

The Meanings of Easter

First Parish in Needham, Unitarian Universalist

Sunday, April 4, 2010

The Rev. John A. Buehrens, Minister

Call to Worship

Clarke Dewey Wells

God of Easter & now-arriving Spring, announce the large covenant to deceitful lands!
Drive the sweet liquor through our parched veins. Lure us to fresh schemes of life.
Rouse us from tiredness, self-pity. Whet us for use. Fire us with good passion.
Restore in us the love of living. Bind us to hope and fear again.

*Hymn 266

Now the Green Blade Riseth

Crum/ Dupre

Now the green blade riseth from the buried grain,
Wheat that in the dark earth many days has lain,
Love lives again, that with the dead has been:
Love is come again like wheat that springeth green.

In the grave they laid him, Love by hatred slain,
Thinking that never he would wake again,
Laid in the earth, like grain that sleeps unseen:
Love is come again like wheat that springeth green.

When our hearts are wintry, grieving or in pain,
Love's touch can call us back to life again,
Fields of our hearts that dead and bare have been:
Love is come again like wheat that springeth green.

Responsive Reading 628

Rolling Away the Stone

The Rev. Sarah York

In the tomb of the soul, we carry secret yearnings, pains, frustrations,
loneliness, fears, regrets, worries.

*In the tomb of the soul, we take refuge from the world
and its heaviness.*

In the tomb of the soul, we wrap ourselves in the security of darkness.

Sometimes this is a comfort. Sometimes it is an escape.

Sometimes it prepares us for experience. Sometimes it insulates us
from life.

*Sometimes this tomb-life gives us time to feel the pain of the
world and reach out to heal others. Sometimes it numbs us
and locks us up with our own concerns.*

In this season where light and dark balance the day, we seek balance
for ourselves.

*Grateful for the darkness that has nourished us, we push away
the stone and invite the light to awaken us to the possibilities
within us and among us – possibilities for new life in ourselves
and in our world.*

Choral Response

Alleluia

First Reading

Dry Bones

Ezekiel 37:1-14 NRSV

A prophecy of the priest Ezekiel, who found himself in exile with the people, in exile in Babylon, in the land we now call Iraq:

The hand of the LORD came upon me and he brought me out by the spirit of the Lord and set me down in the middle of a valley; it was full of bones . . . and they were very dry. He said to me: “Mortal, can these bones live?” I answered, “O Lord God, you know.” Then he said to me, “Prophesy to them and say to them, “O dry bones, hear the word of the LORD. Thus says the Lord GOD to these bones: . . . I will lay sinews upon you, and cover you with skin, and put breath in you, and you shall live; and you shall know that I am the LORD.”

So I prophesied . . . and . . . there was a noise, a rattling, and the bones came together. . . sinews on them, and flesh had come upon them, and skin covered them; but there was no breath in them. Then he said to me, “Prophesy to the breath, prophesy, mortal, say to the breath: Thus says the Lord GOD: Come from the four winds, O breath; breathe upon these slain, that they may live.” And I prophesied as he commanded me, the breath came into them, and they lived, and stood on their feet, a vast multitude.

Then he said to me, “Mortal, these bones are the whole house of Israel. They say, ‘Our bones are dried up; and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely.’ Therefore . . . say to them, Thus says the Lord GOD: I am going to open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people; and I will bring you back to the land of Israel. And you shall know that I am the LORD, when I open your graves, and bring you back . . . O my people. I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live. . . I, the LORD, have spoken and will act, says the LORD.

Anthem

On the Willows

On the willows, there/ We hung up our lyres;
For our captors there/ Required/ Of us songs,/ And our tormentors mirth.

On the willows, there/ We hung up our lyres;
For our captors there/ Required/ Of us songs,/ And our tormentors mirth.

Saying, “Sing us one/ of the songs of Zion.”
“Sing us one/ of the songs of Zion.

But how can we sing? Sing the Lord’s songs/ In a foreign land.
On the willows, there/ We hung up our lyres . . .

Second Reading

Matthew 26:36-39

Then Jesus went with them to a place called Gethsemane; and said to his disciples: "Sit here while I go there to pray." He took with him Peter and the sons of Zebedee. Distress and anguish overwhelmed him. Then he said to them, "My heart is ready to break with grief. Stop here, and stay awake with me." And going a little farther, he threw himself on the ground and prayed, "My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass me by; yet not my will [not my will] but yours."

Offertory Words

adapted from the Rev. Dr. Dana McLean Greeley

Without the grinding of the wheat there is no bread;
Without the crushing of the grape there is no wine;
Without our giving forth and living for the sake of others,
There is no true community.
There let us ponder, give, and keep the feast.

Offertory

Alleluia

Third Reading

read by Molly Housh

Luke 24:1-10

But very early on the first day of the week the women came to the tomb bringing the spices they had prepared. They found that the stone had been rolled away from the tomb, but when then went inside, they did not find the body of the Lord Jesus. While they stood utterly at a loss, suddenly two men in dazzling garments were at their side: They were terrified, and stood with eyes cast down, but the men said, "Why do you search among the dead for one alive? Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, that the Mortal One must be given over to the power of sinful men and be crucified, and must rise again on the third day?"

The women were Mary of Magdala, Joanna, and Mary the mother of James, and they with the other women, told these things to the apostles. But the story appeared to [the apostles] to be nonsense, and they would not believe [the women].

*Hymn

Rising Green

Carolyn McDade

My blood doth rise in the roots of yon oak,/ Her sap doth run in my veins.
Boundless my soul like the open sky/ Where the stars forever have lain.

My hands hold the weavings of time without end,/ my sight as deep as the sea.
Beating , my heart sounds the measures of old, / that of love's eternity.

I feel the tides as they answer the moon,/ rushing on a far distant sand.
Winging my song is the wind of my breast/ And my love blows over the land.

My foot carries days of the old into new,/ our dreaming shows us the way.
Wondrous our faith settles deep in the earth,/ rising green to bring a new day.

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The woman was from China. She said she and her husband had been raised there during Mao's "Cultural Revolution." Every church, temple, monastery, and shrine was destroyed or shuttered. Now she is here. She asked about Easter. She did not understand its meaning, she told my wife. But her husband had an understanding of Buddhism. Maybe she'd go with him to the temple.

How interesting that she seemed to understand, intuitively, or out of her own inner need, that just as nature abhors a vacuum, so does the human spirit. Without a guiding framework of meaning, the soul can be like an empty tomb.

Yet for many people raised here in the West, Easter has only one meaning. A supernatural event occurred. Jesus, crucified, killed by the Romans, was buried, and on the third day, rose from the dead. Literally. Never mind that Paul says, "the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life." [II Cor. 3:6] For too many people the spirit of this day lies buried behind a stone of literalism.

Critics of orthodox religion, skeptics, seekers, scientists – folks like many of us – easily feel this. Keeping the stone in place, saying, "Easter does have just one miracle meaning– to be rejected!" So why are we here? My friend Chris Raible once answered with a parody of the classic hymn, "Christ the Lord is Risen Today" – the one Vivian begged me to leave out this year -- by writing:

Sing an Easter hymn in season/ Even if we have no reason.
At the vernal equinox/ Imitate the orthodox
In [our houses] central heated/ Sing of winter now defeated.
Bulb electric, plastic flow'r/ Testify to nature's pow'r.

All of this is with Alleluias, of course, at the end of every line. And then:

In the cross of Christ we'd glory/ But we don't believe the story.
For our sins Christ can't have died/ In them we're well satisfied.
Dressed up in the latest fashion/ Sing of praise, but not of passion.
Sing of bunnies, bees, and birds/ Sing an old hymn with new words.

But excuse me! Easter does NOT have only one meaning! It never did. If it had, the community gathered after the death of Jesus – now nearly 2000 years ago – would have left only one gospel. Instead, they needed four – not to mention others rejected by mainstream memory.

First came Mark; in his gospel, no miraculous birth story, and no post-resurrection appearances, just the empty tomb. Written in Greek, about forty years after the death in question, and around the time that the Romans destroyed the Jewish Temple in Jerusalem, Mark holds the key to the first lost meaning of Easter. His most characteristic word about the life, work, and ministry of Jesus is *dynamis*, as in *dynamic*, meaning power in motion. Here lies the lost political meaning that needs resurrection in our time.

“Truth crushed to earth will rise again!” said Dr. King. I don’t know about you, but lately I feel like an exile in my own country; my deepest hopes for our collective future almost crushed by the rancor and mendacity of politicians and pundits, by the collective power of corporate money in politics, now licensed by the Supreme Court to spend unlimited amounts to lie about anyone or any policy that they don’t like. Like Paul, I may be a citizen of this empire. But that America is the New Rome, decaying, corrupt, does not distress me so much as the fact that we are tearing down so many other peoples around the world in our dishonesty and moral decline. As what we try to preserve are the bread and circuses of our own over-consumption and celebrity distraction, into a maelstrom of casino economics where only the house – meaning those who already have – manage to get ahead.

But never mind! The Russian writer, Boris Pasternak, “an atheist who lost his faith,” as he put it, reminded friends that when the news reached Rome that people in the empire believed that an ordinary Jewish peasant, crucified as a subversive, was believed by his followers to be still alive – if only in them – there wasn’t a patrician in a palace who could feel safe any longer. Alleluia!

The first interpretations of the resurrection, in fact, were almost surely about justice and power. They came from the experience of a whole people who had suffered virtual death in exile; whose prophets, like Ezekiel, had visions of that same people, unjustly killed, rising like dry bones putting on flesh. The Mortal One, the Son of Man, would come. The innocent dead would rise.

So when the Jewish followers of Jesus saw an innocent man put to death, just as their forebears had nearly had their collective consciousness annihilated under the willows there, they too sang songs of remembrance and prophecy and vision, proclaiming that the crucified one now alone deserved the honorifics reserved to the Roman Emperor: Lord, Son of God, *et cetera*.

What they were also proclaiming, however, was a second lost meaning of this Easter Sunday. Within their political truth lay a relational truth. When we lose someone near and very dear to us, that relationship is not ended, just transformed. In John's gospel, when Jesus is up on the cross, he sees his mother and the supposed author of the gospel, and says, "Mother, here is your son." And to the disciple, "Here is your mother." [John 19:26-27]

When Luke tells the story, the memorable relational drama is between Jesus and the two thieves crucified on either side of him. One echoes proclamations of Jesus as Messiah and bitterly asks, if that's the case, why he does not save himself, and both thieves? The other says, "We [two] have been condemned justly . . . but this man has done nothing wrong." He is told by Jesus, "Truly, I tell you, today you are with me in Paradise." For paradise is where forgiveness reigns.

Forgiveness: the key to rolling away the heavy stone of bitterness, recrimination, self-isolation. When that happens, it's not because we ourselves can push it, any more than the women could. It's almost as though someone else has done it; made just a crack of an opening; one which we then have a choice to widen or walk through. Only to find that the person we thought in there, long since dead to us, isn't present except in the form of a shimmering messenger, asking us not to seek the living relationship where the one that has died was laid, but to move on, and proclaim a new possibility of life together, renewed not by effort so much as by faith and grace. Alleluia!

Remember this not only at home, but in dealing with people you have screamed at. There is, despite everything, a new relationship possible. Not one that makes room for more violence, more abuse. Too often the powerful, including the religiously so, try to cover up such realities. Such things can only make for more death of true relationship. Yet a new life of faith is possible, even after bitterness and cynicism. Not an uncritical faith, but a thoughtful form of trust.

For in the final analysis, the key to understanding Easter is not literal but rather quite existential. We make a choice. Between life and death, despair and hope, distrust and new possibilities .Plural. Notice that when the stone is rolled away in Luke's gospel, the women did not find one, but rather two figures in shimmering clothes asking, "Why seek for the living among the dead?" I think that the apostles did not want to believe them because they also did not want to have to make the ancient choice recited in the Book of Deuteronomy:

"I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Therefore choose life, so that you and your descendants may live." [30:19]

When I was a child, growing up along the shores of the Great Lakes, rivers were catching on fire. The beaches on Lake Erie weren't fit for swimming. I won't say that all now is as once it was. Nothing ever is. But I will say that life *has* emerged from seeming death, in the natural world! -- because of a shift in existential choice, relational sensibility, and a refusal to accept political inevitability. It can happen. One church I know this week marked Passion Week with endangered species at each of the Fourteen Stations of the Cross, because they are being crucified by human heedlessness. But at each one they also named a species, once endangered now reestablished in life, flourishing. Alleluia!

Why is it, I sometimes wonder, that so many of us as we age think things will only get worse? Could this be narcissism? A self-entombment forgetting to open itself to the energy and curiosity of the young? Recently my granddaughter Isabel, now 28 months old, called me up – with a little help from her mom. She wanted to tell me what she'd discovered that day: "Nectaween!

May we, each in our own way, roll away the stone of cynicism this Easter and see, within the darkened tomb of our souls, the call to say YES to ongoing life in the face of mortality's NO; and thereby to live an Easter faith, in all its dimensions – existential within, relational between, political beyond, and all in the service of a new and credible and natural resurrection. Within, and not beyond, the human history we have been given to live. So may it be. Amen, and amen.

O young and fearless Prophet of ancient Galilee:
Your life is still a summons to serve humanity;
To make our thoughts and actions less prone to please the crowd;
To stand with humble courage for truth with hearts unbowed.

O help us stand unswerving against war's bloody way,
Where hate and lust and falsehood hold back your holy sway;
Forbid false love of country, that turns us from your call;
Who lifts above the nation the neighborhood of all.

Create in us a splendor that dawns when hearts are kind;
That knows not race nor station as bound'ries of the mind;
That learns to value beauty, in heart, or mind, or soul,
And longs to see God's children as sacred, perfect, whole.

Stir up in us a protest against unneeded wealth;
For some go starved and hungry who plead for work and health.
Once more give us your challenge, above our noisy day,
And come to lead us forward along your holy way.

Benediction