

2007-04-08 Easter

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Opening Words

We are here,
after a wild week of warm blue skies one day,
and snow falling like cherry blossoms the next,
to celebrate life with joy and flowers,
to sing and reach out and hone our hearts
and dream of a world transformed. And so:

As we move through this year of transition and joy, we remember with gratitude the power of our living heritage, which moves through time like a clear running creek; refreshing us with the sweet draughts of courage, hope, justice-making, peaceful living, ever deeper honesty, and more truthful loving. And so we kindle this light in thanksgiving

Sequence for Easter

Here we are at the still point,
the fulcrum between one moment
and the next,
between the first part of the celebration
and the last,
between the big bang at the beginning of time,
and the final day when the last sun goes out.
Each precious minute a bud, slowly opening
into the blossom of experience,
and a whole bouquet of gratitude.
Here we are, poised at the next step,
dancers on point, about to step back and leap,
rookie pitchers just releasing the ball,
or children just waking up from a nap;
but here, not quite there yet,
not aloft, or released, or fully awake,
just on the edge, the verge, the threshold.
So come now, Spirit of Life,
Song of Songs, Life of Life,
and clap, ring, chime! Startle us
until, like spring robins, we too rise, aloft, free
in imagination's silent flight. *silence*

On this Easter Day, let us pause, especially to call to mind and heart those who have risen to stroll within the deep-scented garden of our best love, those we miss and whom we recognize as givers of gifts that continue to be opened. We bless them by naming them aloud, or remembering them with quiet reverence and peace in our grateful hearts.

naming

Cold or warm, the world around us choruses on Easter day; blossoms chant, roses hum, daffodils trumpet, snapdragons ring. And deepest laud and praise blooms in the sacred garden called music.

Readings

The First Reading is a poem by the Nicaraguan poet, Claribel Alegria, 1993, from her book Fugues.

I think of our nameless boys,
of our burnt-out heroes;
I think of the fiercely wounded,
who lost their legs, or both eyes:
the stammering teenagers.
At night I listen to their spirits
shouting in my ear,
shaking me out of lethargy,
issuing me commands.
I think of their tattered lives,
of their feverish hands
reaching out to clutch at ours.
It's not that they are begging;
no, they're demanding,
they have earned the right to order us,
to break open our sleep,
to wake us up,
to shake off once and for all
this weariness.

The Second Reading comes from the end chapters of the Gospel of John, a meditation on the life of Jesus written over a hundred years after his birth, edited by several editors, but containing novelistic details that make this work a favorite among many passionate believers, and the most criticized gospel by historians.

Joseph of Aramathea asked Pilate for permission to take Jesus' body down from the cross, since he was dead. Pilate agreed, so Joseph came and removed the body from the cross. Nicodemus came too, bringing about seventy-five pounds of spices, a mixture of myrrh and aloes. So they took Jesus' corpse, and wrapped it in strips of burial cloth suffused with the spices, for this is the typical custom in Judea. Now there was a garden near the place where he had been crucified, and a new tomb in the garden where no one had yet been buried. Since this tomb was handy, and because of the approaching holiday, it was here that they laid Jesus.

On Sunday, by the half-light of early morning, Mary from Magdala comes to the tomb, and notices that the stone across the entrance has been rolled away. So she runs and comes to Simon Peter and that other student of Jesus, the one whom he loved the most, and tells them "They have taken our Master from the tomb, and we don't know where they took his body."

So Peter and the other student went out from where they were staying, and made their way to the site of the tomb. They were running, actually, but the other student ran faster than Peter and got

there first. Stooping down, he could see all the cloths lying there, but he didn't go in. Then Peter came huffing along behind him, but he immediately went in. Inside, he too sees the burial cloths, and the piece of cloth they use to bind the jaw, over on the side, rolled up by itself. Then the other student also came in. But since neither of them understood, they went back home.

Sermon

Well, even though most modern scholars that I respect are not too keen on the author and editor of the gospel of John as an accurate historian, this classic Easter story is important to me. Because, you see, I lived it. And I mean, quite literally.

A few years ago I was in Jerusalem, or Yerushalayim as it's called in modern Hebrew, or Al Quds, as it's called in Arabic. I truly fell in love with that beautiful city, and could even imagine living there. It was so vital, so alive, so complex, so surprisingly cosmopolitan.

One day, my friend Ned and I were climbing down one of the cliff-like rocky hills that seem to jut up and down everywhere in that amazing city.

At the base of this stony cliff, carved into the rock itself, was a tomb. A tomb with a great big round stone that been rolled away from the entrance on a sort of stone groove. The dark entrance to the tomb was low and square, and black as pitch when contrasted to the bright, sunlight-whitened granite of the cliff.

Ned and I looked at each other. I said "Whaddya know? Looks like you and I are right smack dab in the middle of a genuine Bible story! Let's go see it!"

We didn't exactly run, like the two students in the story, because the ground was quite littered with loose rocks and, unfortunately, sharp daggers of broken glass, so we had to be careful. But we did, as the Bible sometimes puts it, "hasten."

When we got to the tomb, we noticed that there were some Greek letters carved into the space right above the dark entrance to the tomb. Time had faded the letters some. But since the very sight of this tomb had turned us both into excited amateur archeologists, we put our heads together and dated the sign above the tomb from the early Byzantine era...say the year 400 or so... because of the style of Greek letters we could make out. But the actual structure of the tomb itself suggested that it probably dated from much earlier, even to the days of Herod the Great at the turn of the millennium. It was a very typical first century Judean tomb.

The low, square entrance was totally dark, and we couldn't see much. And of course, we had no flashlights with us. We were both a little hesitant to enter the tomb, because it was so dark we didn't know if we would bump into walls or hit our heads on some low arch. Or even if some wild dog or city rats might not have claimed the place as a home.

But it was just too incredible to find such a site not entirely fenced off with warnings by professional archeologists that we decided to enter the tomb. We agreed to let our eyes slowly adjust to the dark so we wouldn't hit our heads.

There were three low chambers in the tomb, very typical of the First Century. Each chamber had two or three shelf-like niches in its walls where the dead bodies were placed. After the bodies had decomposed, their bones were put in a bone-box and then perhaps buried elsewhere.

We could see pretty well from reflected light in the first two chambers, but when we got into the rear chamber, we had to be still for a while until our eyes adjusted. Then Ned said, “Mark, do you see that?” I did see what he was seeing. There, on one of the shelves, were cloths. Colored cloths all kind of bundled up or strewn across the shelf. Again, we felt like we were right in the classic story.

But as our eyes focused, however, we saw more things, things not found in any biblical story. We found trash left over from fast-food stands, and some paper dishes; and on the rocky floor, three well-used sleeping bags. Ned and I looked at each other. We knew who had risen that morning from this tomb, and gone into the city to appear to passers-by...not a prophet, but a small community of homeless folk. Since Jerusalem’s altitude leads to snow and bitter cold, shelter is necessary even at that latitude to keep homeless folks alive as they sleep outside of heated buildings occupied by their human brothers and sisters.

It was a very moving realization to both of us. Without a single angel in sight, we heard the words: “They have risen. They are not here. They are up in the alleys of old city, trying to figure out where to get their next meal. No one particularly sees them. They are like ghosts to them, not real people with real lives. Behold. They have gone before you.”

The Easter story all of a sudden had a new meaning to me.

The idea considered fashionable on this Sunday is that Easter is about one man’s death being reversed somehow, and that this is somehow significant. Personally, when I read the Greek scriptures, I don’t see that at all. The story of Easter, after all, is not an isolated story. It’s one chapter in a book of many chapters. It seems to me that a man, who all of his life blessed the poor, addressed the oppressed, fed the hungry and gave bear hugs to outcasts is hardly being treated fairly if the last chapter of his life of service and love is only a magic trick of personal resuscitation, as if the poor and outcasts suddenly just dropped out of sight. It seems to me, they too are in that story. And after my experience in Jerusalem in a tomb, I think I understand how.

In the stories as they have come down to us through the reflective generations, Jesus is not recognized either when he leaves his mythic tomb, and people think he’s a ghost, a spirit. And as I see it, that’s not much different from a homeless person, or a teenager truant from a Columbus High School, or a 14-year-old with blown off legs in a suburb of Baghdad. Or the families hidden away in shelters of every major United States city, including this one. Ghosts. Spirits. They are not on the cover of *People Magazine*, or being televised with rolling eyes on *American Idol*, or smiling with bared teeth on *Fox News*. They are the completely unseen. They are, in short, those whom society prefers to remain invisible, or even dead, to the living before they are actually dead.

But our poet, Senora Alegria, *does* see them. She can’t sleep, because she sees them so well. Especially the young ones, the teenagers, the nameless ones. The wounded and wound up. And they make demands of her. They ask her to see them. To notice them. They have earned the right

to wake us up, she writes. To prod, ring, poke, clutch at us until we are awake and can rise up out of our weariness.

Now when I read of young people dying in distant wars, or see and talk with homeless people in our city, or hear of painfully high numbers of teenagers running truant from our high schools, my first temptation is to be overwhelmed. To feel down. Discouraged.

But when I give it a bit of thought, I begin to realize that feeling down about such things is just like a tomb where the stone stays put, and the sweet spices with which the dead are buried completely conceal the stench.

And of course, when I talk about things which disguise the stench, the reality, I am not just talking about the sweet luxury of feeling bad or discouraged. I am talking about all the things which those seventy-five pounds of myrrh and aloes in the story symbolize. I am talking about all the ways modern society has found to disguise the stench of corruption and death in our days. I am talking about the weighty trivialization of the humane idea of justice for all, and the power it takes to achieve that ideal. When our young men and women get taken out by the powers that be, we don't disguise their misery with myrrh and aloes. No, we use more modern methods: 1. We encourage everyone to go after their 15 minutes of fame - with the internet, not a problem. 2. We offer wildly inflated fascination and wildly inflated salaries for the symbolic people Americans tend to worship instead of God: media stars like Anna Nicole Smith, or famous coaches or players on dazzling teams; 3. We think that the number of children movie stars can adopt from foreign countries is a more upbeat statistic than giving the number of children blown up in foreign cities, or walking our streets instead of going to school. 4. We still live as if things falling in, and out of, fashion is meaningful. 5: We still offer Madison Ave the opportunity to hype us with clever Geico cavemen spoofing inclusive ideals. 6. We still fall for the notion that there is an instant diet that will cost us nothing, feel good, and magically transform us, or that if we follow a certain program, real estate success will be ours in two weeks at most. Or even sooner, if you prefer the magical thinking offered by the new best seller, *The Secret*. Me. Me. Now. Now. All of these and more are the sweet smelling spices favored to disguise and hide the death of a culture where, in Lynne Laitala's perfect words, "homelessness is only a lack of shelter, not a breakdown of community."

No, instead of feeling bad, I, along with Unitarian Universalist theologian Sharon Welch, prefer to use the word "accountability." If we promote "the inherent worth and dignity of all human beings," and we Unitarian Universalists do, then it seems to me we are accountable to those folks...among us and outside our circle... who have the inherent worth kicked out of them, stolen from them, denied them, or not seen in them, for one social reason or another. It seems to me that accountability means us wanting, with all of our heart, to do the, yes, joyful work that transforms the world, so that the power of inherent worth no longer allows exceptions.

And isn't that what the Easter story is all about? Transformation? Something that becomes something else? "Feeling bad" transformed into joy. Discouragement transformed into the spirit that gets things done. And what is that proverb people are always quoting to me all the time? *If you do the same thing over and over and expect different results, then you are deluded.* A healthy person expects transformation, and thus does different things, not more of the same.

The early Christians read the same stories as modern conservatives do, and somehow did not read about the singular resuscitation of a singular person. Instead of depicting Jesus as coming back to life just as he was before he died, except for a few nail holes, the Roman Christians filled their catacombs with paintings of butterflies, soaring birds, and wonderful flowers. Why? Because Easter is not about more of the same, but about transformation. Because, as our children's story points out so clearly, when caterpillars transform, they become astonishing butterflies that don't look very much like the finger-thick green thing clinging to a branch. And oval eggs, smooth and sky blue, give way to bright, rising robins; and small hard seeds explode into bright flowers of tender fragility and heartbreaking beauty. Transformations all.

And homeless people can demand and command and haunt us all, until we too, as a society, are transformed, and homelessness no longer exists as a word in English, or Hebrew, or Arabic or any language. And tombs can be left as archeological curiosities, not shelters for the poor. And the streets of the city can be for people with jobs and an education that means something to them, not truants from school. And explosives can be used for fireworks marking the end of a war, not as weapons to destroy life and limb. Real transformations. No disguises, no running away from reality. No shelter in the cold tomb of discouragement and even cheap guilt. But the truly joyful honor of accountability, the satisfaction of compassion, the pleasure of allowing ourselves to be touched deeply.

This is why Wendy and I lift up the great social justice organizations like BREAD, or RESULTS, or the Unitarian Universalist SERVICE COMMITTEE. Because these are organizations of accountability, of compassion, structured with the strong muscles of organization. When literally hundreds of people from this congregation show up at a meeting with hundreds from other Jewish, Protestant and Catholic congregations around Central Ohio for a meeting that engages, practically and with deep study, the serious problem of truancy in this community, they are living out the very meaning of Easter. And of Passover and the Flower Ceremony too. Take Easter first. For the Greek word, translated as resurrection in English, is *anastasis*, which really just means "to stand up again." And that's what we'll be doing at both the BREAD meetings in April and May, *standing up* again for both compassion and justice, and the inherent worth of every single person, no matter who. And the Passover is about the complete, if slow, transformation of servile people with bent backs, into people who together stand up straight and tall for each other as they make pilgrimage toward their freedom. And the Flower Ceremony describes, with almost infinite beauty, the worth of every single flower, despite their universal fragility. Norbert Capek, the originator of this ceremony, went to his death at Dachau rather than refuse to live out the promise of this rite in his every day life. Even when the Nazis came knocking at his door, he stood up for his principles with joy.

The life of Jesus ended in shock and sadness for those who loved him. Of this there can be little doubt. But the Easter story, and the literary construct of what we now call the Empty Tomb, provides a strong sign that, although individual lives may end, the spirit of justice, of compassion, of love itself, which bind individual lives into communities of power and joy, may never be buried for good. Nor may the stench of injustice be long disguised by the spices of cultural excess or the sealed exits, provided by joyless discouragement. For as my friend Ned and I figured out that day, if the whole world were an Easter World, tombs of certainty can become wombs of hope, from which new life, transformed life, can come forth...the un-free set free, the truants welcomed home and to school, the homeless sheltered by now transformed and

joyful living people; no longer would they be ignored by the sweet-smelling dead who like their tombs closed nice and tight.

Blest is this Easter Day, and the transformation and accountability it asks of us.

Offering:

Remembering that transformation is a constant demand, that growth of spirit and joy ask of us a certain generosity of heart, we set aside a time during each Sunday Celebration when the blessings which have sustained us become the blessings we share with our community.

Flower Ceremony (adapted from Capek's 1923 prayer)

Minister: In the name of that Mystery which implants in the seed the future of the flower, and in our hearts, the longing for harmony and peace;

East Voice In the name of the Most High and Most Deep, in whom we move and have our being, and who makes father and mother, brother and sister, lover and loner what they are;

South Voice In the name of the sages and prophets who lived out their lives to hasten the coming of the age of mutual respect---

West Voice Let us renew our passion to find ways to be real brothers and sisters to each other, regardless of the kinds of barriers which try to separate us, one from the other.

North Voice In this holy resolve may we be strengthened, knowing that we are as one family, the human family; that one spirit, the spirit of love, unites us, and in that spirit, may we move toward a more just and joyful life each and every day.