

Wait with Me

A Sermon Delivered at the Unitarian Universalist Church of Ellsworth on
April 1, 2018 by Rev. Sara Hayman

EASTER READINGS & REFLECTIONS

Molly Housh Gordon is a Unitarian Universalist minister who serves our UU Church of Columbus, Missouri. This past week, while preparing for this service, I came across a reading she's written in three parts—three poems, actually, that invite us to imagine what it was like at three particular moments in Jesus' ministry among us, near the end of his life. She calls these poems "At the Gate," "At the Cross," and "At the Tomb."

I've asked three different people to read them, one at a time. In lieu of a sermon at the end, these readings will be interspersed with brief reflections I humbly offer and other elements of worship service... joys and sorrows, a pastoral prayer and silence and our meditative hymn.

May some bit of wisdom (hope and love) find us in our listening and taking it in.

First Reading At the Gate

He came in on a donkey,
but we greeted him as a King.

The crowd was huge that day.
As though all of Jerusalem's poor, tired, downtrodden
had flooded into the streets.

Had risen up from the streets, where we lay.
Had risen up waving palms.
Had put down our only coat to shield him from the mud.

We had heard about him, you see.
His miracles of healing. His acts of love.

We heard how he had touched the lepers, eaten with the poor.
Turned over the tables in the temple.

We knew he had come to preach peace and justice.
We thought he had come to save us.

Can you imagine a hope like that?
You are desperate, you are starving, you are praying for relief.
And here he comes.

Here he comes, and he is everything.
He is loving and kind.

He is righteous and angry.
He is humble and powerful.

And he cares.
About us...
The outcast, the prisoner, the lowest of the low.

Can you imagine a hope like that?

SARA:

Can you do it? Can you imagine a hope like that?

Have you, personally, ever experienced the power of someone seeing you when you feel invisible, when you feel you've been cast aside? Someone valuing you; someone walking, sitting, staying beside you when all is seemingly lost, when no way forward will reveal itself?

I have been thinking about Easter, the sacred story re-told at this time of year and the arc of Holy Week in the Christian tradition that precedes it, Lent before that. Palm Sunday, observed last week in many churches. Jesus of Nazareth riding a donkey into Jerusalem, herald a king, the prince of peace by his followers.

He knew what he was doing, he knew the risks he was taking, knew, even at that time that he'd likely be executed by the authorities; Jesus of Nazareth, a good, holy man, a great teacher and prophet who challenged the status quo, he knew his devotion to God and his love for the People—for all people and beings would cost him his life, and still, he chose to ride into Jerusalem; to be resolute in his commitment to love and justice for the people—all of them and to live the Gospel truth—the Good News—that no one is cast outside the circle of God's love—that all are worthy and deserving of love;

that building beloved community here and now—at that time and today—is our work, our call, our faithful charge.

It's not hard for me to imagine the multitudes of people he loved and companioned; the ones he stood up for in his ministry two centuries ago; people who experienced first hand the hope and promise of his radical ethic of love, his radical religious practice of inclusion, of offering care and dignity to all those cast out or deemed disposable by the powers that be and society at large.

In my mind's eye, I can picture Jesus processing into Jerusalem riding on his lowly donkey. People, all kinds of people, running out to meet him, carrying palms, shouting,

“Hosanna!” which I've learned means, “I beg you to save!”

“Hosanna!” they'd shout on that festival day, in that moment before the gruesome days to come...

and Jesus of Nazareth would give the hopeless reason to hope.

Jesus, in his life, through his ministry and teachings here on earth gave HOPE to the hopeless; Hope to those on the margins, the lepers, the lame, the strangers. Hope to the prostitutes, the homeless, the sick.

Hope to the children and the teenagers, the hypocrites and adulterers, the drunk and sober, the scoundrels and thieves, the blind and deaf.

With Jesus at their side, proclaiming their worth, their dignity, their place at the table, the hopeless began to have hope.

“Hosanna! I beg you to save!” they’d cried out,
and they believed he could and he would do that...

Reading “At the Cross”

No. This cannot be.
The man who came in like a king, our hero.
Trudging forward like a common thief.

Spat upon. Insulted. Betrayed.
He carried our hopes, our dreams, our need.
And now he carries a cross.

Bruised, bloodied, weak.
How could he be beaten?
How could he fail us?

How could we fail him?
Standing by, helpless.
or urging them on.

No, it cannot be.
We are not to blame!
We are too powerless. Too small.

We watched them mock our hope.
With a crown of thorns.
And then they brought out the nails.

That is when I turned away.
I couldn’t watch. But I could hear.
“Father forgive them,” he said as he died.

That was what broke me.
“Father forgive them” with his last breath.
Father, forgive us!

And now he is gone.
The hands that healed us. The ears that heard us.
The heart that beat for us.

He is gone.
He gave us hope. He gave us purpose.
He loved us. And He is gone.

SARA:

Twenty-seven years ago, I still remember opening the front door to our house that night on Grove Street back in Lewiston, ME where I grew up. I'd been away over April vacation break—saved my money to be able to go on the 10th grade class trip to London and Paris.

I was 16 years old at the time. My mom and dad had picked me up at 10pm that night at the turnpike exit just like we planned, and as we drove home, I told them all about my adventure...some of the places I been, the gifts I'd brought home.

Only when I opened the front door to the house and I noticed the kitchen and living room were set up differently—more chairs and tables along the walls, more room to move about— only then did I know something had happened,

that someone had died.

“Is it nana?” I asked, seeing the worry and sadness on my mom’s face as I looked at her.

“Is it Marybeth or Dana?” my sister or brother?

“What is it? Who is it? What happened?”

And that’s when my mom took my hands and knelt down in front of me, her eyes meeting mine, and she told me the news:

my beloved Uncle Jimmy, James Harold Swan, her only brother, had been shot and killed while I was away—the ex-husband of his girlfriend had done it. Jimmy’s Memorial Service was the next day...I fell asleep that night listening to my mother cry quietly while she ironed in the next room .

They are different things, I know...losing a loved one in your family to a tragic, violent death and imagining what it must have been like for those who loved Jesus and watched him suffer and die a brutal, demeaning death, knowing, too, their silence, their turning away had also made them complicit somehow.

They must have wondered ‘is this really happening?’

They must have been dumbfounded. Devastated. Numb—

And how could it have been or be otherwise?

We each know that if you live long enough,

if you love other people, you will know your own intimate experiences of devastating loss.

Live long enough, and the unimaginable will likely happen.

Love other people, as we're each called to love other people, and your heart will break...at some point, or at many points in your life, this will happen and you will wonder how and if you'll ever go on...

It's my hope and my want that you will go on, though understandably not right away; though not without first feeling the hard stuff, coming through it...

It's my hope and my want, for each one of you, and for all people, that you will go on; that the strength of loving community, this very community of faithful people perhaps, would and will be there for you in your hour of need, helping you to believe that thing the great humanitarian Albert Schweitzer calls us to believe:

that we can (and we must) be the light of love and hope for each other... that we are the ones who must rise for Him, for love and for life.

Just a week earlier in Jerusalem, in Jesus' life, people had celebrated their beloved teacher, their Prince of Peace, one who lived among them and walked beside them, affirming their dignity and worth though others scorned and dismissed them;

Jesus, who challenged the powers that be, on this different day, this man, both beloved and despised, would suffer and die and they would watch, some disbelieving, some cheering it all on...the hope they'd felt, gone.

One miraculous bit of the story that I hang onto, that I admire and mean to bring more and more to life in my own living is this: hearing and believing that Jesus did not abandon or curse them. He did not give into the pain and suffering and scream out in agony and anger.

No, we're told he didn't do any of that. Instead, he whispered, "Father, forgive them. For they know not what they do."

Nothing in my theology, in our various UU theologies, condones or sanctifies violence as redemptive, as required somehow, that we might know and live into life more fully. To suggest such a thing is offensive to me. And still, there is the call to forgiveness, to not giving into hate and vengeance and anger and resentment, however easy, however understand that might be...

I have not yet forgiven the man who killed my uncle, though this Lenten season, and in this thinking about Jesus and the life he lived and the stories we tell about this, all of this calls me to that sacred, grief transforming, heart-liberating work...

Third Reading "At the Tomb"

Weeping may last for a night.

Weeping may last for a thousand nights.

But joy comes in the morning.

That morning we went to our beloved teacher's tomb.

We went to anoint his body.

We carried oil and cloths.

We came to the tomb in sorrow,

heads bowed low.

But hope does not die so easily.

It flickers inside, buried somewhere deep.

Hope grows, blossoms like a rose
even through stone,

even in hearts frozen by grief.

When we arrived at the place where he lay

We dropped all that we carried, in wonder, in fear,

to see the tomb laid open, and our beloved gone.

Do not weep, said the man.

This morning we rejoice.

Love lives. Hope lives.

Jesus is not here, he said.

Come and see.

He is risen.

Our beloved is risen.

Our hope is risen.

Can it be?

Can it be?

On this Easter Sunday Morning, where do you see love and hope emerging, like a phoenix out of the flames of devastation or despair?

I see it (and feel it) in the good news you share about your child making her way again.

I see it (and feel it) in the way you are hanging on to being your best self, to knowing your priorities, to breathing your way into what's coming, hard and uncertain as it is...

I see it (and feel it) in the wave of people who flooded the streets of Paris earlier this week to condemn the death of Mierelle Knoll, an 85-year old French woman, who survived the Holocaust but was killed in her apartment, the likely victim of a hate crime. I see it in the love and hope birthed in the presence of people who will not remain silent, who will bear witness and participate in building a more just and inclusive society.

I see love and hope rising in the voices of young ones—students—who are leading us, youth who are calling us to do our part to help keep them (and all others) be safe and less risk from the harm and devastation of gun violence, their courage in naming and challenging our moneyed interest over the safety and well-being of people a call to conscience, to engagement, to doing better than we are.

I see love and hope in the people protesting in Sacramento; non-violently levying the pressure they can to insist that the death of Stephon Clark be investigated...an African American man, just 22 years old, shot multiple times in the back though he was unarmed and in his grandmother's back yard.

I see hope and love and strength and endurance come to life in the naming of such tragedies and the working, and walking and weeping we must do together to try and ensure it does not happen again...

not one more.

Earlier in our service, Eileen reminded us that it takes time to emerge, to be born, or born again after loss, after the death of our beloveds.

It takes time, and our intentional effort, it takes our Believing that it's possible to slowly awaken again,

To feel and trust once more the vitality of life at work in us

However buried or far away it may feel.

“Do not weep, said the man.

For this morning we rejoice.

[This morning,] Love lives. Hope lives...

Our beloved is risen.

Our hope is risen.

Can it be?"

And let us answer, YES, it can be...

and we will believe it is so...

Amen and Blessed be.