

(the reading shared before this sermon was “Heavy,” found in Mary Oliver's anthology of poems, *Thirst*.)

Sermon

The Promise of Resurrection in Our Lives

Rev. Sara Huisjen

For days, maybe even weeks, I've been wondering
what I'll say this Easter Sunday—where I'll find *my* foothold
in this ancient Christian story, knowing too, that there are
older, pagan roots that might also be mined for meaning this day.
Maybe you've been wondering what you'll hear in choosing to come to church today?
My research about Easter Services in our Unitarian Universalist churches,
tells me I am not alone in wondering where to go, or what to do with this holiday.

Daniel Budd, is a UU minister in a church in Cleveland, Ohio,
and he tells the story in one of his own Easter sermons of being
encouraged one year by his Worship Committee to place an ad
in the local paper, just before Easter; to do this
as part of an effort to draw more people to the service.
It was suggested to him that the ad say something like,
“Join us. We're not at all sure what happened.”

And there's a story that's told, maybe you're heard it,
but I'm going to share it here anyway:

In a 4th grade classroom, in a nearby elementary school,
there was a teacher, new in her post, who asked
her eager, young students to tell her about the meaning of Easter.
After she asked this question, the hand of a little
Episcopalian boy shot up in the air. “I know,”
he said confidently, “Easter is when we put up a pine tree
& decorate it with lights, and wrap presents
for each other, and sing lullabies to the baby Jesus.”

“No,” said the teacher. “You've got Easter
confused with Christmas...Does anyone else know?”

A little Roman Catholic girl's hand shot up.
“Easter is when you fill the house with the smell of
cooking turkey, and you watch football, and give
thanks for all the relatives who've come for dinner.”

“No,” Mrs. Rogers said,
“Someone must understand the meaning of Easter.”

A little Jewish boy in the class thought *he* knew.
“Easter is when we decorate our house in American flags,
and go to a parade, and shoot off fireworks all night.”

“No, no, no,” cried the teach, “Doesn't anyone know?”

Finally, you guessed it, the Unitarian Universalist kid in the class raises her hand.

“Easter is when we remember that after a three year ministry among the Judean people, Jesus rode triumphantly into Jerusalem on a donkey, he was put on trial by the Roman authorities for being a trouble-maker, and was crucified on a hill with two thieves, and finally buried in a cave.”

“Yes, that's right Susie,” interrupted her teacher, relieved, and then Susie continued, “he comes out of the cave, and if he sees his shadow, there'll be six more weeks of winter.”

Okay, that's enough with the goofy Easter stories... there are lots of them out there, each of them speaking in some way to an underlying discomfort many of us have with this holiday.

But again, I want to come back to the question I opened with: Where will I, and by extension, where might you, find an entrance into this expressly Christian holy day; a holiday I *used* to observe with ease, even joy as a child in the United Methodist Church, and a kid who loved the neighborhood Easter Egg Hunt.

Easter is a holiday observed in churches right around the corner, and all over the world, that celebrate a theological claim of the resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth, as Jesus Christ—the “anointed one,” the sole son of God who was crucified, died for our sins and was resurrected, the stone turned away at his tomb, his body risen, that we might know and embrace his life and death and resurrection as the only, sure promise of *our way* into God's kingdom and life eternal.

In the telling and re-telling of this intricate story of betrayal and suffering, of death and the triumph of life over death, and in spite of death, there are some who are buoyed... their faith strengthened, their confidence restored yet again by their belief that Jesus' suffering was not in vane... that it served and still serves a purpose, most importantly in the lives of those who believe; those who are sure, with unwavering certainty, that they *will* be saved. Like it or not, I simply am not one of those people. This is not a theology I embrace, nor a promise of things to come that I hang onto.

For years now, I've struggled with the more conservative, more orthodox,

Christian understanding of the Easter story;
a kind of telling that focuses on the crucifixion
and the bodily resurrection of Jesus as the primary
& pinnacle point of his life, and his ministry.

I'm uncomfortable, too, with the idea of glorifying
“redemptive suffering,” a theological claim made by some
suggesting that suffering brings one closer to God.
Understood in light of the Easter story,
it might be suggested that Jesus' agony on the cross
is meant to signify to humanity
that one ought to suffer for one's beliefs,
because it is suffering that leads one closer to the Holy.

Few would deny that violence & suffering are real in our lives,
but to suggest that they are inherently necessary for redemption,
for our saving, is wrong, and I'm uncomfortable
with this possible way of thinking about the Easter story...

But my work this morning, again, is not simply to rail against,
or dismiss out of hand a Christian, orthodox
understanding about Easter—
instead it's to find a foothold in the story,
and that's where the idea, and really the promise
of resurrection in our lives comes into the picture for me.

It had taken three or four months,
though we'd planned to reconnect sooner.
Busyness and mistakes in writing down dates & times
meant our *last* conversation—face-to-face over coffee—
had happened last fall. This time though when we met,
I knew things were different; there was a heaviness
in her demeanor, and in her eyes, and soon enough,
her words revealed some of the struggle she was living with.
There are so few people to whom she could or would say it,
but really, it was clear that she just wanted it to be over;
to be done; that she longed to be with her beloved again,
and that she couldn't figure out, why in the world, she was still here.
Of course, she knew, too, that she wouldn't do anything more
to upset her children, or herself, and that she'd hate
to leave all the loose ends still unattended to out there, but really,
she was ready, and wanting to go, and she needed to be able
to say it out loud and to wish that it
would happen somehow, sooner than later.

I've been living with this conversation,
holding it in my attention each day,
particularly on mornings when I've gotten up
early enough to see the sun rise over the long pond

at the edge of the field across the street from our home.

I've been thinking about it, when I've been out for a walk,
hearing the birds & then the peepers in the fields,
and seeing how green grass is beginning to return,
and how whole bunches of daffodils
are now in full bloom on the front lawn.
In truth, there have been times I've been thinking about it,
that I've felt a lump in my throat again—
and tears have begun to form in my own eyes,
what I can only imagine to be just a taste of the profound sadness
that I felt & read in her expression that day.

Of course, there's a check list of things that my training
has taught me to do in these kinds of situations—
To ask if someone has a plan? To assess whether or not
they are potentially a danger to themselves, or to another?
To ask if they're depressed, and if they are,
if they've talked to their doctor about it?
To inquire if there's anything at all in the past
that's helped when things feels so bleak? so dark & hopeless?

In the days now that have passed *since* that conversation,
something about what happened that day
has also become more & more clear to me –
In that encounter, I was *not* being asked to fix some thing,
or to make things better, or even to figure out
how to change what was going on at all.
What I was asked to do, but really more so than being asked,
what I invited to do, was to be present to the real depth
of another person's struggling.
To sit across the table, with a cup of coffee in my hand,
and to reach out quietly with my attention,
to witness to that pain and not turn away from it;
to not judge what someone was finally finding courage enough
to say out loud & share with another, but rather to just to hold it;
to be aware of it; to feel it with compassion.

In thinking about this person's suffering, I'm reminded of the
words of the poet that we heard earlier, in the reading;
her recollection of the day in her life—
maybe one day of many—when she thought she could *not*
go any closer to grief without dying, but she did.
She stayed present to the feeling,
to the truth of her own heartbreak.
Surely, she found some solace at that time
in being in the natural world, and in friendship,
and in prayer, a new kind of relationship with God, with the Holy,
with a love greater than herself alone.

Solace also came in giving expression to that great sadness;
in sharing the truth of her experience with others.
And in time, we're told, something *shifted* inside her;
the heaviness of it lifted some,
not all at once or for good, but in
new moments that slowly emerged each day;
moments that had been long absent before then;
times when laughter was possible again,
and admiring the beauty of the world was more possible, too.

On this day, of all days, I can't help but to think
about Jesus in the Garden at Gethsemane.
There alone, aware of the hardship that was coming;
the suffering he'd be made to endure; the human and
very real longing even he felt—let this pass over me—
wishing, though knowing, too,
that it couldn't be otherwise; that living his life
meant facing all that would come,
the betrayal, the suffering and humiliation;
the hope and faith that something larger
than his mere physical presence would live on,
even in spite of death.

The story of the resurrection of Jesus is in some way,
in *my* mind, a telling of the lasting promise of his love,
of his ministry of caring and courageous witness,
being alive still today; embodied in the lives of people
who often, at great risk, stand with and speak up
beside others in need, others vulnerable
to harm or oppression, to abuse and neglect.

Resurrection, from the latin *re surge*, meaning to rise up,
is in this *way*, a trustworthy kind of promise & possibility in our lives;
an intrinsic quality of our being, and our capacity
to find ways to live through difficult,
sometimes devastating experiences.

The resurrection of love and hope,
from the devastation of death & violence,
has to do, too, at least in some part,
with the capacity such experiences have, to reach us;
to startle us from our complacency,
and to call us to act to address,
and hopefully change injustices,
such actions being the hallmarks of the
ministry that Jesus lived during his life here among us.

This Easter Sunday, Trayvon Martin's death comes to mind—
the 17-year-old, African-American boy shot & killed

last month in Florida while he was walking home from a convenience store, iced-tea and Skittles in his hands and pockets, and nothing else, but shot, nevertheless, because he looked suspicious; because he was feared and presumed to be dangerous.

The promise of resurrection—of love incarnate, alive even beyond physical death— is evidenced in the movement and awareness now set in motion to look at and wrestle with the realities of how racial injustice exists in this country still today; at how black youth, particularly boys & young men are still subjected to “looks;” to harassment and dangers that others do not face, simply because of the color of their skin.

Trayvon's death—like the senseless killing of all people— is a great tragedy, something never to be wished for, or hoped for, or redemptive, and life-saving in itself, and yet out of the ashes of that horrific & devastating experience, new life and hope is being made real in the renewed determination of others to try and create a different reality; a world that is less intolerant and prejudiced, less willing to let such crimes happen, without consequence.

This past week on April 4th, Maya Angelou celebrated her 74th birthday. As I've thought about resurrection, about what it means, and how it lives and breathes in *our* lives and experience, several lines from one of her poems have been running through my mind. She calls the poem, “Still I Rise,” and these are just two of the verses:

You may write me down in history,
with your bitter, twisted lies,
You may trod me in the very dirt,
But still, like dust, I rise...

You may shoot me with your words,
You may cut me with your eyes,
You may kill me with your hatefulness,
But still, like air, I rise...

All of the verses of this poem are gorgeous, and sensual, radiant, and a proud proclamation of the dignity & beauty of a person whose spirit will not be belittled, or devastated, or rendered silent by oppression, by hatred or bigotry, or by the fear & loathing of others.

Resurrection—the emergence of hope & love & vitality from death, from pain, from our experiences of suffering, and hopelessness— is a capacity we can & must nurture in ourselves & each other.

The Easter Story invites us to remember these truths of our lives;
to believe that we can roll back the rock from
parts of ourselves that we have shut away;
parts that have been denied or hidden, damaged
by some great hurt or betrayal, by the aftermath
of a loss or tragedy that lives with us still.

Rebirth & resurrection, and the promise of spring,
are about the return of hope or expectation,
a fullness that fills us any time of year,
but this time of year, especially.

None of this is to say that such things come easily,
or that we're guaranteed they'll always be there, or happen at all.

It's hard, complicated work to believe in resurrection,
and to participate in it, and still, it is possible
in the lives of people like you and me,
and in the world outside this community.

Today, Easter Sunday, we remember to that
there is resurrection, a kind of rising up of love & life again,
that is, or becomes possible over time,
birthed again and again in our lives
in moments of believing that all is not lost;
that life, even in spite of its hardships & challenges
is good, and trustworthy, and full of possibilities
for healing and meaning.

Knowing this does sometimes happen,
today we embrace the idea & the hope
& the truth of our lives that
ours is the choice this day and always,
to choose resurrection & rebirth;
to try and make room in the busyness of our lives
for both the spontaneous shoots of new life,
and for the hard-won transformations that come
from finding and feeling our way through the buried
and painful pieces of ourselves and our relationships.

In this season, and always,
may the promise of life more vibrant,
more alive and whole,
take root & live in each of us.

Blessed be, and amen.