

**2009-4-12 Easter**  
**Mark L. Belletini**

**Opening Words**

We are here,  
*after a wild week of bright skies one day,*  
and gray, cold rain the next,  
*to celebrate Life with joy and flowers,*  
to sing, reach out and stretch our hearts  
*and see a world transformed by freedom.*

**And so, though our ways of thinking and feeling about the meaning of our days may differ, we agree to journey together, side by side, face to face. Within this circle of strong spirit, mutual care, and ethical vision, may we ourselves remain open to being transformed by a welcoming heart and emerging justice.**

**Exultet: The Proclamation of Easter**

April 4 1968 From 5:59 To 6:02 p.m. written by David Maywhoor  
*Spoken in unison, first two verses*

*Su Ann leads in unison:*  
***A single soul leads a movement***  
***Many hearts shine within one***  
***Hope floods into action and***  
***Action flows into the streets***

***Dark rooms inside many minds are***  
***Re-lit and furnished with places to***  
***Sit and plan and rejuvenate and***  
***Dance and clap and sing new life***

*Eric:* A single knowing soul is betrayed  
Cut down while anticipating an end  
Light is extinguished in fiery rage  
Movement is wrecked on the devil's road

*Su Ann:* Be so many that one killed is no end  
Be so many places flowing like air  
Be so many thoughts kindling new ideas  
Be so many fibers in an impenetrable web

*Eric:* A single soul leads a movement  
A single knowing soul is betrayed

Always and say never again  
Be so many that one killed is no end

### **Sequence for Easter**

Life is today. Not yesterday. Not tomorrow.  
These flowers bloom today, *not* yesterday,  
*not* tomorrow.

But the silence here today is the same as yesterday's silence. It's the same as tomorrow's silence. It's the silence that was here before the universe spun into being, and it's the silence that will shelter its unimaginable end. And yet despite all that, it is always, always, always, and only, just now. Now is all there is....Alleluia.

*silence*

Calling to mind those whose lives have touched our own, we remember that we blossomed in their sun and rain, and that without them we would not be who we are. In silence we give thanks for them, or *into* the silence we name them, so as to celebrate this day with them as well.

*naming*

Alleluia for sun and rain, for moments, for music, for life, for life, for life. Alleluia.

**The First Reading** *is called Resurrection. It's a brief story from With Roots and Wings by Jay B. McDaniel, 1995. The word "tantric" refers to a form of Hindu and Buddhist literature about powerful symbols. Thomas Merton was an influential Trappist monk, a writer and interfaith wisdom teacher.*

Thomas Merton died while at a conference for monks in Thailand. On his way to the conference he was able to visit many Tibetan Buddhists, including the Dalai Lama.

At one point, Merton met a somewhat "wild" Tibetan lama who impressed him deeply, but who had serious reservations concerning Easter. He called Merton "a Jesus Lama." The lama then confessed:

You know, I have never been able for the life of me to get a handle on this, so I'm glad you're here this morning....The center of your religion concerns a man who comes back to life after death; and yet, in Tibetan Buddhism, when you have one of these people, a walking corpse, we call our lama to put him down. So I want to know what kind of a religion has at its center a dead man coming back to life?

The lama did not question the literal reality of Jesus rising from the dead. From a Tibetan perspective, such rising did not seem that extraordinary. What troubled him was the fact that the early followers of Jesus did not "call in a lama" to send him on his way.

Merton did not respond defensively. Instead, Merton explained the Resurrection in tantric terms about the overcoming of fear and the utter and complete power of liberation ...freedom from *all* constraints and restraints, from fear of death to fear of life. That's freedom!

The Tibetan lama was satisfied by Merton's response.

**The Second Reading** *is from my beloved Szymborska. Impressions of the Theater, 1972.*

For me, a tragic play's  
most important act  
is the last:  
when everyone rises up  
from the stage's battlegrounds,  
adjusting their wigs, their robes,  
wrenching out the fake knife from their chest,  
removing the noose from their neck,  
and then lining up  
in front of the living audience  
to face them.

They bow, alone and together;  
their pale hands on their wounded hearts;  
the lady who had killed herself curtseys;  
the beheaded guy nods to one and all.

They bow in pairs:  
anger extends an arm to shyness;  
a victim looks blissfully  
into the hangman's eyes;  
the revolutionary bears no grudge  
as he walks right next to the tyrant.

They trample eternity with a golden slipper.  
They sweep morals away with the brim of a hat.  
They show incorrigible readiness  
to start afresh tomorrow.

Single file, those who died a lot earlier,  
say, in the second or third acts,  
enter... alive.  
It's the miraculous resurrection  
of those lost without a trace.  
The thought that they have been waiting backstage, patiently,  
not taking off their costumes

or wiping off makeup moves me, strangely,  
more than all the play's tragic tirades.

But truly inspiring is the lowering of the curtain.  
And that brief glimpse of what lies beneath it.  
Here, one hand  
hastily grasps at a bouquet of flowers,  
there, another hand  
picks up a dropped sword.  
Only then does a third, invisible hand  
perform its task: it clutches at my throat.

### **Sermon:**

So why, I wonder, does the poet Szymborska feel a hand clutch at her throat when the tragic play ends? Why does she feel such deep feelings when, after all the Shakespearean massacres and poisonings are over, all the dead rise up from the floor, and pick up fallen swords and catch bouquets of flowers from the applauding, deeply affected audience?

Because in real life, that just doesn't happen. Szymborska knows that the folks on the stage haven't really died. They are *pretending* to die. They have been trained to fall the right way, and without hurting themselves in the least. They have learned to appear to be run through by daggers, or to fall limp from poison.

But in real life, they don't get up. The daggers work very well indeed. The poison is deadly. Our latter-day Romeos and Juliets do not start breathing again after the drive-by shooting or over-dose, after the explosion in the barracks, or after the mortal illness, which the insurance simply refused to cover, claims a young life. The curtain comes down, and does not go up again. Szymborska feels a hand at her throat because the theater of the world does not have that last act, the one when everyone stands up again. She is moved because, although the play tells the truth about life as we know it, its last act, the curtain call if you will, seems to erase that truth, or at least, hold it at bay.

Yet the Easter stories claim to tell the same hard truths as any Shakespearian tragedy... betrayal, fear, injustice and unfair death...but then *surprises* us by providing us with what it claims is a REAL honest-to-god curtain call. The story insists that its main character, killed in a most awful way, actually does stand up again on the stage of the world. *Anastasis*, the Greek word so clumsily translated as *resurrection*, means just that...to stand up again.

Like all those actors on the stage.

However, there is a story in Matthew's gospel which clearly suggests to me that Jesus' "standing up" was not one of the visions of the dead that grieving people often see. Right at the moment Jesus dies, Matthew tells us, "there was a great earthquake, and rocks were split apart," he says, "and tombs were opened, and many good people came out of their

tombs after Jesus' resurrection, and went into the holy city where they appeared to many."

But please note that the very fact that these people were seen in the city is not put on a par with the first Easter experience. Matthew never asks us to see in this strange event more proof of some literal Easter story. Here's why, I think.

I have been a minister for 30 years, and I tell you now that there are many people who have had visions, dreams, or other unusual experiences of the recently dead. I have heard this story in my office, or on walks, or on the phone countless times. Beacon Press, our Association's magnificent publishing house, just put out a terrific book on the subject, Dreaming Beyond Death: A Guide to Pre-Death Dreams and Visions, written by a mother-and-son team, the Bulkleys. Ladosha Wright, the totally remarkable mother of my dear friend Devere whose Memorial was just a few weeks ago, had a dream, a vision, an out-of-the-body experience, call it what you will...of Devere, along with her long passed father and a good friend. She saw them against a field of dark green with a deep blue sky-color behind them. It was comforting. And Devere said amazing things to her in this dream, holding a real conversation. But she writes, "I know science rules over my dream/out-of-the-body experience, but I must admit, I am pretty damned awestruck."

Exactly. This is why I don't struggle against the visions of ordinary healthy men and women who come to me with these experiences. Arguing about neurons, endorphins, psychological grief, projection and all that stuff is completely beyond the point, as far as I am concerned. Experiences which bring out the griever's awe and wonder, dreams which comfort with a deep green heaven, are gifts to leave us awestruck.

Remain faithful to science, by all means. I am. But remain faithful to your love and your grief too. You don't have to file any experience you have into some specific theological drawer in your head. You can just rejoice in the wonder of it. You don't have to come to some particular "ism" or some time-honored interpretation either. Being awestruck is its own reward, it seems to me. Experience can remain experience. You can reflect on it, sure, but you don't have to come up with some theological notion to finalize an interpretation. I don't think you have that power. As a Unitarian Universalist, I don't think anything has that power. Ever.

But the gospel of Matthew tells me that this kind of vision is NOT what it means when it speaks of the *anastasis*, the resurrection, of Jesus.

Let me make clear that *anastasis* doesn't mean resuscitation either. There are two perfectly fine Greek words for reviving someone who is dead to literal life, namely, *zontanevo*, *anazoogono*. But the gospels, all written in Greek, insist on using a theatrical word that sounds like it belongs in a Szyborska poem about "slain" actors standing up on stage after the play is over.

And long before Matthew, some 45 years before Matthew's gospel in fact, you will find that no one was buying this resuscitation business. You can read about it in the First

Letter to the Corinthians, written by the much-misunderstood Paul of Tarsus. Paul claims he too had an Easter experience; and yet he didn't even know the historic Jesus, nor had he even seen him. But he claims he saw a light which knocked him off his high horse. But Paul is clearly horrified, and even a bit peeved, when anyone suggests he has witnessed some *literal* return of the dead to life. He insists that when we die, our natural body returns to nature (physis in Greek.) But the *resurrection*, he says, is about what he calls a "breath body," (soma pneumatika) namely, a recognition that everyone alive, all who breathe, together make up a living, breathing, universal or *spiritual* body. Paul even went so far as to make it perfectly clear: "flesh and blood simply cannot inherit... imperishable life."

Yet so many simply ignore these clear texts. The Buddhist lama who spoke to Thomas Merton had himself heard this strange idea of resuscitation; and to him, this meant the Jesus was only some sort of zombie, a frightening creature that had to be "sent away" by a powerful lama. I admit I was blown away that he had no problem with the idea of a corpse coming to life; he just thought the fool thing needed to be chased away.

But instead of being defensive about this vast cultural difference and clear misunderstanding, Merton explained the Easter story in a way the other monk could understand, as the experience of complete freedom among those who were committed to live with the kind of freedom Jesus brought to the living of *his* life. Namely: freedom from any law that doesn't serve the common good; freedom from trying to earn approval from any authority; freedom from the unquestioned but rigid cultural and religious taboos that keep people apart and afraid of each other; freedom from needing to have people agree with him and praise him; freedom from wanting to control how other people think; and freedom to make up his own mind.

What this means to me is that anyone in this room can have, and, more significantly, can *have had*, Easter experiences for themselves. Not something to be believed, passed down from an ancient book. Not something necessarily Christian even. You certainly don't have to believe that ancient stories are true in any particular or doctrinal way. As I say every year during the Seder, "stories are true in the way stories are true." (cf. E. Chartier/Alain) You don't have to believe that the crucified Jesus turned into something else any more that you are expected to believe that the unselfish mouse in our story this morning literally turned into an eagle and flew off. Stories are true in the way that they are true. You don't have to be a Jesus lama like Merton; you could even be Buddhist or a Jew who rarely mentions Jesus; and, as I reported one year on this day, even a strong non-religious agnostic like Bertrand Russell once had a luminous experience that he claims tipped his life totally toward that kind of freedom, an experience that in no way seems emotionally or effectively different than Paul of Tarsus being knocked off his horse by a bright insight, or Mary the Magdalene having a conversation with a gardener in a cemetery that turned her life completely upside-down.

Easter is *not* about what happened or didn't happen to Jesus. Easter is about what happens to us, to you and to me, when we are open to being restored to the deepest life within us. What Easter is about is not awe-inspiring visions of the recently dead, or some

wild resuscitation, but rather, it's about something possible for everyone in this room. Over the years, many of you have told me, sometimes while trembling or even weeping, stories about facing great odds; and about how you faced them even though you were afraid; or you've told me about finding relationships that have transformed you; or getting *out* of relationships that were hurting you; or risking new and untested endeavors; or refusing to be defined by failures and grief...all of these are Easter stories, at least as far as I am concerned. They are *one* with the stories of Jesus or Martin Luther King Jr., or Susan B. Anthony or Sojourner Truth. Each of them individuals who were trembling, and fallible, yet remarkably free. None of them got up from the stage of history after they fell and walked around again. Life may be a stage, as Shakespeare told us, but it is not literally a theater... the slain do not get up, catch bouquets and bow.

But those of us, the living, who are lucky enough to hear the transformative Easter stories of the remarkably free: Jesus, or King, or Susan B. or Sojourner, along with so many others, *are* blest. If we allow ourselves to be moved by these stories beyond the safe edges of our own lives, and whenever we cross those edges, I say we can experience Easter first hand, not second hand by focusing on someone else's story instead of our own.

And what if all of us who have experienced our own kind of Easter combined our efforts? I can only answer with the last line of David Maywhoor's beautiful poem:

*Be so many that one killed is no end.*

**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 life and love, unites us, and in that spirit, may we move toward a more just and joyful life each and every day.

**Blessing**

Be so many that one killed is no end  
Be so many places flowing like air  
Be so many thoughts kindling new ideas  
Be so many fibers in an impenetrable web

A single soul leads a movement  
A single knowing soul is betrayed  
Always and say never again  
Be so many that one killed is no end