

Earth, Remember Resurrection©

A sermon offered by the Rev. Kathleen C. Rolenz

Easter Sunday, April 17, 2022

All Souls Church Unitarian, Washington DC

Happy Easter All Souls! For those of you living in the DC area, this weekend was simply a glorious explosion of light and color; the daffodils are waning, but the tulips are still going strong; the forsythia is fading but the red bud is bursting, and the dogwoods are delighting us with their elegant beauty. And then – here are all of you, both online and in person – and it feels, despite our fears of an uptick of Covid – it feels like for the first time since Easter 2019 we are emerging from the tomb. Along with the reminders of spring, I’m feeling an upsurge in our energies – in hope – and that is what Easter morning is supposed to be all about.

So, it’s tempting, as I and many other Unitarian Universalist ministers have done or will do this morning, to give lip service to the easter story and equate Spring with Resurrection. To do so means we do not have to grapple with the Christian story that describes that what happened before Easter morning. We don’t have to deal with the state-sponsored execution of a 32 year old man – nor do we have to deal with the grief of the women sitting by the tomb, waiting for dawn to bathe the body of their beloved friend with spices befitting a proper burial. No matter how many times I read the story, I still want to look away from the torture and sufferings endured by Jesus; to numb myself to the grief of his friends, and to fill the silence of his death with hopeful preaching.

If I’m honest, the Easter morning story is challenging for Unitarian Universalist ministers. We can translate that word “resurrection” in our hopeful preaching only if we equate it with the flowers and the booming trees coming back to life in the spring. I was once told by a fundamentalist who, upon hearing that I am a Christian Unitarian Universalist who didn’t believe in the bodily resurrection of Jesus, quoted 1 Corinthians 15: verse 14 at me: “If Christ has not been raised, your preaching is useless and so is your faith.” So, I guess I’ll better just step down

out of this pulpit right right now. But I'm not going to, because I actually, I do believe in resurrection, and by the end of this sermon, I am hoping that you will as well.

This week, my colleague the Rev Kendyl Gibbons posted a kind of manifesto on her Facebook page. It's called "A Humanist Speaks of Resurrection," and this is an excerpt from that post:

"I don't believe that Jesus came back from the dead.
Neither did Martin, or Malcolm.
Neither did Viola Liuzzo,
or Frozan Safi, the women's rights activist shot by the Taliban in Afghanistan last November.
Neither will dismembered journalist Jamal Kashogi,
or Aleksei Navalny when he dies in a Russian prison.
Neither will documentary filmmaker Brent Renaud, or photographer Maksim Levin,
both killed by invading armies in Ukraine.
Kevin Strickland and Lamonte McIntyre will not get back the stolen decades of their lives.
don't believe that the crucifixion is a story with happy ending,
or that it was a onetime event.
It happens over and over as the human journey unfolds.
It happens to us, and to the people we love;
It happens to the righteous, and the innocent.
Crucifixion happens, and it feels like the end of the world, every time."[\[1\]](#)

Before we can get to resurrection, we first must come to terms with Good Friday. For Jesus friends and followers, his death felt like the end of the world. It was the end of THEIR world, certainly. Because doesn't death of a beloved feel like end? Not only did Jesus' friends and family lose him, they must have felt that this movement that they were a part of – this new vision of a world in which the last were first and the first last; where women's voices were heard; where people with illnesses or disabilities were not rejected; where, as the prophet Amos once famously proclaimed "justice shall roll down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream." Oh yes, it was Springtime for Jesus and his disciples until it all came crashing down on Good Friday and Silent Saturday. Oh, they heard Jesus talk about resurrection, but they could barely remember what he said. What was that someone said about him, something about being the resurrection and the life? It didn't matter now. He was dead. They saw that with their own

eyes. It felt like the end of the world. That's what it feels like after every crucifixion - every time. There's a good reason why the Apostles Creed, developed around 390 CE requires the faithful to say this: "I believe in Jesus Christ, who was conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of the virgin Mary. He suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died and was buried. He descended into hell..."

In some ways it feels like our earth has descended into hell too. Even as we may be basking in this refulgent springtime, we cannot turn away from what is dying before our very eyes. As I write this, I am flipping through an on-line Environmental Newsletter that catalogues the state of the planet. Sea levels rising in the east, severe drought in the west, unrelenting tornados in the Midwest and south, bomb cyclones, too much snow, not enough snow, plagues of locust – it feels, well – practically Biblical! And we can't ignore the impact of these are often felt more acutely in communities of color and underserved communities. Then my eye landed on the page which listed the loss of seven species that went extinct in 2021. Just as we do with people whom we've lost, we must say their names out loud and grieve them. We mourn the passing of: **SLIDE HERE** the ivory billed woodpecker, the smooth handfish, Bachman's Warbler, the Spix's macaw, the Jalpa False brook salamander, and the Splendid Poison Frog. I have never met the splendid Poison Frog, and I'm not sure I should, but I mourn the loss of it and the other species which are gone. They're not coming back. For that is the mystery and the hardest and strangest thing about death for us to wrap our minds around. We will not see them again.

SLIDE DOWN I grieve the suffering and deaths caused by another natural disaster, brought on not by a wrathful God but simply by an ordinary and extraordinarily virulent virus – Covid 19 – 20 – 21 and now 22 with all its variations. And the earth itself. I imagine it laboring to breathe, its own body being strip-mined to its core, drained of water, exhausted by the sun and rising temperatures, hallucinating through the fog of pollution and extreme temperatures. Enough, the Earth wants to say. I need a break from human beings and the incessant demands. I need the coolness of the tomb. I need the hope of resurrection.

Some Christians will define resurrection narrowly; that it refers to one-time event that happened only to Jesus. And this resurrection meant that he came back from the dead, physically. But there are many understandings and different interpretations of resurrection. Judaism offers multiple understandings of the meaning of resurrection, but most contemporary thinkers believe in resurrection as a symbolic idea. It is the soul, not only of an individual human being, but of the community that will be revived and will live again as a whole people. One scholar suggests that “the individual, even in death, is not separated from the society in which they lived.”¹ And more liberal Catholics would claim that resurrection means continual transformation as well as a new way of thinking, feeling and living. In order to be authentic and believable, the resurrection must be reflected in ordinary human lives.”² This is the good news of resurrection; that we have within our DNA – our very being – the power of transformation and therefore, we can call ourselves resurrection people. We are defined by resurrection just as we are defined by transformation because resurrection changes everything!

The Psalmist writes: *weeping may endure for a night, but joy comes with the morning.* In the book “Braiding Sweetgrass,” Robin Wall Kimmer quotes climate activist Joanna Macy: “until we can grieve for our planet we cannot love it — grieving is a sign of spiritual health. But it is not enough to weep for our lost landscapes; we have to put our hands in the earth to make ourselves whole again. Even a wounded world is feeding us. Even a wounded world holds us, giving us moments of wonder and joy. I choose joy over despair. Not because I have my head in the sand, but because joy is what the earth gives me daily and I must return the gift.”^[2]

Earth, we need you to remember resurrection. Where can we find evidence of resurrection in this time and this place? Well, – one answer—the answer we UU ministers usually preach - can be found - as the Transcendentalists taught us, in nature.³

¹ https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/281644/jewish/Jewish-Resurrection-of-the-Dead.htm

² <https://www.catholicregister.org/faith/columnists/item/24809-resurrection-is-a-journey-of-transformation>

³ Earth, Teach Us Resurrection, a Sermon offered by Rev. Kimberly Debus. <https://farfringe.com/earth-teach-us-resurrection/>

I found an answer in the tree in my backyard in Charlottesville. The tree is an ordinary sugar maple, probably planted by the developer of our townhome some 30 years ago. It's an important tree to us because it provides crucial shade in the summer and fall; a home for squirrels and birds all year round. Shortly after we moved in, we noticed it was experiencing "a failure to thrive." It lost half of its crown; and branches were dying at an alarming rate. At that point, we decided to call in a tree expert to see if the tree could be saved. The tree expert gave us a diagnosis. He said "your tree is afflicted with gloomy scale." I looked it up. Gloomy scale are small insects which use their piercing-sucking mouthparts to penetrate the tree bark. If left untreated, trees will exhibit twig and branch dieback, thinning canopy and eventual death.

Gloomy scale seemed like a perfect metaphor for our own confronting of climate change, because the scale of what's happening right now feels pretty gloomy. Although it's one tree of millions of trees but the thought of losing that one particular tree, hit me as hard as if it were a dying friend.

"Can this tree be saved?" I asked the arborist. He looked at me kindly. "It's up to you. It likely will die without intervention." I looked at the other, seemingly healthy maple trees in my neighbor's yard. I asked him, "what might the impact be of us treating this one tree on the other trees that are close by?" He really couldn't say, he said. "But it's good to start with this one."

"It's good to start with this one." Pretty sound advice as we think about what it's going to take to save the earth and in turn, ourselves. We need to grieve, yes and recall all that is lost. We need to name the species that are extinct. At the same time, we must remember these words from Joanna Macy: "because joy is what the earth gives me daily and I must return the gift." Because joy is as real as grief and is in our earth bones: it is as sure as the molten lava at the center of the earth; it is as honest as the dogwood which splays out its elegant limbs against a clear blue sky, there is something in the earth – and in us – that remembers resurrection. And when I speak of resurrection, I am not just preaching about Spring. Spring happens without our

willing it to do so. Resurrection is also an act of will. Resurrection is the transformation of the body we already have.

I began this sermon with the first portion of a post by Rev. Kendyl Gibbons. It's important that you hear the second part of that longer post. We ended with the line "crucifixion happens, and it feels like the end of the world, every time..." But that is not where the poem ends. She continues:

And then, inevitably, and miraculously, something happens next.

Something happens. Of course it does.

Because the world hasn't ended yet.

But something happens and whether we want it or not, a new chapter begins.

Maybe the sun comes up, or the lilies do. Spring rolls around. That happens.

Or memories come or someone needs you.

You eat food, that happens. You walk down the road and share a recollection.

Life happens, keeps happening

The dead don't rise – but we do.

One day, it happens, you take a breath and it doesn't hurt to breathe.

You start to see people again, really see them.

Hope rises. Community rises. You rise. We rise, Life rises

Not because death isn't real; crucifixion is not just pretend

But something else is just as real, maybe even more real.

Something happens next

That is the other thing we know for sure

Life rises. Outrage rises. Love rises, Faith rises. Tears rise. Hope rises

This, I do believe.

Our gorgeous planet also rises. Every time I see a bit of green breaking its way through concrete, I want to fall on my knees and shout hallelujah and amen! Every time I recall the

Cuyahoga River in Cleveland Ohio is now clean enough to swim in, I want to jump in praise!
Earth remembers resurrection, but it is up to US to practice it.

The poem by Wendell Berry that was read this morning invites us to remember and practice resurrection. He says “Ask the questions that have no answers. Invest in the millennium. Plant sequoias. Say that your main crop is the forest that you did not plant, that you will not live to harvest. Put your faith in the two inches of humus that will build under the trees every thousand years. Expect the end of the world. Laugh. Practice resurrection.”

Happy Easter Friends. May it Be So and Amen.