

UU Waterville Bicentennial - Opening Words

06/28/2026 and 1833

Welcome to our new Waterville Universalist Church building which held its first Universalist service in January of this year 1833. My name is Reverend Sylvanus Cobb. I've known some of you since 1820 when I began travelling from my home in Norway, Maine to preach the word of a loving and forgiving God. I returned to Waterville a number of times and found the town and you people so friendly that I moved here, built a home, and organized a permanent Universalist congregation which met in my home starting with its first service on May 28, 1826.

The message of love, forgiveness, and fairness appealed to enough of you over the next few years that the congregation grew too large for my home and so we raised the \$4,200 to build a church home of our own. Thank you to all who helped with the project: raising money, buying lumber, doing the carpentry and painting, buying the woodstove and keeping it replenished to keep us warm during services this last winter. So, thank you to all here who have helped as well as all who are visiting today to help us both celebrate our beloved church building and to commemorate our first service together in 1826. We have waited to celebrate until winter was over and mud season nearly so, so that we could invite two special ministers to come up to Waterville and lead our service.

The first is retired Universalist minister Rev. Maria Cook, the first woman ever called to be a preacher by a Universalist congregation and among the first women so recognized by any congregation of any denomination here in the United States. Rev. Cook, as a woman in the pulpit, adds another dimension to Jefferson's immortal words, "All people are created equal." Rev. Cook's claim of her right to speak from the pulpit has not always been met with equanimity by the administrative associations of our churches. Once she was briefly imprisoned when a local court denied her right to preach. As might have been anticipated, she then preached to the prisoners. Rev Cook's health has not been good for the last few years and so we are deeply and doubly indebted to her for making the journey here to share her wisdom. Clearly, God's love does not discriminate by age or sex.

Our second visitor and first speaker will be Unitarian minister, Ralph Waldo Emerson. Rev. Emerson is well known in pulpits around New England. Though still a young man he has, through the untimely loss of those dear to him, experienced a lifetime of sorrows in those short years. Just returned from Europe where he travelled to regain his equilibrium, Rev. Emerson brings back expansive ideas about the nature of God, love, and justice that seem sure to shake the foundations of the Christian church—including in all probability our own. We are intrigued and we are not afraid to hear his challenging message.

This morning's celebration has been called Heart and Mind as it is comprised of Rev Cook's deep understanding of the limitless compassion of the heavenly power and the equally powerful spiritual insights of Rev Emerson as they join hands and bring together a union that we here this morning hope will strengthen all of us far into the future: the warmth of love with courageous clarity of mind.

We might well have added a third word to our title and that word is freedom. Our Universalism has called to question those passages in the Bible that describe an angry and punishing God from that honest rebellion to see that our Bible is not a dictate of God but an effort of men to describe their spiritual feelings, leading some of Universalist leaders to question other parts of the Bible, such as the divinity of Jesus. We have been freed from the bondage of tradition and continue to stretch the wings of our morality and of our imaginations. This has brought our Universalism closer to the freedom of thought claimed by our Unitarian friends as they challenge old ideas with new insights and speak words never before heard from New England pulpits.

To symbolize the sentiments we have introduced into our service this morning a chalice, source of warmth and of light and a beacon for freedom.

Let us now ask Mrs. Allane Ball to light the chalice.