

Easter

April 4, 2010
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Opening Words

We are here
to celebrate life and love
on Easter morning in early spring,
with flowers and stories, music and singing,
that our lives might awake! awake! awake!
to the wild Alleluia thriving deep within us.

And so, mindful that we share a common world, but approach that world in different ways, we begin our celebration together by kindling our promise of mutual honesty, attentiveness, and deep courtesy. May we become more proficient at gratitude and awareness, that we might more deeply embody the kind of justice and peace which embraces everyone on earth.

Sequence: Exultet for Easter 2010 a poem Imperatives, by Kathleen Norris.

Look at the birds. Consider the lilies.
Drink ye all of it.
Ask. Seek. Knock. Enter by the narrow gate.
Do not be anxious.
Judge not.

Go. Be it done to you.
Do not be afraid.
Maiden, arise.
Young man, I say arise.

Stretch out your hand.
Stand up.
Be still.
Rise, let us be going.

Love. Forgive. Remember me.

silence

No matter the day, no matter the hour,
our past comes forward and greets us.
Memories of days past, people we love
or miss deeply, come forward and

knock at our doors. Awakening to their
presence as we hold them in the arms of our love,
we name them as we imagine them...
quietly, or softly into the Easter morn.

naming

Soon, the choir will sing these wonderful words: Awake. Awake. Awake. The silence of the night has passed. The new day has begun. Let music never die in us. Forever let our spirits sing. Wherever emptiness is found, let there be joy and glorious sound. Let music never die in me. Forever let my spirit sing. Let music live!

The First Reading *comes from one of the premier poets of the nation of Mozambique, Eduardo White.*

The burden of life!
I wanted to feel it as you did, in your way,
and to sense life growing inside me,
in my living body.
It's not that I was looking to tear open an old wound.
It's not that I was looking to work slowly like a farmhand, or even like the earth,
which the farmhand tends.

So take up love as your profession.
Practice it with care.
Repeat it as many times as necessary, until it lasts,
and everything inside you has meaning.

Let the sun *inside you* climb and illumine the night. Let it be the wing lifting your imagination high; let it brighten up the storeroom where you keep peace.

But never let it be just a leftover. And don't let it be only something you remember.

The Second Reading *is a poem by Kathleen Norris. Its title is "A Litany for Basil, on Leaving Oz." She doesn't tell us who Basil is, but Oz is pretty clear. You will probably, most of you, remember the line spoken by Glinda the good witch in both the film and the book.*

I don't know how to do it. But I see the plains before me like a book.

I don't know why pain comes in waves, but I see grass in the wind.

I don't know how it happens, but I listen to the story.

I don't know why it takes so long, but I love to hear it.

I don't know how the days will run, but I long to see them unfold.

I don't know why it's in us, this love that moves in color through fears that are black and white.

"You've *always* had the power," the good witch says. Why, love is like death, only longer. Amen. Amen.

Sermon

Several times in the last month I have mentioned my friend Bonni down in Chile. I went to college with Bonni, and when she moved to Europe for her year abroad, she never really came back. She lived in Switzerland for years, studying the techniques of translation. And then she worked in Algeria as a translator. It was there that she met Ignacio, a Chilean who had left his native country to escape the violence and injustices of the Pinochet dictatorship. Bonni and Ignacio flew to England one weekend and officially married, and then returned to Africa to work several more years in Algeria. Then they spent a half-decade in Mozambique before moving to Chile.

Bonni and I have mostly deepened our friendship via letters... long, long letters,...snail mail, mind you...although I *have* visited her in Chile, and she does fly up here sometimes during our summer months.

When Bonni first told me she was moving to Mozambique, I have to confess to you that I was pretty ignorant about geography. I thought she was moving to that big island off the east coast of Africa with all the cute little animals with wide round eyes, the lemurs and bush babies, you know, the ones I get a kick out of when I go to a zoo. I have since repented of my unfortunately rather *typical* American ignorance of geography, and studied our common world a lot more. After all, in this world of instantaneous communication, I have to think of myself, like Diogenes of old, as a *citizen of the world*; aren't you?

Now, over the years since I have been serving as one of your ministers, I have read many of the biblical Easter stories on this day. I've read them through a Unitarian Universalist lens of course. I've made it clear that Easter for me...and for those who first wrote about it as far as I can tell...was never about a corpse come back to life, as if living forever in a some sort of nifty new physical body was somehow a terrific thing, or a sign of special favor and divine care. I'm really not sure *why* this notion of resurrection as *resuscitation* is viewed by some people as a sign of some putative cosmic fairness; but I admit that it is so. I even think it's the reason why some Unitarian Universalists don't like to celebrate Easter. They reason, "Well, if it's not the real deal I learned about as a kid in Baptist Sunday School, well, then, why bother?"

Still, even someone like me can appreciate the insightful humor attributed to the Jewish non-theist, Woody Allen: "I don't want to achieve immortality through my work; I want to achieve immortality through not dying. I don't want to live on in the hearts of those who love me; I want to live on in my apartment."

In our children's story this morning, which I thought was quite moving and beautiful, the idea of living on in the hearts of others, singing a song of life, is beautifully told. And I find myself in synch with the basic truth of the story as I understand it.

But I also realize that to many, the metaphor of a singing bird, in the hollow of a newfangled, but quite dead, tin man, still seems rather thin and weightless. And not just because they would rather have the old fashioned kind of Easter, complete with news of a 150 lb dead body that starts to breathe again.

I understand, I think. After all, when you hear even just the *first* line of Eduardo White's poem, *The Burden of Life*, you remember immediately how much outright suffering accompanies our days. You realize how heavy life can be...dozens of people being blown up on a Moscow subway train, a child killed by a bus at Disneyland, strange cancers affecting friends, fires and gunshots and sudden death in Sudan, Somalia, Afghanistan.....and when you honestly *realize* how tough life can be, how *unfair* it can be, you begin to understand why some folks might dream of a physical resurrection as representing, at the very least, another chance at life. A real chance. Solid, not ghostly. Tangible, not metaphorical. So, with that thought in mind, let me tell you an Easter story.

No, not *that* Easter story. I'm not going to talk to you today about Mary Magdalene or Peter. I am not going to interpret the story of the two travelers meeting a risen but incognito Jesus on the road. Jesus of Galilee is not even in this story. But I assure you, it's a true Easter story nevertheless.

Back in the 1980s, when my friend Bonni and her husband Ignacio were in Mozambique, the country was going through a terrible civil war. The war was fought by two factions, the progressive, anti-colonialist faction, called Frelimo, and the radically conservative faction, called Renamo. These are acronyms; you really don't need right now for me to explain them to you. All you need to know is that this civil war was very complicated. And, that there were mistakes made on both sides, although I have more sympathy with the Frelimo people, if only because the conservatives were being supported in their violence, and brutally encouraged, by apartheid-era South Africa. The Frelimo people were mostly all Mozambiquans throwing off the colonial yoke of Portugal, although it's fair to say they received some little help from Soviet Russia and Cuba. But in any case, it was complicated, to be sure.

The progressive government in Maputo, the capital city, was led by a former nurse, Samora Machel. But South Africa was against Machel because he clearly favored a Marxist view of things. So they sent insurgents into Mozambique to destabilize the new government with acts of terrible violence. Tens of thousands of them crossed the border and engaged in acts of terrorism in no way different from what we know in our present decade.

My friends Bonni and Ignacio were not involved in politics, but rather, they were working with native people far away from either Maputo or Beira, the two largest cities. They were working with the United Nations through Sweden, and they had been assigned to a forest area where a group of hunter-gatherer people lived. These were folks who wore no clothes, who had no villages, but slept under leaves at night. They gathered food as they found it, tubers and honey and other things. But the trouble was, it was the days of the great African drought. The reddish soil was not producing much except an abundance of wild cotton and cassava roots. And so, since neither cotton, nor cassava, are particularly nutritious, the people were starving.

So Bonni and Ignacio noted the cotton, and decided what they had to do. Bonni flew to Rome, to the English library there, and became a quick study in carding and spinning cotton. Ignacio, meanwhile, taught the people to stay put for a while by helping them make a village of mud. He poured some river water into the earth, made mud, and then created a circle about ten feet in diameter on the ground, leaving room for an entrance. Then, when that dried in the hot sun, he made more mud, and added another course, embedding dry sticks into it to make it stronger. Pretty soon, he had made a nifty dome, pretty solid, with an entrance and a hole at the top to let smoke out when they built a cook-fire. When Bonni came back from Rome, she helped the people design and make looms, and then to pick and card and spin the wild cotton into threads. Soon, they were weaving belts, dyed with local berry juice. These they could take to local town markets and sell, earning them money enough to buy some staples. They had the pride of earning their own food, and slowly, they built community in the manner of neighboring peoples, by living close together in their new domed settlement.

One day, a worker from Machel's government in Maputo found Bonni and Ignacio and told them they had to leave, and retreat to Beira for a while. Seems like some local South African-supported guerillas were coming through the area, bearing guns and using them, and creating havoc everywhere. The man told them that because they were foreign nationals, the government had the duty to keep them as safe as was possible, although he did praise them for the work they had done. He was amazed by their ingenuity.

Reluctantly, Bonni and Ignacio went with the man to Beira, and holed up in an apartment for a month or so. There was no electricity in the forest where the mud and stick domes rose, so, even if cell-phones had existed they wouldn't have worked.

One day, a man came and knocked on Bonni and Ignacio's door. They didn't know who it was. He identified himself as a man who lived at the edge of town, and that some folks had come from the forest and called to him, but would not come further because they were frightened by what they saw...these big square things which he told them were "buildings." They had never seen anything like it before. But these visitors had mentioned Bonni and Ignacio by name, and the man had figured out how to find them by asking around. On hearing this, immediately Bonni and Ignacio put the man in their jeep, and he took them back to the place where the visitors were. There they immediately recognized the faces of folks from the village of mud domes they had left. They looked terrible. They had burn marks on them, and bloody wounds, and they looked haggard. They spoke haltingly in their native language, which Bonni and Ignacio could speak, if but barely. They said that they were all that was left of the village. A handful. The insurgents had come through two weeks after Bonni and Ignacio left. They killed and murdered most of the villagers, but not before forcing them to burn down their huts and set fire to their belts and looms. Then they left, and the traumatized remnant buried their dead in the ground. "And then we came here," they said, "because we didn't know what to do."

In her poem, Kathleen Norris writes: "I don't know why pain comes in waves...." and "I don't know how it happens, but I listen to the story." I can imagine the pain coming in waves, after hearing a story like that, can't you? I too can't know how such things happen...such things? oh, let's call it by its proper name...evil. I don't know how such evil things happen. But I do know I

cannot turn away. I have to listen to the story...whether it's Bonni's version of the crucifixion in Mozambique, or the gospel of Mark's version of the crucifixion in Jerusalem, or the latest report of such death from Darfur. I have to listen to them. And to tell you the truth, I've heard such stories before, from the wars of the last century...My Lai, Auschwitz, Nagasaki. They chill my blood. They leave me feeling pretty powerless.

"What can we do?" they asked. Bonni and Ignacio tried to think, to push through the sludge of their thick and paralyzing grief. Then suddenly, something lit up in their hearts. Perhaps the kind of light that brought them to far Mozambique's forest people in the first place. Call it love if you want, as in Kathleen Norris' poem: *I don't know how the days will run, but I long to see them unfold. I don't know why it's in us, this love that moves in color through fears that are black and white.* Or I think of Eduardo White's words, forged in that difficult environment of Mozambique: *So take up love as your profession. Practice it with care. Repeat it as many times as necessary, until it lasts, and everything inside you has meaning.*

Let the sun inside you climb and illumine the night. Let it be the wing lifting your imagination high; let it brighten up the storeroom where you keep peace.

But never let it be just a leftover. And don't let it be only something you remember.

So, lit up from the inside, and deciding not to lose himself merely in remembrance of what was, but to push forward into the new day, Ignacio went and got a plastic pail from the jeep that had brought them there. He went to the nearest source of water, a small estuary near by, and filled it. Then he poured it into the earth. He and Bonni mixed mud. And then they lifted the mud in their hands, and daubed it onto the earth, making a circle about ten feet in diameter. A new dome for a new day.

They could not bring back the dead. They knew that. But they realized they could show the living that it was possible to start again. The horror of their loss was unspeakable, and very real. But every single day ahead of them would also be real. 100% real.

And so there, at the edge of Beira, the remnant started again. Rose up, if you will, into new life. Rose up, not by supernatural power from above, but with a power that was in them from the beginning.

Again, Kathleen Norris sums up this Easter story beautifully. Imagine these words addressed, not to Dorothy Gale of Kansas wanting to take leave of Oz, but rather, addressed to the characters of my Easter story, the villagers of Mozambique, and Bonni and Ignacio, all of whom were feeling rather powerless.

"You've *always* had the power," the good witch says. Why, love is like death, only longer. Amen. Amen.

So there you have it. A real Easter story. Nothing ghostly about it. The death was real, and the resurrection was real. No resuscitation or anything like that. For me, Easter is about the power to

love, which is even more real. Easter is about making it our daily practice no matter what. And love's a power that was always with us, a power that lasts a lot, lot longer than mere death.

So awake! Awake! It's time to get up! And while you're at it, says Kathleen Norris, says Jesus, look at the birds. Consider the lilies. Do not be anxious. Judge not. Go. Be it done to you. Do not be afraid. Maiden, arise. Young man, I say, arise. Rise, let us be going. Love. Forgive. Remember. And then, keep on making love *your profession* until your very last day.

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.

Song:

Consecration of the Flowers (Jolinda Stephens)

(strike bell) Awake to these flowers before you!

Awake and know that they are like us all,
mortal and beautiful, and that they cannot help
but sing Alleluia every moment of their lives.

(strike bell) Awake! Awake to the song that rises from these flowers, and know that song is your own.

(strike bell) Let these flowers remind us that we are one with all that is, and that no one belongs in the world more than anyone else. We are all in this together. Amen.