***“a little blue egg of light”***

*a sermon for Easter delivered by Rev. Scott Dalgarno on April 20, 2025*

*based on John 20:1-21*

When ministers get together, like everyone else, we talk shop. We compare notes about preaching, we tell old stories about the wedding where the groom faints, the funeral where the funeral director is inebriated. Well, we all know, stuff happens.

Ministers know you can’t control everything, especially at weddings and funerals, the kind of services where people you’ve never met always play critical roles, and you are often on *their* turf, not your own.

But, you know, the last place you expect something to go wrong is in your own church. And, I’ll tell you, the last *time* you want a disaster is on Easter.

If you’re new here this morning you may not know that every year, here at Southminster, we observe the decorating of the cross with flowers. It’s our peculiar celebration. It goes way back.

You must have noticed that there is a fair amount of chaos involved. It’s a little like “The Running of the Bulls” at Pamplona. No one, yet, as far as I know, has been seriously injured, but we worry a little.

The week before, we worry there might not be enough flowers for everyone to participate. It takes all of us being thoughtful and patient for it to work. Yes, and now that everyone has a camera on their phone there’s that, too. But it always ends up to be both gorgeous and joyful. It’s our special Easter catastrophe.

I know of a mainline church in Atlanta where there was also an Easter floral tradition going back 15 years; a tradition of having 500 lilies placed around their altar on Easter Sunday. 500 lilies. I don't know why 500, but for fifteen years running there were 500 beautifully arranged lilies swamping the high altar – (this is a seriously large church).

Some years it was just a bank of lilies. Other years they’d mix it up and put them in the shape of a cross. Sometimes they’d be carelessly strewn like an artist spattering paint across a large canvas.

No matter, it was always beautiful. Now, add to that, these were memorial, lilies.

People gave five dollars for each one in memory of someone they loved. Of course, that meant that the insert in the worship bulletin on Easter had 500 names. 500 names (it was huge). 500 beloved departed souls remembered by the giving of a lily.

So, there it was, 500 lilies, five dollars each. It was big and beautiful. Well, in the 16th year of that tradition, the whole grand thing came apart at the seams.

Let me explain. It began innocently enough. One of the elderly members of the church, a woman, went forward immediately following the morning service and said, “I'm going to the hospital to visit Margaret Campbell, she’s had a fall.” Margaret was one of their well-known widowed members.

“It’s okay, isn’t it,” she said, “if I take one of the lilies to give to Margaret? Of course, I can't tell which one it is I donated, but just any one of ‘em will do, they're all the same.”

And without really getting permission from anyone, she went up the chancel steps to the cross of 500 flowers to get one. And then, standing amongst the sea of lilies, she stopped cold.

Instinctively, she turned around to address the hundreds of people still in the sanctuary, and, in a shocked voice, she said, “They're plastic.” All at once it got really quiet. She repeated herself. “The lilies, they’re all plastic.” Well, nearly everybody heard her.

Very soon, there was a lot of commotion bubbling over about the 500 flowery trumpets of Easter being artificial.

Someone said, “We gave five dollars for lilies and they're plastic?” Someone else said. “Yes, and they may be the same ones as last year, and we gave five dollars then, too.“

Quickly, little huddles formed – church members, church board members, staff. The whole tradition was collapsing. Someone, a teenager, did the math in his head: “You know, over 15 years, that's $37,500 for the same plastic lilies.”

So, the minister, hearing a great deal of disaffection, gathered those concerned together and tried to defend the practice of having plastic flowers. His defense went along two lines.

The practical defense he offered in response to the donated money was that it was used to replenish a contingency fund; something to help transients and also meet emergencies that had not been budgeted.

“Let me assure you,” he said, “the money has gone to good use.”

Well, there was reluctant acceptance by some and outright rejection by others.

His backup line of defense was theological. He said, “After all,” (he said this with enthusiasm). “After all, the plastic lilies are more appropriate for Easter because they always bloom. They never die.”

Well, that’s one way to think about it. Except that how can a thing, even a lily, made of plastic, be said to “never die” when it’s never been alive.

I mention this because for most people, maybe even for most Christians, Easter is a very antiseptic holiday. It’s very clean – Jesus’ Easter garments are always pictured as white. The preferred Easter musical instruments are shining brass trumpets. There are no discordant notes on Easter. And I get that. I get all that.

Except that this divorces Easter entirely from Good Friday. Good Friday, meaning the day Jesus died.

I mean, without Good Friday, Easter never happened. It never happened. Without Good Friday, you can’t have Easter because you can't have resurrection if nobody’s dead.

Now the tradition insists Jesus was dead. He wasn't sleeping. He was dead. All the texts say that. Yes, and in this morning’s text from John 20, the resurrected Jesus came to his friends and said, “See the scars? See the nail prints?”

Let me tell you why I’m going over this. It’s *not* because I think I can use the Bible to prove anything about the resurrection. You can’t do that. The Easter stories are just the 2000 year old tradition speaking it’s mind.

The worst Easter sermons go to great lengths to try to prove the resurrection. Preachers do logical backflips with it and it just winds up being awkward and embarrassing.

Nor am I bringing this all up to make a plea for us to have faith. Faith has its place, of course. It truly does. No, I’m bringing up the Biblical witness to the scars and nail prints and physical death of Jesus because we, all of us, naturally tend to want to ignore that part of the story. We all want to ignore that basic reality of our own mortal lives.

It's only natural. I mean, the older we get, the more space in our psyche is taken up with that anxiety.

Well, it seems to me that this Sunday, Easter Sunday, is as good a time as any to address that reality. And the only way to address it effectively is to keep the bookends of Easter and Good Friday together as all the New Testament Biblical writers intended.

Now, the way I propose to do that this Easter Sunday is to quote at length from an address a man named Alan Watts gave some sixty years ago. Alan Watts was so interesting He was an Episcopal priest and also a Zen Buddhist. He lived on a houseboat in Sausalito, California just 8 miles from where I was living in the early 1960s.

He possessed one of the most nimble minds I’ve ever witnessed. I say witnessed because he came to my college back when I was 20 and I was in awe.

Here is a bit of what he had to say about human beings and the problem of death. He spoke of death in a way that captured my attention like nothing I’d heard before. He began by saying that the experience of dying was like “going over a waterfall.” That’s just how he phrased it.

Here’s what he said …

*The whole problem is that there really is no other [recourse] than to go over that waterfall when it comes. Just as you go over any other waterfall, just as you go on from day-to-day, just as you go to sleep at night.*

See, you don’t get all nervous about going to sleep at night, do you? No, of course not, because you are sleepy and you’re pretty sure that the other end of sleep is a gentle waking up. Alan Watts continued …

*Now, I’m not preaching. I’m not saying you OUGHT to be willing to die, and that you should muscle up your courage and somehow put on a good front when the terrible thing comes. That’s not the idea at all. The point is that you can only die well if you understand that [living and dying are just two parts of the same thing]. If you do, you will understand that [death is merely] you’re disappearance as the form in which you think you are* ***You****.*

*[Death is merely] you’re disappearance as the form in which you think you are You.* Not the real YOU.

*Your disappearance as this particular organism is simply seasonal. [Look,] you are just as much the dark space beyond death as you are the light interval called life.*

*These are just two sides of you, because YOU are the total [of those two manifestations].* Then Alan Watts likened our lives to waves.

*You see, we can’t have half a wave. Nobody ever saw waves that just had crests, and no troughs. [In the same way] you can’t have half a human being, who is born but doesn’t die . . . That would be only half a thing. Life is [like a radio wave]; it simply goes on and on, but its cycles are short cycles and long cycles. [There are solid vibrations that come along periodically with large spaces in between].*

He said we are all like those waves, part solid and a large part, open space. He went on with this even further …

*Space, you see, is not just nothing.* (Now, this is the crucial part of his argument).

*Space, you see, is not just nothing. If I could magnify my hand to an enormous degree so you could see all the molecules in it, I don’t know how far apart they would be, but [physicists tell us] they would be something like tennis balls in a very, very large space, and you’d look when I move my hand like this, and say, ‘For god’s sake, look at all those tennis balls, they’re all moving together as one. Crazy!*

*And there are no strings tying them together. Isn’t that queer?’ No, but there’s space going with them, and space is a function of [and] an inseparable aspect of whatever solids are in that space.*

Then he offered a terrific analogy …

*It’s exactly like … when those marvelous sandpipers come around here, the little ones. While they’re in the air flying, they have one mind, ONE MIND. And they move all together. When they alight on the mud, they become individuals and they go pecking around for worms or whatever. Yes, but one click of your fingers and all those birds go up into the air as one.*

*And look, they don’t seem to have a leader, because they don’t follow any one bird when they turn; they all turn together and go off in a different direction. It’s amazing. And they are exactly like the molecules in my hand.*

Alan Watts was telling us that our bodies, and the cycles of our lives, are way more complex and magical than any of us can imagine. They are not a bit accidental.

You know, all the best spiritual teachers say the same thing and they say it pretty much the same way; Alan Watts, the Dalai Lama, Ram Dass, Fr. Richard Rohr; all the mystics of every enduring religious tradition. They all tell us that death is perfectly safe. That it’s like taking off a tight shoe. That’s all it is. Like taking off a too tight shoe. It can also be like a ride over a waterfall.

And look, these teachers don’t tell us that we shouldn’t resist change. They don’t scold us when we find change somewhat frightening. No. They simply assure us that nothing is ever lost.

They say. Look at the Buddha. Look at Jesus. At the core of their teaching they tell us we are already delivered from that which frightens us. They model that in their persons. You can see that clearly in the Easter Jesus.

Alan Watts sums the whole thing up this way …

First: “You can’t hang on to yourself. That’s a given. And second: You don’t have to do spiritual heavy lifting to learn how ***not*** to hang on to yourself, either.

No, when worry over death comes, just remind yourself that death is no more than taking off a tight shoe.

Making a simple meditation of telling yourself that can train you in peace. It can change your living. And it can change your dying.

Now, I want to conclude with a story about someone who received that very gift of liberation and it changed her and it changed her relationships, too. It’s told by a woman named, Ellen Powell.

“We had a rocky time together [my 89 year old mother and I]. She had never been easy to get along with . . . Maybe I wasn’t easy, either. Finally when I was 42 I gave up hoping she would turn into the kind of mother I’d always wanted. When I got word that she was dying I started to spend a lot of time visiting her. The first month after she got her prognosis she was very depressed and distant. She either slept or stared at the wall, her face a mask of misery.

One day during that month I was sitting in the chair next to her bed. The sun had set and her room was almost completely dark. I shifted my chair closer and rested my elbows on the edge of her bed. She reached out her hand to touch my face and stroked it very gently. It was a wonderful thing.

[Some days later] I was playing a game of rummy with my mother and she was cheating like crazy, when she announced that she had to go to the bathroom. [On the way] she let out a long breath and collapsed. I caught her and lowered her to the floor . . . she eventually let out a long final breath.

Her pulse stopped. She was completely still. I held her there for a moment, frozen. . . I thought about what an honor that she had chosen me to die with. I held her in my arms for a few minutes wondering how long it would take before someone [would come in]. All of a sudden her body jerked. I almost jumped out of my skin . . . She was alive.

There we were on the floor, two living people, one holding the other. Two attendants finally found us. We got her up and back into bed. Ten minutes later my mother was beating me in a game of rummy, cheating like mad.

Later that day I was sitting on the edge of my mother’s bed. I can only imagine how stunned and exhausted I must have looked, because she said to me, “Now dear, when I’m really dying – not one of these dress rehearsals I seem to be having – but when I’m really going, I want you to know that I’ll be kissing you all over!” Then she fluttered her hands around my head. With love pouring from her eyes , she said, “Kiss, kiss, kiss, kiss!’

Something was happening to her. She was being remade.

I’d never seen her so full of joy. The next day the phone rang . . it was Sister Pat, a nun who worked with the hospice organization that was caring for my mother.

I told Sister Pat that my mother had made a complete turnaround in the past 24 hours. I told her how she had been completely and inconsolably miserable, and that now, after what had happened, she seemed happy and content. It was like night and day, I said.

There was a long pause. Then Sister Pat said, ‘Your mother is a very fortunate woman.’

‘Huh?’ I said, thinking, ‘She’s dying; that’s fortunate?’

Sister Pat continued. In her twenty-odd years of working with dying people, she said, she had observed that the ones who had [experienced] ‘little deaths’ were very peaceful for the rest of their lives. She said it was as if they got to take a little look-see and realized there was nothing to be afraid of on the other side.

My mother and I had six more months after that. She had five more dress rehearsals and was proud of them all.

We never talked about much – just the weather, bits of news – but it didn’t matter anymore. We lived in a little blue egg of light, and the love poured back and forth between us inside the egg. I finally got the mother I’d been waiting for.”

Amen