

***Order of Service –March 13, 2016  
Easter Sunday  
Then a Miracle Occurs: To Woo Loss Into Song***

*Musical Prelude*

*Greeting -- “Late March” by Richard Schiffman*

*1st Hymn: How Can I Keep From Singing, Green 245*

*Readings --Romans 6:4-5: George Fox; e.e. Cummings; Mark 16:4*

*2nd Hymn Now the Green Blade Riseth, Green 116*

*Joys and Concerns*

*Musical interlude*

*Prayer -- We Thank You God.*

*3rd Hymn: Lord of The Dance , Green 115*

*Message “Then a Miracle Occurs: To Woo Loss Into Song”*

*Silent worship*

*4th Hymn: Praise and Honor Jesus’ Name, 121*

*Closing -- How Can We Keep From Singing?*

*Introductions/Announcements/Afterthoughts*

*Postlude*

**Welcome**

*"Late March" by Richard Schiffman*

*Again the trees (have) remembered to make leaves. In the forest of their recollection many birds (have) returned singing. They s(i)ng... because they forgive...the winter, and all that remain(s) still bitter.*

*Yet it is early spring, when the days (are) touch and go, and a late snow could nip a shoot, or freeze a fledgling in its nest. And where would we be then?*

*But that's not the point. Do you think the (robin) doesn't know that its chicks are at risk, or the (fruit) trees, their too-frail blossoms, the new-awakened bees, all that is incipient within us? We know, but we can't help ourselves any more than they can, any more than the earth can stop hurtling through the night....*

*Must be something in the sap, the blood, a force like gravity, a trick called memory. You name it. Or leave it nameless... (that) something (that) returns and keeps on returning through a gap, through a dimensional gate, through a tear in the veil.*

*And there it is again. Another spring. To woo loss into song.*

And here we are again, on Easter morning, come together to Name that Something that returns and keeps on returning, to Proclaim it Christ, Risen, and to raise our voices in praise as loss is wooed once more into song. **And so we begin with our first hymn, *How Can I Keep From Singing? Green 245***

## Readings

**Romans 6:4-5** “... we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have been united with Jesus in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with Christ in a resurrection like his.”

... then, oh, then, I heard a voice which said, "There is one, even Christ Jesus, that can speak to thy condition"; and when I heard it, my heart did leap for joy. -- **George Fox**

**Ee cummings:** i thank You God for most this amazing day: for the leaping greenly spirits of trees and a blue true dream of sky; and for everything which is natural which is infinite which is yes (i who have died am alive again today, and this is the sun's birthday; this is the birth day of life and of love and wings: and of the gay great happening illimitably earth) how should tasting touching hearing seeing breathing any—lifted from the no of all nothing—human merely being doubt unimaginable You? (now the ears of my ears awake and now the eyes of my eyes are opened)

**Mark 16:4** But when they looked up, they saw that the great stone had been rolled away.

**Second Hymn: Now The Green Blade Riseth, Green 116**

**Joys and Concerns, Prayer, Third Hymn: Lord of the Dance, Green 115**

**Fourth Hymn: Praise and Honor Jesus' Name, Green 118**

### **Prayer**

*Oh God of all Creation, unimaginable You. We thank you for this most amazing day. We thank you for the life that lives in us, for the good green earth and the true blue sky, we thank you. So many days our hearts feel like a tomb, where nothing lives. We feel only loss. We hear only lamentation. But on this Easter morning, we pray to the endless song, to the dance that goes on and on, to You, Holy, Unimaginable You, Love that was there when the world began, Love that is come again and again. Let that great stone be rolled away from all that entombs us. Awake the ears of ears, open the eyes of our eyes, that we may see Christ Risen, that we may hear your music ringing, that we may walk in newness of life, that we may sing the new song that Christ is giving. Though shadows gather round, we hail your new creation, the song that echoes in our souls, a fountain ever springing, and we say thank you, thank you, thank you.*

### **Benediction**

*May the ears of our ears awake, may the eyes of our eyes be opened. May the great stone be rolled away. May we walk in newness of life, may we witness the miracle, the moment of grace. How can we keep from singing, each time that loss is wooed, again and again, into song? How can we keep from proclaiming -- Behold, Christ is Risen!*

## Message

Last summer, my wonderful husband George found this shirt for me at a Salvation Army in Vermont. There are two kind of ruffled gentlemen, holding sheafs of paper, looking at a blackboard, on which are scrawled complicated mathematical formulas. The first man is pointing to words that connect formulas on the left to ones on the right, like a bridge. The words read “Then a miracle occurs...,” and he is saying to his colleague, “I think you should be more explicit here in step two.”

This cartoon captures my feeling that Christian theology often seems not unlike complex mathematical constructions, complicated equations, one calculation built onto another, all cobbled together with unexplainable, shrouded phenomena that can never be made explicit and must just be accepted as the part of the equation that makes the whole thing balance and work out. And this can seem never more true than with all the theorems constructed around this day, Easter Sunday, the high holy day for many in the Christian tradition -- the bridge that holds all the computations together, spans all the unknowns and mysteries and leads us to the solved problem, the solution, salvation.

When I was growing up Roman Catholic, the week leading up to Easter was called Holy Week, and it meant more church than usual, and in our family, more Jesus than usual. Because the Catholic household that my parents created for my siblings and I was actually not that Jesus or Bible focused, the takeaway message of my childhood Catholicism was mostly that Jesus was an amazing, special teacher who taught everyone the Golden Rule. It's a good, solid takeaway and I am grateful to my parents for it. But during Holy Week, we'd get an immersion experience in this Jesus guy's story. Thursday evening, there was this astounding and uncomfortable ritual of foot washing, with pale and bony feet gleaming shockingly in the dim church as we watched this enactment of the ministry of Jesus -- a wise and powerful leader whose power was somehow found in its inversion, in the humbling act of washing other people's feet. There was a dramatization of the Agony in the Garden of Gethsemane, the apostles who were meant to be keeping vigil with scared, agonized Jesus simply unable to keep their eyes open. On Good Friday, there would be a live re-enactment of the Stations of the Cross, the telling of the story of Jesus' condemnation and his harrowing journey to Calvary. The whole congregation would participate in a passion play, the people in the pews around me cast as the crowd, and when Pontius Pilate, presiding over the trial of Jesus, asks the crowd what should be his fate, we all intoned together “Crucify Him! Crucify Him!”

In Catholic churches there is always a crucifix prominently displayed, and it is a depiction, normal and commonplace in that context, of stark brutality. As a child I neither questioned nor engaged too deeply this horrific image of a painfully thin man being tortured to death, though I could count his ribs, and noticed the bloody places where the nails held his flesh to the wood of the cross, and the wound on his side. The frozen depiction of the state execution of Jesus was the hidden-in-plain-sight backdrop of all the liturgies that played out every week in my childhood. And Holy Week told the story of how that happened, how that terrible thing came to be. After retelling this story, **then, and only then**, came Easter. The horrible story had a mysterious and happy ending. Suddenly it was all ok. Relief and light flooded the church, lilies were placed on the altar, everyone wore bonnets and new clothes, and we could go back to “seeing but not **really** seeing” the crucifix on display in the church, living with it without **dwelling on** it. Easter: then a miracle occurs. And the problem is solved.

Ritualized violence is not that unusual in the human impulse to sacrament, to faith. Actually it is quite common. For thousands and thousands of years people have told stories, have built whole narrative edifices, with personified deities, symbolic representations of mysteries, powers outside our ken, ways of giving shape and meaning to the violence and death that seem to be built into how the world works. We have constructed theorems, equations, formulas, we have married them to poetry and song and symbol, and we have created reasons for the tragic, for the no-fault loss that seems to be part of the essence of this Earth, this eating other beings, breathing, making shelter at the mercy of forces more powerful than us, being mortal, loving what doesn't last. And we have also built and told and re-told stories that justify, that explain, that seek to solve the problem, answer the question that can't be answered, offer a map, a template, to comprehend, somehow, the singular way we humans seem capable of watering with our greed and our fear that seed of tragedy sown into the fabric of creation so that it grows into a terrible invasive vine of systemic, structural *evil*. I know: it's Easter. And evil is not a very 'Easter-y' word. I only uncomfortably and sparingly use it. What I mean when I say it is something that unravels what connects, that severs connections and destroys the essence of relatedness. Evil can be deliberate or it can be thoughtless. And I've come to think of the crucifixion of Jesus as an effective symbol for structural, systemic evil, for the way that humans can organize ourselves into groups in which we act monstrously, crush what is good and hopeful, what connects and sustains, in which we ravage what is small, particular and dear, in which we demand blood, shout together 'Crucify Him, Crucify Him' both ecstatically, consciously, **and** unconsciously, just in unknowing complicity with the grinding machinery we have built or are part of. We humans, we can create sublime beauty **and** terrible suffering. And many, many of our religions and mythologies are holy confessions of our dual capacities for both brutality and mercy, for sacred sacrifice and senseless violence.

And here's the thing: many of these scriptures, stories and myths weave a tale that holds together *only* with miracles, the mechanics of which cannot be explicitly explained, we just *know* that it *is possible, it must* be possible, we *pray* that it is possible, for new life to be found even in death, for what has been cast away to be gathered up, for restoration to follow betrayal, for the song hidden in all hearts to be wooed from great loss, for the abject place of sorrow, where all is lost, to be the precise place where what cannot be lost is found and redemption lives.

In the tradition in which we are rooted, today is the day we celebrate the mystery and the miracle -- that what we call most Holy is That Which Makes Life Out of Death, That Which calls into being what we had ceased to hope for. We don't know how it happens. We just know it does. It can. It has. It will again, we believe, and we will not be able to explain it when it does. A miracle occurs. Love lives after death, triumphs over the worst we can do, grace happens, the evil that we do becomes the place where mercy and justice respond in equal measure, our sorrow can become a song that gets picked up by others and soon we are looking at them and seeing ourselves, singing. The mechanics never get elucidated or diagrammed, you can't graph them or write them out in long form equations. It is never explicit. It just is. In this passion play we celebrate every year, we ask Jesus to be the one who stands in our place, the one who speaks to our condition, the name we give to our humanness, our vulnerability, our impermanence, our best impulses, our most generous, brave, faithful selves, the part of us that is capable of *giving* our lives -- both in our living, daily ministry, *and* in our dying -- giving them in service to that which makes life out of death, that which is eternal, that which is found when all is lost, which lives always, everywhere, in everyone. Jesus is the wounded hero of our own hearts, the one we see our most hoped for selves in, and he also becomes the faces of our most beloved fellow travellers, dear and particular and precious, all. This Jesus is both doomed to die and marked for everlasting life. Precious and temporary, and yet made of something eternal that lives on and on. That's us. And that's everyone and everything we love on this dear, particular, precious planet.

Every Easter I remember the ubiquitous crucifixions of my childhood, a symbolic image of structural evil that most of the year faded into a hidden-in-plain-sight savagery that required nothing of us, that normalized and desensitized us to the barbarous story it told *all* the time, not just during Holy Week. Somehow, the dominant calculation of the theological equation of Easter became a once and done, a miracle that occurred once 2000 years ago, the one precious time the theorem worked out, and the solution was found. And so, at least since the Emperor Constantine aligned the name of Jesus to the power structures that killed him, it's been terribly easy to make an idol out of this precious first century man, and in so doing fail to see that the crucifixion continued, and continues to this day, often perpetrated by the very people who claim to follow Jesus.

And then we miss how that first century Palestinian rabbi's passion and suffering are now reflected in the passion and suffering found today in so many parts of our beleaguered, distressed world.

So, in these days of ubiquitous structural evil, of inexorably unraveling relatedness with all that sustains us, to engage a deliberate spiritual practice of presence to all the ways that Jesus is still being crucified today, to not normalize or desensitize ourselves to that crucifixion, and to be clear-eyed about the fact of its continuation is critical, necessary, and brave. But it is Easter. And this feast of resurrection tells us that just as important, just as critical, just as necessary and just as brave is an equally deliberate practice of vigilant, clear-eyed, reverent attention to where Christ is Risen. Attention to one without the other is not attention to Christ Jesus, the One who speaks to *our* condition. So to awaken the ears of our ears and open the eyes of our eyes, is to *notice* the miracle that occurs that we cannot explain but know is there, the astounding way that God takes what would destroy us and transforms us instead, the crucial part of the arithmetic in all our best formulas and theorems, never as explicit as the other parts of the problem, but it's right there, right in the middle.

Like what? Like: The unexpected grace. The kindness when you need it most. The sweetness of breath, the generosity of a stranger, the recognition of kinship with the enemy, the clatter of weapons as they fall from hands. The weeping for another's sorrow. Forgiveness: wherever, whenever it happens. The loosening of the grip of bitterness. The great welling up of compassion for those unlike ourselves. The palpable feeling that the ones we love and lose are still, somehow with us. The child who grows up to end the cycle of violence. The spark of gratitude that makes everything shine, as if lit from within. The incredible resilience of Life itself. The way a ruined landscape can heal itself, regenerate, given half a chance. The moment when we look up and see, incredibly, that the stone, which was impossible great, which had entombed our hearts, has been rolled away, and loss has been wooed, once again, into song. And there it is, just like that: a miracle occurs. And Christ is Risen.

*"... we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have been united with Jesus in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with Christ in a resurrection like his."*

*(now the ears of my ears awake and now the eyes of my eyes are opened)*