expanded vision on the world: a world of love. And so, God, for this and all our blessings, we say thank you, God; thank you, God; thank you, God! And it is so. Amen.

DUET

Guest artists Sally Jo Bannow and Rusty Ferracane sing "Glory"

One day eyes that are blind will see you clearly
And one day all who deny will finally believe
One day hearts made of stone will break in pieces
And one day chains once unbroken will fall down at your feet
So we wait for that one day come quickly

We want to see your Glory
Every knee falls down before thee
Every tongue offers you praise
With every hand raised
Singing Glory
To you and unto you only
We'll sing Glory to your name

One day voices that lie will all be silent
One day all that's divided will be whole again
One day death will retreat and wave its white flag
One day love will defeat the strongest enemy
So we wait for that one day come quickly

We want to see your Glory
Every knee falls down before thee
Every tongue offers you praise
With every hand raised
Singing Glory
To you and unto you only
We'll sing Glory to your name

We know not the day or the hour
Or the moments in between
But we know the end of the story
When we'll see

Your Glory
Every knee falls down before thee
Every tongue offers you praise
With every hand raised
Singing Glory
To you and unto you only
We'll sing Glory to your name

MESSAGE

Rev. Richard Maraj: Thank you, Sally Jo, and thank you, Rusty! That was absolutely fabulous!

So this young man and his wife and his mother-in-law were vacationing in the holy land. And, after a few days on the trip, his mother-in-law passed away. So the young man went to the undertaker, who explained that – for them to ship the body home – it'll cost \$5,000. But if they wanted to just bury her right there in the holy land, it would just cost \$150. And immediately the young man said, *"Nope; we'll ship her home."* And the undertaker said, *"Are you sure? \$5,000 is a lot of money, and we do a really good burial here."* And the young man said, *"Well, you know, the money is tight, and I do believe that you can do a great job with the burial. But I heard that, 2,000 years ago, they buried a guy here, and then three days later he rose from the dead. And I just can't take that chance!"* [Simulates "rim shot" drum roll]

A Sunday school teacher says to her class, *"What do you think Jesus' first words were when he came out of the tomb?"* And a little girl eagerly put her hand up and said, *"I know; I know!"* And the teacher said, *"Okay, Bethany; what do you think he said?"* And she said, *"I think he said, 'Ta da!'"*

I love both of those jokes! They're corny! But I hope at least one of them made you smile. And even if they didn't, you know what should make every one of us smile? And that is Easter. Isn't Easter such a joyful, uplifting, beautiful, colorful time of the year? With everything coming back to life in nature with the flowers and plants blossoming and blooming. There is something absolutely uplifting and exciting about this time of the year. It is a time of rebirth and renewal. And, of course, the absolute highlight of Easter is the celebration of the miraculous and inspiring resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Easter is a celebration of the ultimate overcoming. Jesus said, *"In this life, there will be trials and tribulations, but be of good cheer, for I have overcome the world."* You know, when you really think about it, Jesus overcame all of the worst of human experiences. He overcame betrayal, hatred, fear, injustice, torture and death. And he was able to rise above all of it.

Traditionally, the resurrection is seen as the prophecy that fulfilled the Messiah coming to make an atoning sacrifice and, by his blood, that we were washed of our sins, that we may have eternal life. Now, in Unity, we don't really think of the resurrection as a future promise of an afterlife, or a future passport to eternal life. But we see it as a demonstration of the indestructible transformational power of God. It

is not just a reminder of what happened 2,000 years ago, but a reminder of the resurrecting power of God that is alive and is available to each and every one of us today.

I ask you: What does the resurrection mean to you personally? And how does Easter affect the way that you are living today? The way that you feel? The way that you believe? The way that you hope? The way that you dream? The way that you show up in your life?

You know, in 1 Kings 19, there's a wonderful passage. And here's what it says:

"And there were great winds so strong, splitting mountains and breaking rocks into pieces before the Lord. But the Lord was not in the wind. After the wind, an earthquake. But the Lord was not in the earthquake. And after the earthquake, a fire. But the Lord was not in the fire. And after the fire, a sound of sheer silence. When Elijah heard this, he wrapped his face in his mantle, and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave. There came a voice to him that said, 'What are you doing here, Elijah?'"

I just love that! *"What are you doing here, Elijah?"* And I think that question relates to all of us! And in two ways. The first one is in the context of what is going on in your life currently. What are you doing there? Are you waiting for the wind to come and just blow away all of your problems? Are you waiting for some outer force to come and to improve the circumstances of your life?

And then the second aspect of that question – *"What are you doing here?"* – is: What are you doing here this Easter? And what do you hope to get or feel or experience or be different from your experience of Easter this year?

You see, Easter is not just a miraculous event ... not just an atoning sacrifice. It is a demonstration and a teaching to each of us of how to overcome. How to rise up. How to move through a process to transform and lift up our lives.

If you looked at Jesus' entire ministry, he was teaching some variation of overcoming, of resurrecting, and of transforming. He raised Lazarus from the dead. The hemorrhaging woman, who was suffering for 12 years, was healed ... and that's a resurrection story. The Prodigal Son who wandered and came to himself – and his father said, *"My son, who was dead, is now alive!"* – is a resurrection story, from being lost. Of the loaves and fishes: it's a resurrection story of lack into a state of abundance. All of these stories are about the resurrecting, overcoming power of God! And Jesus said we have that power in us! He said, *"He who believes in me shall do the works that I do and even greater things than these."*

So, to me, Easter is a powerful, personal message to each of us that we have the power to rise up from our struggles, from our hurts, from feeling lost and down ... from our challenges, from our woundedness ... from our confusion and our turmoil.

So this morning we're going to look at three things that Easter teaches us to use in our lives to resurrect any aspect of our lives, and to help us truly rise up.

And the first thing is to DIE TO THE OLD. You know, the crucifixion represents dying to the old ways. You can't have a resurrection unless you have a crucifixion. And the crucifixion is a spiritual principle of dying to the old so that something new and greater can be born in its place. You know, the caterpillar has to die to itself so that the butterfly – this beautiful creature – could be born. We have to die to our old beliefs to be born into a greater awareness and understanding. We have to die to fear and failure and unworthiness and drama and judgements and attachments and shame and regret – all the negative things that hold us back – to create a space to allow us to develop a higher level of consciousness of love or success or peace or healing or insight.

Often, we just want to be born anew. But that's not the way it works! We must die to the small self to be born to the true self. We must be willing to die to the smaller and different versions of ourselves that are false and untrue to be born to the higher truth of who we really are. You know, Lao Tzu once said that we must let go of who we are to become who we are meant to be.

So I ask you: What false belief – or what untrue image or what negative mindset – in your life do you need to die to in order to be transformed and born into a higher and greater experience of life?

The Apostle Paul, when speaking of transformation in 2 Corinthians, said: *“If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation. Everything old has passed away. See, everything has become new.”*

To experience a resurrection – to experience a transformation – we must have a crucifixion and be willing to die to the old mindset, the old images, and the old ways in order for something greater to be born in us. So what is it that you need to die to to allow something greater to come forth?

The second thing we can learn to rise up is: we need to LISTEN TO OUR INNER SILENCE. In 1 Kings, I love when it says that after the wind, the earthquake. And after the earthquake, a fire. And after the fire, a sound of sheer silence.

The sound of sheer silence is not something that we hear very often in our lives. We live in a very busy, hectic world with a lot of noise and constant activity. So we don't hear the sheer sound of silence very often. And the truth is: that God is in the silence. That God speaks through the silence. Rumi said, *“There is a voice that doesn't use words. Listen!”*

You know, great spiritual teachers and great holy individuals all did the similar thing: they went up to mountain tops, or they went to the desert, or they went to caves. They went to places where they could hear nothing but silence: a place away from the distraction and the push of constant activity. Quiet and silence allows us to listen to the wisdom and the transformation that only comes in the silence.

I often wondered about the tomb. You know, Jesus was in the tomb for three days. And, when you think about it, a tomb is the ultimate place of surrender. A tomb is a place of silence. It is a place of quiet. And we don't know what happened inside that tomb, but what we do know is that, what was dead came alive. That something miraculous happened in the silence that we don't know ... but it absolutely happened in the silence.

You know, the Apostle Paul, in his great conversion of moving from being angry and hateful to preaching the Gospel, he was blinded for three days. And it is in the darkness and the quietness and the silence – those three days – an amazing transformation happened in him. And it was because he was in the silence. Something powerful! God speaks to us in the silence!

Being in the silence is really tapping in to the depth of spiritual power and clarity and wisdom. It cannot be seen, but it is the source behind every great thing that is made possible. That's why it says, *“Be still and know that I am God.”* That is a powerful and important practice for all of us: Be still, and know that I am God! And how important is it? Well, Blaise Pascal says that all of humanity's problems stem from man's inability to sit quietly in a room alone.

So let me ask you: How well do you sit still? How well do you listen to the silence? And what role does silence play in your life currently? And how much more of a role would you allow silence to play in your everyday life?

When great spiritual leaders and seekers have sought transformation for their lives, or wisdom or clarity or guidance, they didn't go out and act and run around and do a lot of things. What they did was: they went to a place that was quiet. They went to a place of stillness and silence so they could listen and allow the wisdom of Spirit to speak to us and transform us.

And the final thing I wanted to talk about how to rise up in this powerful Easter time is to LET WHAT IS IN US SPRING FORTH AND COME FORTH FROM US. How many of you believe that – if you had to live your life over again up to this age that you are right now – that you could do more, create more, enjoy more, and be more than you have been up to now in this time of your life? And that isn't to make anybody feel bad; I think everyone would agree that we could and would. And it's just to say how much more there is in us that we don't always allow to come forth.

In the course of our lives – and our struggles and our frustration, relationship issues – we sometimes get off course and get disconnected from our true selves. Sometimes we lose our joy. Sometimes our passion for life is dampened. Sometimes our dreams and our desires go dormant. And we end up living very cautiously, very tentatively, and sometimes very carelessly.

You know, the story of the Prodigal Son – when he wasted all his inheritance, and he was eating with the pigs – I love the line when it says, “*And then he came to himself.*” In that moment he realized that he was living so far below the level of life he had been called to live – and meant to live and wanted to live – that he came to himself, and he rose up and he returned back to his father. That story says that something in him awakened; something in him – he knew that he was not giving full life and expression to – and it called him to bring it forth and step forth, and to live the life he was called to live.

So I ask you: What in you is calling to be awakened? What in you is calling to be alive? And what in you is calling you to overcome and to transform it? What in you is being called to be expressed more fully? What in you wants to rise up?

I heard a story about a very successful young man named Leonard Kim. At one point, he couldn't pay his rent, and he was living with his grandparents. He moved from selling shoes and selling cars and then real estate, and then financing and starting his own business. And he ended up going bankrupt, and lost everything. And he started an entry level position; it started building up. And, yet, he was as broke as he ever was. And he realized, for 10 years he was chasing these dreams; 10 years he was going after the idea of wanting more and more and more: that that would make him happy. And he just felt like a failure. He felt so down. He felt like a fraud. And, just to get his confidence back and to rebuild himself, he just started writing and blogging. And he'd just share thoughts and ideas for business, to what he was going through. And within six months, two million people had read it. By a year-and-a-half, ten million people had read it! And then his articles started getting out into different magazines. And he wrote a book, and it's entitled *Ditch the Act: Reveal the Surprising Power of the Real You for Greater Success*.

And I love that! *Reveal the Surprising Power of the Real You for Greater Success*. And he's considered by *Forbes Magazine* one of the top marketing influencers – one of the top branding experts. And the thing I loved about what helped him rise up was that something in him wanted to come forth. And I thought it was perseverance, and I thought it was this dream. But then I realized – by his book and how he wrote – what wanted to come forth from within him was to be more his authentic self. Not to chase a dream that he thought he was meant to have, or what people think we should have. But, it's when he turned and let the authenticity in himself come forth – and the true person he was – his success just flowed and expanded in amazing ways.

Louis Zamperini – whose life story was written in the book, *Unbroken*, and the movie – in 1936 he competed in the Olympics. In 1941, he became a bomber pilot and was shot down over the Japanese Sea. And for 47 days, he and his buddy survived in a raft; it was the longest level of survival in salt water that they have ever known. He unfortunately was captured and beaten and starved and tortured and humiliated in a horrible way by a very sadistic guard. It went on for months and months and months. Even when he was rescued and came back to the United States, he was haunted by how much anger and hatred that this guard had for him: the horrible ways that he was punished and treated. And he could not sleep. He had trouble; he had nightmares. I mean, he was in a lot of turmoil; turned to a lot of abuse of alcohol just to cope.

After months and months of this going on, his wife recommended that they go together to a Billy Graham crusade. He did not want to go! But, amazingly, he went there, and something amazing happened at it. He felt a sense of peace, and he went home that night and – for the first time – didn't have nightmares. He didn't feel the level of anxiety that he had. And so, what he realized he needed to do – to find himself again and to find his joy again – was forgiveness. And, over time, he was able to forgive this sadistic guard: to literally let go and free himself from the resentment and the bitterness and the pain and the hurt and the trauma that he experienced. He was able to let go and release those

emotions, and went on to live a joyful and happy and fulfilling life. And he became an inspirational speaker. He developed a camp for troubled youth. And he was even invited back to Japan, where he carried the torch a part of the way for the Winter Olympics held there years ago.

And I kept thinking: what was it? Was it his perseverance? And it's really not. What needed to come forth for him to rise up above was forgiveness. And sometimes just letting go, and forgiving and freeing ourselves from the past, is the thing that rises up in us. And helps us elevate to a level of joy and happiness.

You know, today is the first time in 19 months that I'm giving a talk standing up! It has been a long journey. I wondered if I would be able to stand up and do this again, and I wasn't always positive. And it was a struggle and a challenge. And what has really helped me rise up – literally, figuratively – is the level of appreciation for all of the prayers, for all the support, for all the therapists, for all the people who have worked with me to help me get to this place again. And so what is really coming forth in me right now – as I experience this new dynamic again, and getting to enjoy this experience again – is feeling so thankful and so grateful. Because that really is helping me rise up to a greater level of joy and happiness and fulfillment.

You know, every one of us has something in us that wants to come forth. And whether it's peace and forgiveness, or love, or living more authentically, or being grateful for how blessed we really are, what is it in you that wants to be given life and more expression? Because whatever that is, I guarantee you, it'll lift you to a higher level of happiness and fulfillment, and will really help you rise up.

Easter is a celebration of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. And it is a reminder that that same resurrecting power – that same transformational power – is available to each and every one of us today and every day. So are you willing to move through that process by dying to the old? By listening to your inner silence? And letting the best in you come forth?

No matter how many times you've been knocked down in life ... No matter how much you have struggled ... No matter how far you feel you are away from your dreams, let the power of the Easter message help you RISE UP!

God bless you all!

DUET

Guest artists Sally Jo Bannow and Rusty Ferracane sing "A Brand New Day"

Everybody look around
'Cause there's a reason to rejoice you see
Everybody come out
And let's commence to singing joyfully
Everybody look up
And feel the hope that we've been waiting for

Everybody be glad
Because our silent fear and dread is gone
Freedom, you see, has got our hearts singing so joyfully
Just look about
You owe it to yourself to check it out

Can't you feel a brand new day?
Can't you feel a brand new day?
Can't you feel a brand new day?
Can't you feel a brand new day?

Everybody be glad
Because the sun is shining just for us
Everybody wake up
Into the morning into happiness

Hello, world
It's like a different way of living now
And thank you world
We always knew that we'd be free somehow
In harmony
And show the world that we've got liberty

It's such a change
For us to live so independently
Freedom, you see, has got our hearts singing so joyfully
Just look about
You owe it to yourself to check it out

Can't you feel a brand new day?
Can't you feel a brand new day?

In harmony
Let's show the world that we've got liberty

It's such a change
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Freedom, you see, has got our hearts singing so joyfully
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Can't you feel a brand new day?
Can't you feel a brand new day?
Can't you feel a brand new day?
Can't you feel a brand new day?

OFFERING

Rev. Lori Fleming: It's that time in our service to give of our gifts and our tithes and our offerings. Our offering blessing is: *"Divine love, through me, blesses and multiplies all that I have, all that I give, and all that I receive."* And so we say thank you, Mother/Father God, for these gifts and these tithes and these offerings. We know they are given in love, they are received in love, and that they move through this ministry with the energy of divine love out into the world as good. And that each giver is blessed – heaped up, pressed down and overflowing – for that is the Law. And so it is. Thank you, God! Amen.

CLOSING

Rev. Lori Fleming: We're so grateful you could join us on this blessed Easter Sunday! We hope that you have risen up in consciousness and become a brand new you as we move forward in this Spring season. And now will you affirm the Prayer for Protection with me?

The light of God surrounds us;
The love of God enfolds us;
The power of God protects us;

The presence of God watches over us.
Wherever we are, God is. And all is well!

Have a blessed week! And listen now as the choir sings the Peace Song. Happy Easter!

Choir sings Peace Song:

Let there be peace on earth
And let it begin with me!
Let there be peace on earth
The peace that was meant to be!

With God as Creator
Family all are we!
Let us walk with each other
In perfect harmony!

Let peace begin with me;
Let this be the moment now!
With every breath I take
Let this be my joyous vow:
To take each moment and live each moment
In peace eternally!

Let there be peace on earth
And let it begin with me!

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