

The Liberal Christian Herald



The Unitarian Christian Association seeks to strengthen and revitalise the liberal Christian tradition.

Easter Edition

Issue 104 Easter 2022



Front Cover Image: Isenheim Altarpiece— The Grunewald Christ from Wikimedia Commons

AGM REPORT

The recent AGM held at Mill Hill Chapel, Leeds was attended by members in person and also on Zoom. Alex Bradley and Francis Elliot-Wright were elected as Secretary and Communications and Media officers, respectively. At the end of the meeting, the Chair, Jean Bradley presented a gift to Jeff Gould thanking him for nearly 30 years of service to the UCA.

Jo James led the worship and facilitated a discussion with members of the Leeds branch of the Progressive Christianity Network. The day benefited from the exchange of experiences and perspectives of the members of the two organisations which have parallel aims and objectives.

The venue of Mill Hill Chapel was inspiring to those who attended as there were concrete signs of the congregation's involvement with the local community and helpful response to the current crisis in Ukraine.



The Chair, Jean Bradley presenting a gift to Jeff Gould.

Photographs , Jim Corrigan



Jenny Jacobs of the PCN (pictured right) makes a point during discussions between UCA and PCN members, in the church.

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A personal reflection on Easter and the Resurrection

Alex Bradley

“Awake, O sleeper from the dead, and Christ shall give you light” (Ephesians 5.14)

The Resurrection is a difficult topic for many Unitarians and liberal Christians. Moving from Joseph Priestley’s self-confident belief in the New Testament miracles as proofs of Jesus mission as Messiah, but not God, a growing number started to doubt the Bible in general, and the Gospels in particular, as reliable evidences for the truth of Christianity. In his book, ‘The Dissenters’ (volume 2) Michael Watts writes that, “In 1840, a Mr Kendall, minister of the Unitarian church at Devonport, retired from his pulpit and the ministry because he no longer believed in the resurrection of Christ”. There would probably be many vacant pulpits in our churches if contemporary ministers took a similar view of what it is necessary to believe to be a Unitarian minister!

That particular minister took the view that he must accept the Resurrection (and all the Biblical miracles) as ‘historical’ events, in the same way as a verifiable historical event like the Battle of Hastings. The other logical consequence of his inability to do so, was in his view, that he must abandon all belief in the Christian revelation, perhaps even in God as well. However, this is to do less than justice to the complexity and nuance in the Biblical texts.

Owing to the influence of an inspiring RE teacher who taught me at school, I early realised that the Gospel texts are themselves far from being perfect witness statements. The very fact that no one thought to ‘doctor the evidence’, to make them all tell the same story, added to their credibility in my eyes. We are told of the outright scepticism of Thomas in John’s Gospel, and that “others doubted” in Matthew. It is clear that the ‘risen Jesus’ is a very different reality from the ‘pre-Easter Jesus’, so much so that even his closest friends do not recognise him at first (Luke 24.16ff). The variance in the accounts is a sign that the gospel writers intended to tell the unvarnished truth as they perceived it, even when the facts were awkward ones.

What happened? None of us can know for certain. What does seem clear to me, however, is that

something happened, whatever that ‘something’ might have been, to convince his earliest followers that somehow, he had triumphed over death. Was it wish-fulfilment? Was it a psychological defence mechanism to cope with an otherwise unbearable truth? Such explanations must be considered, but the very scepticism and realism of the accounts seem to militate against such a conclusion. Every person will have their own opinion as what happened (or didn’t happen), whatever it was that constituted the nature of that event we call the Resurrection. I can only say that I do not know what it actually was.

In its aftermath, a group of frightened and demoralised men and women who had lost their loved one and leader to a cruel and unjust trial and execution, people who were in terror for their lives, were transformed. It was as if they were new people: they were born anew.

It is a profound paradox that the significance of the Easter story lies in the insignificance of the people who experienced it: an obscure Judean prophet and teacher and his handful of faithful followers. The people who condemned and buried him are remembered, if at all, only for their part in his trial and execution. Pontius Pilate would be remembered only as an obscure Roman Governor in a far-flung part of the Roman empire. The message and teaching of Jesus has triumphed by being remembered by the countless millions who have followed him and who still follow him.

All this is true: but I think that that the significance of the Resurrection goes beyond that. There is a clue to be found in some words by St Paul, who claimed to have seen a vision of the risen Christ (but not in the flesh, like the others). ‘It is sown a physical body, it is raised a spiritual body’, he says in one of his letters to the Corinthian Christians.

Our bodies are made up of cells which are constantly dying and being renewed. In that scientific (and rather poetic) sense, we are indeed dying and being born again. It would be impossible for a human body that had rotted away into its material elements and individual cells, to be reincorporated into other forms of matter, either plant or animal, to be brought back again as plain Mr or Mrs Smith. And that is just the point: the Gospels point us to a

different sort of conclusion, namely, that resurrection, ^{very} whatever it may mean or involve, and if it exists, is a very different process. This is not the reconstituting of a human body as it existed previously, but is instead into an entity which has an existence but a spiritual one. We die to our old selves and become part of a greater reality, the reality that we can call God or the divine.

Such an idea makes sense for me at least of what would otherwise be a pointless occurrence in history, albeit an amazing one. If one man, in this case Jesus, was literally able to come back from the dead, that would be an amazing event but of no further significance for any of us, since, as far as we know, there have been no scientifically verified cases of it happening. It is true that various miracle stories both Christian and from other religious traditions talk about people being brought to life. The resurrection of Lazarus in John's Gospel is one example and the stories told about the third century teacher and the pagan miracle worker, Apollonius from the Hellenic city of Tyana another. These, however, raise the question: even if they happened 'literally' as they were said to have done, what universal significance would that have for the rest of us? Presumably, those brought to life later died. Jesus, we are told ascended into heaven but that of itself would still not give us the promise of new life.

This is where the resurrection stories start to become interesting. They are not about the mere reconstitution and resuscitation of a human body, even while it would be amazing in itself. Even if it were possible for all of us, would we really want to live for ever in our present bodies? Apart from the fact that our health services and nursing homes are struggling to cope with an aging population, the great stories of literature and legend remind us that we should beware of asking for eternal life in a selfish frame of mind. One Greek myth tells us of a beautiful youth called Tithonus, with whom Aurora, goddess of the dawn, fell in love and offered him anything he desired. He asked her for eternal life and was granted his wish. However, he did not think to ask for eternal youth as well. After growing impossibly weak and feeble, he begged to be allowed to die and the goddess granted his wish. The resurrection stories seem to point to something very different. It is about a dying to our old, limited selves and a reconstitution into a spiritual reality which is practically beyond our capacity to conceive, let alone accurately

describe. It is a reality so great that we cannot conceive it, any more than an ant can conceive what it is to be a human being. The other aspect of this is that the process begins in this life, when by right thinking and action, we can begin to cast off our selfish ways and desires. In the words of the gospel, we can lose our life in order to find it. We realise that true fulfilment in life is not about satisfying an unending stream of selfish desires and cravings but about helping others and by doing so, being in tune with the ultimate reality we call God. We can 'wake up to reality'. In the words of the letter to the Ephesians, we are exhorted to awake as sleepers from the dead in order that Christ may give us light.

We often use the everyday phrase about an experience giving us 'a wake-up call'. The experience of waking from the dead, is a spiritual one, one which can occur before our bodily death, and, I believe, after that death as well, but at a much deeper and more powerful level than the more mundane experiences that mostly crowd our lives. It is like the ultimate love affair. Once you have experienced even a small taste of that reality, you will know what it means to most fully live.

Jesus lived and died, but his teaching and message lives on. The good news, the 'gospel' that I believe in, is that his spirit lives on too, not as some disembodied ghost, but as a spiritual reality, and that we can experience that reality too, both in our earthly, bodily existences and in the wider, higher, greater love that envelops us all and calls us to its embrace. We are offered the possibility of a great awakening in our lives, in the here and now, the call to a higher and greater reality, a resurrection reality that is here and now for those of us who wish to embrace it. It is in that spirit that I affirm the great proclamation: 'Christ is risen! He is risen indeed!'

UNITARIAN CHRISTIAN

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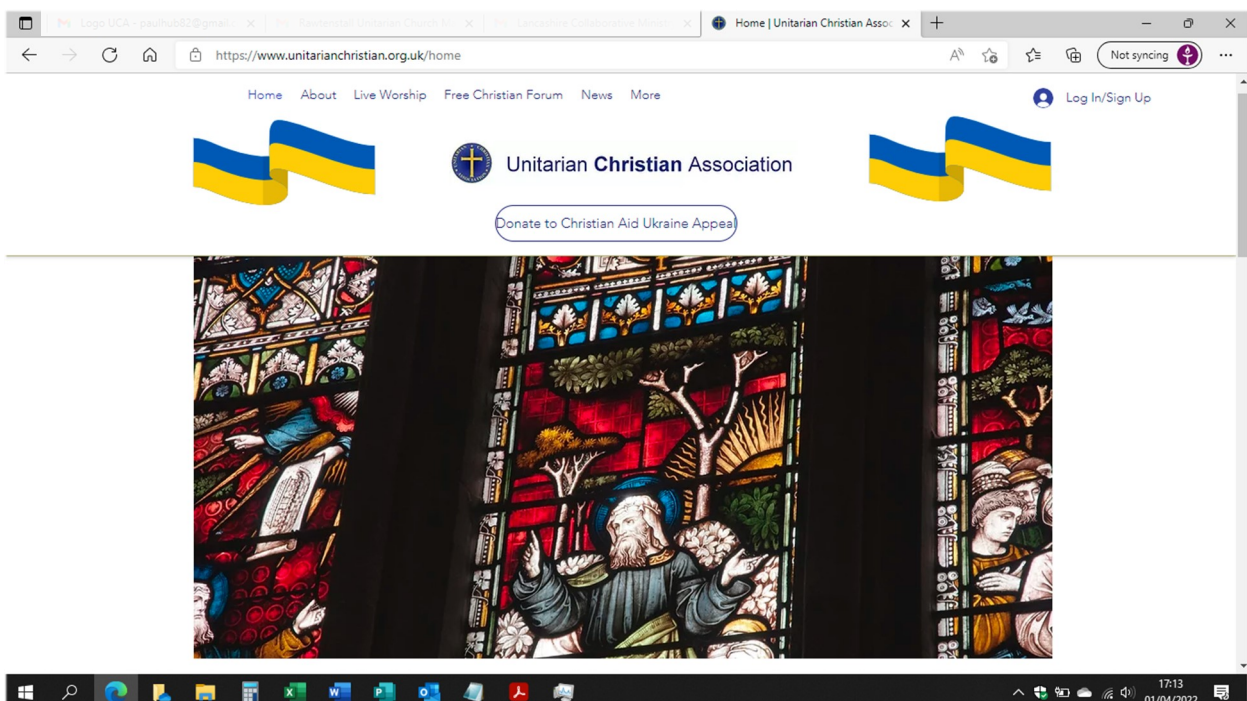
Since Advent Sunday, 2021, the UCA has been providing online worship via zoom, each Sunday at 6pm. These services are led by different UCA members, either ministers or experienced worship leaders. They are 30 to 40 minutes long and are always followed by about twenty minutes of friendly chat. Many people have commented on how much they appreciate these services because they are unable to get to a Unitarian church, due to problems with health, or because there isn't a Unitarian church nearby. Others tell us that these services top up their morning service perfectly, because UCA service leaders don't apologise for praying, nor do they negotiate before using the word, God.

To join these services, go to our website at unitarianchristian.org.uk, click on the page 'Live Worship' and follow the link. Participants are invited to join from 5.45pm, for music to get us into the right frame of mind before worship, which starts at 6pm.

Some people come each week, others drop in when they can, and there's a nice feeling of fellowship growing up among us there. The next step is for us to get a place to interact online during the week. This was why the forum on our new website was created, but for some reason it has never really taken off. So, perhaps a Facebook group has more chance of getting going.

It's important for us to understand the difference between Pages and Groups on Facebook. The UCA's Facebook Page is where we share news, links, make announcements, and advertise forthcoming events. Our new Facebook *Group*, called UCA Worship, is much more interactive. It's a place where all its 'members' can post and comment on each other's posts. Please, please, please, let's all try to join the group and see if we can get a feeling of connection and good cheer going together. I'm in the process of issuing 'invites' to UCA members whose profiles I can find on Facebook, but please don't wait for an invite. Just search for UCA Worship and ask to join.

The UCA also continues to support the Unitarian & Free Christian Bible Discussion Group. This is an independent group, featuring Christians and non-Christians from across Unitarianism, but quite a few of its regular participants are UCA members. Why not join us? We meet on Mondays from 6.30-7.30pm. Ask to join the Facebook group, Unitarian & Free Christian Bible Discussion. There you'll find online debate, chit chat and news about upcoming discussions. For anyone who doesn't do Facebook, the details of each week's discussion are posted in advance at unitarianbiblediscussion.blogspot.com



On the Resurrection of the Body Peter Brown

"For we know that if our earthly house, the tent we live in, is dismantled, we have a building from God, a house not built by human hands, that is eternal in the heavens".
(Second Corinthians, Chapter 5, verse 1)

It was during the early 1960's that I left the Church of England. I can still recall the Easter morning when I made a sudden change of heart and would not go to church on that day and it was my family that gave me the most grief about it: 'Call yourself a Christian and not go to church on Easter Sunday!' I can only think that I did not even try to share my thoughts of that day which were based on the account in John of Jesus inviting Thomas to put his fingers his wound. It suddenly seemed such a ghastly thing to occur that I found it abhorrent and instead of rising and going to Communion and then singing in the choir for Morning and Evening services I instead stayed in bed and never returned to that church again.

It was only decades later and, I suppose feeling my way back to the gospels, that I listened to a lecture by Elaine Pagels on the Gospel of Thomas and hearing her opinion that the Doubting Thomas character could well be fictional and inserted to 'verify' that the resurrection was both real and completely physical. By our standards this would be a crude method of validation since to our senses any resurrection must be 'physical' to even exhibit a presence in our 3D universe where even a mirage is composed of shimmering light patterns.

Modern physics, originally based upon an ancient Greek idea of matter being constructed with 'atoms' and then elaborated in the eighteenth century, has now become so much part of our current assumed mind set that we can only look back at previous centuries and be astounded at their literal interpretation of bodily resurrection, both in respect of Jesus and also of 'everyone' on the last day. So it was that our European culture regarded the more or less precise layout of the dead in cemeteries and graveyards to be especially important, not so much for matters of public hygiene, but to be ready for the final reawakening. An interesting consequence is that it is not easy to find an artistic representation of resurrection that does not portray usually naked persons wearing bedsheets. The closest that I have found is the image given on the Isenheim folding altar where Jesus rises high above the sleeping soldiers with an expression that is possibly portraying a look of 'See! I fooled you all!'

Yet Paul had already pointed out in Corinthians that our resurrected bodies would be not at all similar to our human form and he used the simile of the seed dying so that the plant itself could develop in all its glory. It was not until the end of the twentieth century that thoughts developed in in some academic circles of a realisation that modern physics was coming across results that had strong echoes of the sayings of ages old philosophers, mostly in the ancient Indian traditions. During studies in quantum physics it became clear that the mental constructs that we used daily were very inadequate to describe what the new findings were revealing. Certainly most people are used to the earlier idea that everything is composed of atoms and that items in everyday use such as a chair are in reality made up of millions of tiny spinning atoms

and also that even our bodies in their cells are in fact millions of tiny items all working together to provide the 'world as we know it'. Yet the newer thinking has delved even further. It now sees our universe as being composed of items that at their point of creation have no defined 'role' until they are 'directed' by some form of unseen consciousness which is itself far beyond any understanding. Sound familiar? In parallel studies it would appear that our individual consciousness is interconnected with the larger consciousness and that allows us the possibility of being interconnected not just with the larger consciousness, but also with those consciousnesses that relate more directly to each of us in our daily lives; the consciousness of friends; and enemies; and our geographic grouping. At the forefront of thinking at present it is considered that consciousness forms the basic material of the known universe and that consciousness constantly creates the everyday world.

What the new quantum physics now teaches us about the nature of our own consciousness is even more enlightening. It tells us that our consciousness is constructed of a pattern of the finest particles which together are able to produce a tiny plasma like sheet yet which contains 'us' together with all our thoughts and memories. Small wonder that ghostly apparitions always appear to be transparent. Further, according to modern thinking, this 'part' of us leaves us at death and is able to enter another dimension more closely connected to the Prime Consciousness. So whatever the nature of Paul's vision of Jesus it would seem that his account is verifiable.

Elaine Pagels: audiobook; The Gospel of Thomas: A New Vision of the Message of Jesus

Youtube video; the nature of the Overall Power:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zy6mVAb-UjU>

Using our thoughts to control the surrounding quantum field:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rUVt650GdEI&list=WL&index=14>

https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/3/31/Grunewald_-_christ.jpg



The Unitarian Christian Association
www.unitarianchristian.org.uk



In collaboration with

The World Community of Christian Meditation

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will host a Quiet Day

at Dean Row Chapel, Chapel Road, Wilmslow SK9
2BX

www.deanrowchapel.org.uk

on Saturday 20 August 2022, 10am until 4pm

Come for a day of peace, silence, guided meditation and Taizé worship, all offered in the beautiful surroundings of a 17th century Dissenting chapel, garden and well appointed hall. There will be no charge for the event but it would be helpful to have some idea of numbers. Don't forget to bring a packed lunch, tea and coffee will be provided. Please contact Jeff Gould (telephone 01625 402952 / email jeffreylanegould1959@talktalk.net) to register interest or seek further information.

Charity Report Cathy Fozard

At the 2020 AGM (just prior to the first lockdown), it was decided to support MaaChild, a British based charity working with the Maasai people in southern Kenya. The UCA committed to raising £1500 to support the secondary education of a student for 4 years. Then, as the realities of lockdown became obvious (no events, no social meetings etc), the UCA officers realised that it would be impossible to fundraise for the charity. It was decided to give all donations received by the UCA to support our efforts for this charity. By the end of 2020 we were able to send £860 to MaaChild.

In 2021/2022, we continued to support the charity with donations from members and a very generous donation of £250 from one of our affiliated churches. The total amount sent to MaaChild by the year end 2021 was £2050. In early 2022 there remained £250 of donations still to be sent. This means that we have raised £2300 over the course of two years.

Thank you to all members who have contributed extra amounts when they paid their subscriptions or sent extra donations separately. We are very fortunate to have such generous members.

As we end our support for MaaChild, Therese Green, the founder of MaaChild, has written to inform us that the charity is going to be wound down. This is mainly because of the global impact of the pandemic. The responsibilities and management of the charity will be handed over to the local Maasai volunteers in Kenya. The good news is that there are sufficient funds available to send one more cohort of at least six students to secondary school in April. Their fees are ring fenced in the UK MaaChild account and paid annually to the secondary schools until the final year in 2025. The trustees of the charity will remain in place until the final transfer of funds is made.

MaaChild, founded in 2010 has achieved great successes and progress for the Masai people in just 12 years. See what has been achieved on pg 15.

Therese Green has sent us a special message,

“A heartfelt thank you for supporting MaaChild and being part of this incredible journey that made life changing dreams come true for so many Maasai children and their families. MaaChild made it all possible!”

As Therese wrote in the 2019 brochure,

“Small gestures, which seem like tiny droplets when originating here in the green hills of Lancashire, create ripples which become mighty waves of opportunity when they reach the plains of Southern Kenya.”

Therese has just informed us that our final donation of £250 has helped to achieve the goal for supporting a seventh student’s four years of education!

THANK YOU!

A Season and a Time Alex Bradley

Having recently told my congregation that my ministry with them will be ending this summer, Francis asked me whether I would write some thoughts on my ministry, and the formation and training of ministers, for the Herald.

You may have noticed that I have avoided the words ‘retirement’ or ‘retiring’ in that sentence. Chambers Dictionary defines the verb ‘retire’ thus: ‘to withdraw; to retreat; to recede: to withdraw from society, office, public or active life’. I do not envisage myself as doing any of those things! It is true that from this summer, I will cease to be a minister who is paid a stipend (or salary) but I will remain a minister. Even though I will no longer conduct regular public worship (perhaps any worship), attend committees, District meetings, G.A. meetings: even though I will have no pastoral responsibilities to meet, no reports to write, no social media to update; although I will lay down all these things, I will remain a minister in my heart and mind. Ministry is about caring and service, and the worship of God, in the spirit of the ‘Shema’ that Jesus quotes from, on loving God, and one’s neighbour as oneself (Mark 12.29-31).

‘To begin at the beginning’ writes Dylan Thomas in his wonderful poem ‘Under Milk Wood’ but where, precisely, was my starting point? Like many, perhaps most of us, I probably had many ‘beginnings’ in my long journey towards the Unitarian and Free Christian Ministry and the subsequent evolution of my views. This is not the place to talk about those things here, except to say that I had the remarkable good fortune to be encouraged and helped along the way by several Unitarians, both Ministers and lay people, to whom I shall always feel the utmost

gratitude. Many of them are no longer with us in this life but I hope I have repaid at least some of the debt of thanks that I owe them by helping others in my turn.

Ministry is a 'calling', a 'vocation', as, in a similar way, we used to refer to nursing, being a doctor, or a teacher as a calling and I think it a pity that this usage has largely died out. Almost any field of work and endeavour can be referred to as a calling (excluding arms dealers and a few others).

I recently listened with fascination to a man who described his own route into accountancy, and what came out was the way in which his work had enormously benefited the community, far beyond the parameters of his 'official' work. We are all called to ministry but not all of us are called to be Ministers. I like gardening but I am certainly not called to be a professional gardener – I would probably end up-rooting the flowers and keeping the weeds! Professional ministry (or the term I prefer, 'vocational ministry') requires a certain set of skills and aptitudes, some of which can be developed, although they must be there in embryo at least. However, I believe it must also have a sense of calling to a higher purpose: whether you call that purpose 'God', as I do, or the Transcendent, the Ultimate Reality, the Ideal, or any other term. It is that sense of a high calling that may sustain one through the difficulties that often come with ministering to a congregation. I am not aware of any hard statistical research having been done on this subject, but my impression is that there is a higher than usual rate of breakdown of relationships for both students for the ministry and established ministers, compared to other occupations (police officers might be an occupation with a similar or even higher rate). I am married to a wonderful wife, who also happens to be a Unitarian Minister, but not everyone is so fortunate. Many congregations, probably the great majority, are supportive of their ministers in both their ministerial work and in regard to their personal well-being but a few are not (usually through the influence of one, or perhaps a handful, of 'difficult' or dysfunctional individuals).

Unitarians are inheritors of a great spiritual tradition. I use the term 'tradition' deliberately. I regard Unitarianism as a way of understanding faith, a way in which to practice a faith but not a religion in its own right. The world has religions enough as it is, and one more religion will make no difference: cer-

tainly not one with about 5,000 active members (at a very generous estimate) in the UK, and perhaps 180,000 in the UUA in North America. Although there are encouraging signs of growth in some of our congregations and interesting online developments which may bring real results in due course, there is no doubt that we are sharing in the common decline of 'established' religions in Western Europe. There are no easy answers to this (I certainly have none) but we could perhaps look to how we might improve our 'offering' to the community. Over and over again, I have put my head in my hands (figuratively or literally!) as I hear of how people are all too often put off from joining a congregation. One couple seeking a more liberal church were told by the steward at the door that they would be better off going to the Methodists down the road!

Another weakness lies in our over-emphasis on individualism, and the consequent lack of a sense that each of our congregations is a spiritual community in its own right and the insight that, in the words of St Paul, we 'are members, one of another'. When I was first coming into Unitarianism, I came across a bookmark published for publicity purposes, which read as follows: "Most people think. Some people think a lot. A few people think that they ought to think for themselves. If you are one of the few you may be interested in Unitarianism, the creedless religion which says that people ought to think for themselves". I must admit that at the time, that message 'spoke to my condition', as the Quakers would say. It was only on later reflection that I realised that for all its good intentions, the message was misguided on so many levels. It exuded a certain patronizing tone ('you can be one of the few'), an elitist mindset (we are the 'real thinkers' – when in fact, Unitarian theology has not been at the cutting edge for a century if not longer), and the unfortunate notion (in my view) that it is a 'religion', rather than either a part of the Christian tradition, or, if you prefer a non-Christian reference, a way of being religious.

'To everything there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven', writes the author we know as Ecclesiastes. All churches, including Unitarian and liberal Christian ones face great challenges, as we move into a mode of society that many have called post-Christendom. However, if we Unitarians can draw from the spiritual wells that refresh us: not only the great heroes of Unitarianism and Protestant Dissent, but also the wisdom of the me-

dieval mystics like Julian of Norwich, Hildegard of Bingen, and the great church fathers and mothers and scholars like Origen of Alexandria, Jerome, and others, then we may be able to develop a distinctive spirituality which complements our Trinitarian friends and cousins, while being open to the insights of modern knowledge and other faiths.

Far from 'retiring', I am looking forward to a new equally active stage in my life, in which I will be able to spend more time with my wife and with our friends, pursue my other interests, work with the Unitarian Christian Association, and have more time for reading novels and further theological study.

Nothing in this life stays the same forever: change is a part of what it is to live. However, we who are fortunate to have found a faith, know that, in the words of the Letter to the Hebrews, 'Here we have no continuing city, but we seek one to come'. It is a journey I am eager to embrace.

'Life is sweet and a pleasant thing it is for eyes to behold the sun' (Ecclesiastes)

You must read...

What's the one book that you would press into the hands of other UCA members?

Lynne Readett

The Fifth Mountain by Paulo Coelho

Read this and be transported into the world of Elijah as the biblical story becomes a magic carpet ride.

Jeff Gould

I would recommend that one read *The Spiral Staircase* by Karen Armstrong, as it eloquently illustrates the task of finding one's spiritual integrity in the midst of an environment that exerts pressure on the individual to tread an inauthentic path.

Peter Brown

Finding Your Hidden Treasure (the Way of Silent Prayer) by Benignus O'Rourke OSA.

An Augustine friar writes of the simple way in which silence can lead us to our true selves and the realisation that we are in union with the source of life and love itself.

Jo James

The Master and Margarita by Mikhail Bulgakov; Written under the severest hardship of Stalinist repression, Bulgakov chose one 'Yeshua ha Nosri' (Jesus of Nazareth) as the ultimate champion of liberty in this luminous love letter to liberation.

Sarah Tinker

You must read this: *If You Sit Very Still*, written by Marian Partington, a Quaker, about the disappearance and death of her sister Lucy. It's a painful, yet profoundly inspiring exploration of how the human spirit can transform seemingly unbearable suffering into healing and you can read online of Marian's restorative work with the Forgiveness Project

Stephanie Bisby

The Art of Gathering by Priya Parker, written in 2018 to help businesses, charities and individuals 'create transformative meetings, events and experiences' is not a theology book but is a book with the power to make us reevaluate every aspect of how we 'do' church, and could not be more relevant as we wrestle with how to reshape our gatherings to a post-pandemic future.

Rory Castle Jones

Surprised by God: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love Religion by Rabbi Danya Ruttenberg. This beautiful, moving and very relatable book helped me let go of my fears and launch myself heart, body and soul into becoming "religious" again after many years in the wilderness.

Tristan Jovanovic

Jesus: the Teacher Within by Lawrence Freeman. I do so because Freeman begins with the question Jesus posed ('Who do you say that I am?') and gets the reader to ask the question repeatedly as the book goes on until one begins to ask it of oneself, in relation to Jesus the Christ and in the world.

Sue Woolley

Sacred Earth, Sacred Soul by J. Philip Newell. A wonderful book about Celtic Christianity - its depth, its breadth and its deep connection with the sacred earth.

Stephen Lingwood

The Way to Love. The Last Meditations of Anthony De Mello. Profound and simple spiritual teachings from one of the great Christian masters of prayer, in a teeny tiny book that will literally fit in your pocket

Denise Birks

Rescuing the Bible from Fundamentalism by Bishop John Selby Spong opened up an alternative way of reading and understanding the Scriptures, after failing to conform to a literal understanding of the Bible.

Trish Lindsay

The Gospels - a new translation by Sarah Ruden. As a Quaker, she aims for a literal translation, one that is not biased towards (or influenced by) any particular belief or denomination.

Ken Howard

The Ascent of Everest by John Hunt.

This is a fascinating account of both the preparation and the first successful climb of Everest completed by Edmund Hillary and Sherpa Tenzing Norgay; it is a real example of efficient leadership and the power of a cohesive group; it captures the spirit, determination and teamwork of a group of resilient people.

Lizzie Kingston-Harrison

A Secret History of Christianity by Mark Vernon

In deft and lucid prose, Vernon invites us to read the old and new testaments through the lens of Owen Barfield's work on the evolution of consciousness. In doing so he calls us to be mystics, and to transfigure our lives by recognising the sacred unity of our inner and outer worlds.

Francis Elliot-Wright

The Narnia Chronicles

It's well worth going beyond *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*. Read the other five books for charm, imagination with and lots of theology, all in beautiful prose written for children of all ages.

Jim Wilson

Jesus Uncovering The Life, Teachings and Relevance Of A Religious Revolutionary by Marcus Borg

Borg has provided a detailed study of all the different aspects of Jesus, as a historical human being who lived within a specific time and place, as a timeless ethical teacher par excellence, and a mystic who shows us the way to the Kingdom of God so we can all become one in Christ.

Alex Bradley

'*The Christian Agnostic*' by Leslie Weatherhead. Published over 50 years ago by a liberal Congregationalist minister but still relevant today.

Andrew Brown

Atheism in Christianity (1972) by Ernst Bloch (London, Verso Press, 2009)

A powerful reminder that a person can engage fully with the Biblical texts and the Judeo-Christian tradi-

tion in ways that will surprise many, if not most, people. As Bloch says, "the best thing about religion is it makes for heretics" and that, as far as he was concerned, "only a good atheist can be a good Christian; only a good Christian can be a good atheist."

Steven Williams

Easter by Michael Arditti

Holy Week in a North London parish, and a series of crises threatens to divide the Church community, conflict between modernizers and traditionalists, liberals and conservatives, and between people.

Daniel Costley

The Orthodox Heretic, by Peter Rollins, (2009) Canterbury Press

A slim volume of short and longer stories and challenges (that are simple, often funny and always captivating) that will encourage you to reflect on your actions, your preconceptions, your preferences and your weak spots.

Have you been inspired to follow one of these recommendations? Let us know what you thought, or add your own recommendation. Please email franciselliottwright@gmail.com in time for the Summer edition. Hopefully this will be a regular feature!

A Sermon that was preached on Easter Sunday, 16 April 2017 at Hale Chapel, Hale Barns and Dean Row Chapel, Wilmslow, Cheshire Jeff Gould

Because I could not stop for Death (poem number 479), Emily Dickinson

*Because I could not stop for Death—
He kindly stopped for me—
The Carriage held but just Ourselves—
And Immortality*

*We slowly drove—He knew no haste
And I had put away
My labor and my leisure too,
For His Civility—*

*We passed the School, where Children strove
At Recess—in the Ring—
We passed the Fields of Gazing Grain—
We passed the Setting Sun—*

*Or rather—He passed us—
The Dews drew quivering and chill—
For only Gossamer, my Gown—
My Tippet—only Tulle—*

*We paused before a House that seemed
A Swelling of the Ground—
The Roof was scarcely visible—
The Cornice—in the Ground—*

*Since then—'tis Centuries—and yet
Feels shorter than the Day
I first surmised the Horses' Heads
Were toward Eternity*

* * * * *

The 19th-century New England poet, Emily Dickinson (born 1830, died 1886), was virtually unknown beyond her immediate circle of family and friends in her own lifetime, but from the time of the posthumous publication of her innovative poetry in 1890, her work and her own peculiar life's story entered the world's literary sphere.

Most people only vaguely familiar with this elusive character are at least able to report that she was an unmarried female writer who rarely left the home of her birth after young adulthood, and who was known to have favoured white clothing. Apart from these scant facts, she remains a shadowy figure at best, and an unknown contributor to Western thought and discourse, at worst. Some scholars have given her a tentative diagnosis of agoraphobia, whilst others have identified her epileptic seizures as a cause of shame, which kept her confined to the

house, lest non-family members witness her illness. What cannot be denied is the impact her short verses have had on the English language and the many women and men who have been inspired by this frail and seemingly disempowered poet's longing to express herself in the context of an environment of extreme conformity.

Born into a comfortably-off, middle-class family in the charming academic town of Amherst, Massachusetts, Emily was educated to a high standard, both at home, and at the nearby Mount Holyoke Female Seminary (which is today the esteemed Mount Holyoke College—a high-ranking women-only university). It was that superb education, combined with her innate non-conformity, which enabled her to lead an intellectual existence that benefited from a secure domestic base.

For our purposes, Emily Dickinson commands attention because of her consistent occupation with the life of faith, a consideration of death and the life hereafter, and a refusal to be forced into an orthodox religious worldview. A voracious reader, she eagerly devoured the works of the Unitarian minister and lecturer, Ralph Waldo Emerson, along with the essays and articles of several other leading figures of the Transcendentalist Movement. You will recall that this was a New England phenomenon, which involved largely Unitarian men and women, who turned from a purely scriptural encounter with God and found divinity to be discernible in the natural world. New England in the middle of the 19th-century was positively obsessed with the confrontation between a restrictive Calvinism and a liberating Universalism. The first theological position stressed the importance of acknowledging one's innate sin and depravity (thereby requiring God's grace and forgiveness), whilst the latter affirmed the ultimate desire of the creator to re-unite all souls with himself in a spirit of unconditional love and acceptance. Emily steadfastly refused to worship a wrathful, judgemental God, and chose to construct a faith that sought solace in a loving and welcoming deity.

Emily knew hypocrisy when she heard it in a preacher, and penned these two stanzas in response:

*He preached upon 'Breadth' till it argued him narrow—
The broad are too broad to define;
And of 'Truth', until it proclaimed him a liar,
The truth never flaunted a sign.*

*Simplicity fled from his counterfeit presence
As gold the pyrites would shun.
What confusion would cover the innocent Jesus
To meet so enabled a man!*

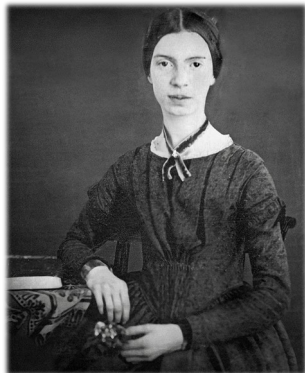
Emily Dickinson's figure and poetry are offered to a new generation, through the release of Terence Davies' film, 'A Quiet Passion' (2016), which provides the viewer with a broad sketch of her life, along with a presentation of the development of her personal faith and witness. In it, one is reminded that illness and death were far more present realities to those who lived in the 19th-century, and religion (especially with regard to the state of one's soul) was a concern that was utmost in the thoughts of most mindful people.

Emily's apparent pre-occupation with the subject of death and what state in which the soul might exist in an after-life was, in reality, a common, every-day concern to her contemporaries, and much of what she wrote was penned in response to debates taking place around her. What marks her poetry as having been so innovative in its time is the directness and the intimacy with which she addresses the figures of both God and Jesus—demonstrating little fear of what might lie beyond this life, and embracing human mortality as an opportunity of faith, rather than an obstacle. As we heard in this morning's reading, she wrote, 'Because I could not stop for Death,/ He kindly stopped for me.'

This Easter Sunday, we hear the account of the Resurrection as it appears in Matthew's Gospel (Matthew 28.1-10). It, along with Mark and Luke's narratives, offer fear as the dominant emotion experienced by the women who arrive at the empty tomb and encounter angelic beings. Matthew includes an imperative given by the angel twice in the story: 'Do not be afraid'. It is a phrase that occurs frequently in both the Hebrew and the Christian scriptures. If Matthew offers one message of the tale of the Resurrection it is this: neither life nor death is to be feared, if trust in God is allowed.

Our own small, but influential religious tradition challenged the dominant religious mindset of the 19th-century when it asked Christians to consider the stories of the Bible not as reports of historical events, but rather as stories of faith that speak far greater truths than mere reportage. It was our forebears' contention that a person of faith is not asked to believe that events contrary to nature take

place, such as the parting of the waves to allow the Israelites to cross the Red Sea into the safety of the desert. A person of faith is not asked to believe that a teenage girl could conceive and give birth to a son and remain a virgin. A person of faith is not asked to believe that an itinerant, first-century rabbi should be capable of walking on water, or that an executed revolutionary should come back from the dead on the third day after his death. Faith requires far more than simple credulity in the unbelievable. It asks that one see in such stories even more potent truths, namely, that God chooses the most unlikely of persons to demonstrate what is capable of being accomplished in a fully human life.



Like Matthew writing two-thousand years before, Emily Dickinson could affirm, *'Do not be afraid.'*

FOCUS ON OUR AFFILIATED CHURCHES

Dundee Unitarians: Williamson Memorial Unitarian Christian Church

We regret to announce the death of Jimmy Hastie on 31st January 2022. He was a long term member of Williamson Memorial and had been Treasurer and Convener for many years. He and Olive (died 2018) were the first marriage to be held in the new building in 1970. They are both greatly missed.
Rob Whiteman, Minister

Stalybridge Unitarian Church & Sunday School

Unitarianism in Stalybridge started as a Sunday School to provide education to the families of cotton workers who were out of work due to the cotton famine caused by The American Civil War. Ever since then we have attempted to continue to attract young people to join in our worship and other activities. Currently we have 17 children on the register between the ages of 6 months and 15 years old. They take part in the first part of the service before going to their own dedicated room for their own activities. They often take an active part in services. Currently all the children are preparing their exhibits for the 90th North Cheshire Unitarian Sunday School Union Arts and Crafts Exhibition to be held in May. The dedicated Sunday School leaders do a wonderful job of keeping the young people involved with everything we do. All the congregation feel that it is our duty to encourage young people as much as we possibly can.

Ken Howard, Church Warden

Kingswood Unitarian Chapel

Kingswood Chapel is a Unitarian Meeting House based 7 miles from Birmingham. We tend to see ourselves as Liberal Christians.

Unfortunately, we have been without a permanent Minister for the last two years but have had the pleasure of having many visiting preachers since we returned from lockdown. We kept the Congregation together with regular online Services and a Newsletter. Happily, we have now started the process of finding a new Minister but we will continue with our regular Services and many Social events.

Jill Bowie, Chair Congregation Committee.

Dean Row Chapel, Wilmslow

There is an established tradition in the Cheshire

We are not asked on Easter Sunday to affirm a miracle that is neither in our own experience nor in the recorded works of history. Rather, we are asked to acknowledge the great gift of faith in God's power to transform lives that appear to be at their most trying, most wretched, most unredeemable, and to consider that such power to move beyond any present time of trial rests in our Creator. Easter becomes then, not a conjuring trick of myth, but a story of what is possible in every person's life.

In similar fashion, Emily Dickinson sought to assert her own intimate connection with God, against the backdrop of a severe and uncompromising Calvinism of her day, not by investing in a Hell that was graphically depicted by the clergy of her experience, but rather in the God of love whom she encountered directly. She wrote:

*Our journey had advanced,
Our feet were almost come
To that odd fork in being's road,
Eternity by term.*

*Our pace took sudden awe,
Our feet reluctant led;
Before were cities, but between,
The forest of the dead.*

*Retreat was out of hope;
Behind, a sealed route,
Eternity's white flag before,
And God at every gate.*

town of Wilmslow of the various churches and chapels of the community uniting each year to raise money towards Christian Aid Week by providing a simple soup lunch on the Tuesdays of Lent. Initially, the hosting of the meals rotated round the town centre congregations, with each assuming full responsibility for that year. Several years ago, it was decided to hold all the meals, each year, in the Dean Row Chapel hall, with each congregation providing the food for a single Tuesday in that season. The chief factor in this decision was the fact that the chapel hall has a car park, whilst the other houses of worship pose difficulties for those who want to attend and cannot walk to the designated building. The major benefits of this situation are that two to three times the number of persons are able to attend the lunches, far more money is raised in support of Christian Aid Week, and a genuine spirit of ecumenism brings Christians of different denominations together over a six-week-long period. Conversations take place over the lunches that help to break down barriers, dispel mis-information and generally encourage a healthy exchange of perspectives on religious matters. It is important to note that the UCA's Cathy Fozard is the official Christian Aid Organiser for the entire town of Wilmslow. This enables the congregation of Dean Row to hold a much higher profile within the ecumenical instrument of Churches Together in Wilmslow, as it demonstrates the congregation's commitment to working alongside other households of faith in the community. The chapel is in full membership of the local expression of Churches Together, and its ministers have served as its Chair over many years.

Hale Chapel, Hale Barns

In contrast with the above scenario, Hale Chapel in Hale Barns, Cheshire is actively excluded from the local organisation of Churches Together, but has been an integral participant over the course of several decades in the World Day of Prayer (formerly the Women's World Day of Prayer). Representatives from the chapel are invited to join the committee in planning this annual act of witness, and the chapel has hosted the service on two occasions. It has to be acknowledged that the current minister, Jeff Gould, and the members of the congregation enjoy very healthy relationships with most of the other Christian congregations in the community, including the parish church. The profile of the chapel was recently raised, owing to its celebration of the first same-sex marriage in the village. What

marked this event as truly innovative was the fact that one of the grooms came from an Anglican background and the other from an Orthodox Jewish heritage. The result was not only a step forward for equal marriage, but also an affirmation of the chapel's openness to inter-faith celebrations. The chapel will observe its tercentenary in 2023. The death of the chapel's long-serving treasurer, Margaret Taylor, on Christmas Day is shared with deep sadness.

Jeff Gould , Minister of Dean Row and Hale Chapel

Hold the Fire, Catch the Wind

Judith Fantozzi (Golders Green)

How shall I describe You, Spirit of my God?

Hold the fire in a bottle, catch the wind in a cage

The bottle breaks
The wind blows free

Write Your words upon a page

The sages come
The fools rush by
And ever they will ask You why
You hide yourself intangible

Sign Your Name in flaming letters on the sky

The question marks of passers by
Fill the air and queries flow
Of things that always have been so
And evermore shall be

I know more than I know I know
For Your Spirit dwells in me
Knowing all things that were or are
And all that are to be
At any time to me to show
Anything I need to know

And so content in You I rest

The heart that loves You
Knows You best
And need not know Your form
More important far
To know that You know me.



*[Registered charity 1152932](#)
Providing sustainable educational support
for Maasai students in Southern Kenya*

MaaChild giving

Sustainable secondary bursaries

60+ children receiving the full 4 years secondary education

The Solar lantern project

All students received a solar lantern to help them study at home

The Pencil case project

Hundreds of fully kitted pencil cases put together by our UK students for the Maasai children both at primary and secondary schools

Water storage

A 10,000-litre water tank providing water for the maternity unit at Kimana health Centre

The Bunk bed project

42 Bunk beds with mattresses, blankets and mosquito nets provided for year 7 and 8 girls at Enkaji Naibor primary school

The Nursery facility

The Nursery Naserian “many blessings” with a compost toilet block, three water tanks and two handwashing sites. Susan continues to run the nursery

Resources given to Maasai students and to the local schools

“Made with Love” handmade gifts, Starter educational packs for secondary year 1 students, Revision books and library books, Toiletries, Football/gym kits, medical kits and so much more over the years

A huge thank you for all your efforts



Therese Green, founder of MaaChild, with a graduate student