

Past the Strait of Kept Faith

Easter Flower Ceremony

April 20, 2014

Rev. Dr. Mark Belletini

"If this life is loss, hearts broken, hopes destroyed, that is not all. That there is more is what we celebrate on Easter. Come, morning, restored, heart-whole and free!" *Barbara Glenn 2011*

Along the dangerous narrow straits of your life, the sun of hope will bring warmth. Freedom was, and will be again. Let peace touch every flower; forgive, play host to everyone."

Norbert Capek, in Dresden Prison, just before his death, 1942

Preparation: <i>Affirming Loving Community</i>

Gathering *until the temple bell calls us to mindfulness*

Welcoming Kitty Jones

Centering *In Time of Silver Rain*, words by Langston Hughes,
arr. Karen Madden Nathan Hamm, piano
Peace Pals and Rising Voices, Karen Madden, Director

Kindling *the grail which signs our living tradition*
9:15 Marina McCreary, 11:00 Sienna Basso-Schricker

Opening *please rise in body or spirit*
Rev. Eric Meter, Steve Abbott

We are here
on Easter morn, celebrating life and love
with the flowers of spring
and freedom of spirit and question,
in this our common house of gratefulness.
And so we say together:

Grounded in gratitude for the cosmos that is our home, claiming deepening wisdom as our authority, and daring to engage joy, burden, loss and insight in a deliberate community of many ways and ages, the flame summons us to *awaken*: to listen with our whole lives, to open, to serve.

Singing #123 Spirit of Life

Ingathering Allegory of the Spoons, original story by Rabbi Haim of
Robshishok as told by Debbie Shaw (with a little help)

There was a couple that sometimes would feel overwhelmed by all the responsibilities of their lives. They loved each other, but often felt like they were on a treadmill – going to work, doing chores – and at times lost sight of a deeper meaning. Then one night when they fell asleep, they both had the same dream. The couple was standing at the entrance to a great dining hall. The hall was full of round tables, each piled high with the most delicious foods. The smells that reached their noses were wonderful.

However the atmosphere in the room was quite sad. The people seated around the tables had gaunt faces that were creased with frustration. Each person held a spoon. The spoons must have been three feet long! They were so long that the people could reach the food on those platters, but they could not get the food back to their mouths. They kept trying and trying, and looking sadder and sadder.

The couple looked at each other and could understand the people's despair as they sometimes felt like that in their own lives.

They continued to walk on and came to an identical great dining hall. The hall was filled with the same round tables piled high with the same types of food. And again, they saw that there were people sitting just out of arm's reach of the food with those three-foot long spoons.

But the couple noticed that these people were well fed and had smiling, content faces. The room was full of joy and sounds of laughter and camaraderie filled the air.

Then understanding dawned on the couple, and they smiled at each other. They felt a warm wash of contentment seep over them. They understood the difference – everything in the situation was almost exactly the same but these people – these people were using those long spoons to feed each other.

Children and teachers leave for activities as Nathan plays

Greeting news of the congregation

Exulting 1. Beginning with words from the Tibetan Buddhist Poet, Reba Gerong Tsering

Do not talk about different religions
In fact, you and I are close.
In fact, both you and I *need* freedom.

*Freedom is not sent from heaven,
Marauding wolves do not listen to the Buddha.
All depends on ourselves.*

Melt the cold heart with compassion.
Cure the ignorant wound with love.
In the tree of freedom,
the fragrant flowers are touching each other.

*Under the tree of freedom,
all living creatures are accomplishing
deeds of new life.*

2. Sue Carter

On this day of celebration of new life, the farmworkers of Immokalee are celebrating the New Day created by the Fair Food Program. So let us celebrate with them.

First, thank you. Thank you to First UU from all the farmworkers of the Coalition of Immokalee Workers. CIW is the acronym. Since 2012, First Unitarian Universalist members and friends have joined in solidarity with the farmworkers: at protests and marches, standing in freezing cold and snow, or hosting a beautiful dinner for the Immokalee workers. (Immokalee is named for a town in Florida where this all began.)

What have we achieved? Through the CIW's Fair Food Program, over 1200 enslaved workers have been freed, and slavery in Florida's fields has ended.

The Coalition has trained nearly 15,000 workers in the Code of Conduct with zero tolerance for slavery and abuse. The Fair Food Standards Council monitors have investigated more than 450 complaints from farmworkers.

In January, Walmart, the largest retailer in the world, joined the Fair Food Program, extending the program beyond Florida, and into other crops. This month, Del Monte joined the Fair Food Program. Buyers and growers are finding they, too, benefit from being partners with the farmworkers in this unprecedented business-worker collaboration. The New Day, as the CIW calls it, has arrived.

We invite all of you to join us in bringing Wendy's and Kroger into the Fair Food winners' circle. Come to the Fair Food table after the service and sign a letter to Mr. Brolick calling on Wendy's to join the Fair Food Program. Thank you.

3. Unison: In the tree of freedom, the fragrant flowers are touching. All living creatures are accomplishing deeds of new life.

4. #407 Welcome Table (flowers are brought forward)

Communing

The earth is round, and we live on its surface.

It was there hanging in space long before we were.

We are of it. It is not of us.

Without its storms, earthquakes, and volcanoes, we would not be.

Without meteorites striking its surface, the moon pulling at the tides, the gravity holding us close, the pollinizing of the flowers by bees, the abundance of green growing and edible things rising from its loam, we would not be here.

Without earth, there would be no Jesus, no Buddha, no Confucius, no Baal Shem Tov.
There would be no Susan B. Anthony, no Sojourner Truth, no poets, no athletes, no artists, no
peasants, no "seeking after truth," no answers, no questions.

Without the earth, we are not.

Even if one day we travel to the stars,
we will still be earthlings, formed and bound by earth's rhythms, by earth's realities.

Blest is our home the earth. By this silence we keep,
may we honor our place in the world –

Not dominators, but stewards.

Not separate, but part.

Neither the highest nor the lowest, just a piece of the whole.

Love, be our tether to our earth as well as our tether to each other.

Silence, be the perfect articulation of the wonder that we are, because earth is.

The Great Silence

All the people that we love, have loved, or ever will love are of the earth. We live in this time and
place on the earth – neither in the past or future, and our lives are all interconnected. Now is the
time we set aside to let the names of those on earth we love, or miss, or struggle with, or
remember with devotion, rise into our consciousness. We say their names to silent hearts, or
whisper them into the common room, that we may bring our life to the greater life of all with
honesty and gratitude.

The Naming

Rise, rise Music, rise from the voices that signify the joy of spring, the promise of Easter's
transformations, and the grounding of all that is in the spinning, solid, necessary reality of the
earth.

Choral Anthem

The First Reading for Easter is Wendell Berry's

Passing the Strait 1984

1.

Forsaking all others, we
are true to all. What we love
here, we would not desecrate
anywhere. Seed or song, work
or sleep, no matter the need,
what we let fall, we keep.

2.

The dance passes beyond us,
our loves loving their loves,
and returns, having passed through

the breaths and sleeps of the world,
the woven circuits of desire,
which leaving here arrive here.
Love moves in a bright sphere.

3.

Past the strait of kept faith
the flesh rises, is joined
to light. Risen from distraction
and weariness, we come
into the turning and changing
circle of all lovers. On this height
our labor changes into flight.

The Second Reading *is the great Russian poet Anna Akhmatova's 1921 poem Everything, dedicated to a woman named Natalya Rykova. The date tells us it was written just after the Russian Revolution and then the Civil War, so the land was devastated by the years of upheaval. (translated by MLB)*

Everything has been pillaged, betrayed, misled;
Death's dark wing flickers quite near.
"Everything's been consumed," the starving said:
So, why then is everything so *radiant* here?

In the wonderful woods just outside of town,
cherry blossoms perfume the landscape by day.
And by night, new constellations descend to crown
the transparent bowl of summer sky's Milky Way.

Look at how close the Marvelous draws near
to the tumble-down shantytown of our land.
No one can define what it means, this truth so clear;
but we've been waiting for ages for it to be at hand.

Preaching

Because I tend to be a night person, sometimes I don't get to eating my supper until 11 PM, still about three hours before I finally fall asleep. I don't always cook – sometimes I just go out. In the last year, I've come to know one of the servers at one of the late night restaurants downtown on Fourth. His name is Andrew.

Let me tell you a bit about him. Andrew's one of those people who does not move, so much as he zooms. Serving the food, clearing the tables, renders him a blur. But nevertheless, he and I have gotten to talking when I come in, so last week, he said, "I'm getting off in a few minutes. Can I join you for supper?" I said, "Sure!" And when he finished, he came and sat at the counter with me.

Andrew, besides being a visible whiz of a server, and a student graduating from OSU, is also a trapeze dancer. You heard me right, a trapeze dancer. He's good too. Last week I went to the show he was part of over at 400 W. Rich Street, across the river from me. It's the artist's collective where he gathers with many others to practice on gymnastic hoops, climb ropes and swing on the trapeze. The show was terrific. For one, it was free, to my complete surprise. How often does that happen in Columbus? But also, 300 people besides me showed up, by my estimate, and all of us were wowed by the performances. We blistered our hands from applauding about two hours straight.

When Andrew and I sat down for dinner that night, we ended up talking for well over an hour, and long after our food had disappeared. We began talking about his performance. He told me that he had only been working on the trapeze for a year, and I got the impression it was as much a surprise to him that he was doing that as it was to anyone else. Then we talked about lives a bit. I learned about his upbringing in Connecticut, his Jewish roots, and how he was no longer practicing his religion.

"Look," he said with a playful grin, "It's the first night of Passover and I am eating bacon." I smiled. "I really have no attachment to the religious culture of my upbringing. I'm pretty much an atheist. But, I do have a sense about how all things are connected to each other – call it the spirit – when I am outdoors and rock climbing, for example. Out in the world of the rocks, flowering trees, and wide blue sky is where I am most alive. And, to stand under the stars on a crystal clear night is sheer ecstasy for me. I feel so small when I think of what a small dot I am in this vast universe, yet at the same time I feel infinitely worthy. Sounds strange doesn't it?"

"Not at all," I said, gratefully, since he was unexpectedly composing my Easter sermon for me. "Not at all. I say the *exact same thing* about the power of the stars all the time. Sometimes I even proclaim 'The stars are instant religion for me.' When I gaze up at Vega or Aldeberan or Mizar in the sky (those stars named by the Arabs under their clear desert skies), I too feel my inter-connection to everything else, from star to stone, in my bones, in my solid flesh. I feel miniscule amid the galaxy-strewn abyss of the universe, and I feel somehow completely worthy at the same time. I feel totally alive."

I continued: "I'm not much one for the rugged outdoors, rock climbing and all that. But I do like to stand on my roof on clear nights and gaze at the stars. Over the years, I have certainly talked with people – who, unlike you, actually seem to think that they are challenging me – who announce to me that they don't need religious communities to be connected to the divine, to spirit, to interconnection. They would rather garden, or golf, or rock climb.

They look funny at me when I tell them I agree with them completely. I don't expect anyone to get into that feeling of visceral aliveness – the kind you get from standing under the stars, or gardening – inside the building housing our congregation, as lovely as it is. Oh, it might happen now and then, certainly for some – I have read a few poems in my life up here in this pulpit that have almost the same effect as the star Arcturus does when it swims in my eye. I get the shivers, the sense of interconnection. But I don't think either church or synagogue liturgies can be counted on to generate such feelings automatically. That's hardly possible."

But I usually say to those people that ecstasy is not why I serve a congregation anyway, or conduct celebrations. I serve a progressive religious congregation because I think a lot of people working together is one of the few ways to work for a better world, a fairer, more just world. I think people working together can generally accomplish a lot more than someone working all alone. Oh, I think the weekly service needs to be beautiful as can be, certainly. But I certainly don't think I can offer anything nearly as beautiful as the star-pocked night sky or a single branch of cherry blossoms.

The only thing I can dare hope for when I lead a celebration (like this one, for example) by reading the cultured readings from our past, from scriptures critically understood, all the way to some author who wrote something astonishingly wise just two days ago on the internet, is to help people reflect not just on their wonderful experiences of unity with all that is, but on the needs of our brothers, sisters and cousins around the world – or right next door. Stories I tell in this community might help folks rearrange their understandings about the *practical* consequence of all those feelings of unity and aliveness under the stars. Like the story you heard this morning, which talks elegantly about serving each other, rather than serving ourselves alone.

Andrew and I conversed about other things too. After we went home, I think we both reflected on what we had said, and what the other had said. It was a remarkable conversation. And once again, after he told me his story, I realized why, the older I get, the less interested I am in theological arguments for or against God, or anything else for that matter. I am less interested in theism, atheism, agnosticism, pantheism, panentheism, etc. None of these are terms that feed me, or that make me feel alive. I am less and less enthralled, personally, with the various "isms" of either belief or unbelief. Oh, I understand they clearly work for others, but just not for me.

So I want to move away from the Protestant theory that religion is somehow a life or death decision about what I do or do not believe. Instead, I want to join Andrew under the stars, outdoors among the gardens of the world, and let that awe and wonder be enough. And since it is Easter Sunday, a day associated with traditional stories, I want to put those stories in the context of reflecting on the conversation I had with Andrew. I personally think that is exactly why the gospel stories about Easter put the event of *aliveness* they strangely call Resurrection *in a garden*. The aliveness they affirm, and the garden, are connected by the way those stories were told. One of them even goes so far as to suggest that the *aliveness* of Jesus after his death resembled the aliveness of a gardener.

Lovely story. I understand the metaphor. But I also understand that the Greek word translated as "resurrection" does not mean *resuscitation* in any way, but only *standing up*. Standing up just as in the English phrase *taking a stand*. Or standing up for a cause of honor, or equal rights. Thus, I refuse to subject the Easter stories to the ridiculous tennis match test "Did it or did it not happen?" It's neither interesting nor important to me, the older I get. The story, at most, is true in the way that a story is true, as I say at the *seder* every year. So for me, the Easter story simply links the garden experience of aliveness with the idea of *standing up* for something. Standing up for what? Standing up for more love, more justice, more compassion, come to mind right off.

But for me, the *community* is the locus of this communal aliveness of more love, more justice, and more compassion, *not* the rapture I feel under the stars. "What we love here, we would not desecrate anywhere," writes Wendell Berry in his beautiful poem. Meaning, when I meet and get to know folks in community, I realize that folks outside the community are not all that terribly different in their needs for life and love. Which means I do not want to desecrate, or debase anyone's life or love, because I have learned to love a diversity of people here in this community.

Then Berry writes these amazing lines, clearly making an Easter reference:

*Past the strait of kept faith
the flesh rises, is joined
to light. Risen from distraction
and weariness, we come
into the turning and changing
circle of all lovers. On this height
our labor changes into flight.*

I had to imagine, after I first read this poem, that Berry is doing something like I have been doing more and more. Taking off the straight-jacket of "kept faith," leaving the narrows of "I believe" AND "I don't believe" for a while, and recognizing with Andrew that "the flesh rises," joined to light out there in the garden, in the wilderness, in the natural world of star, sun, rain, blossom and bird.

But then, "risen from distraction and weariness," writes Berry, "we come into the turning and changing circle of all lovers." In other words, the religious community, where "our labor changes into flight." Our labor? Our justice, compassion and love work wherever we do it: at a BREAD meeting; marching in the rain for Immokalee Workers; going to a Planned Parenthood site; helping the people of New Orleans restore their aliveness after the devastation of Katrina. Our sense of oneness with all that is thus joins itself to the strength of community. It's the community that gives us the energy to keep going, to fly, as Berry says, rather than trudge.

And I hope I don't need to point out that the Easter story wrestles with a very difficult reality. It tells the story of a Jewish peasant wisdom-teacher who was completely crushed by the brutal system of Empire. Death by the cross is a cruelty few of us in the modern world can imagine – the degradation and tragedy of it was a horror story. Yet after that tale is told, the story moves to the garden, and that aliveness. Not a resuscitation, but simply "a something more..." not about some future life, but about this one.

Anna Akhmatova knew degradation and tragedy too. A Revolution and a Civil War had left much of her beloved nation in shambles, "a tumble down shanty town" is how I read the Russian. Yet, like Berry, she asks the question, "So why then is everything so radiant here?" Then, like the Easter story, she sets her sense of light and aliveness out in the natural world, the gardens, the wilderness outside of town. "In the wonderful woods there," she exults, "cherry blossoms perfume the landscape by day." And then, almost predicting the reaction of both Andrew and me to the night sky, she writes, "And by night, new constellations descend to crown the transparent bowl of summer sky's Milky Way." I felt a shiver as I read that poem the first time. "That's me!" I

said. "I see the bowl of stars above me on a summer night as a radiance without peer." And then Akhmatova does what the Easter Story does, she connects the light and radiance of the night sky and spring cherry blossom to the harsh realities she knows: the social struggle of the people after a destructive war. "Look at how close the Marvelous draws near to the tumble-down shantytown of our land. No one can define what it means, this truth so clear; but we've been waiting for ages for it to be at hand."

She says it better than I did, Akhmatova. As I grow older, I have become unaffected by either claims of belief or unbelief. She simply says, more directly, "No one can define what it means" – meaning this relationship of aliveness and light to the gloomy difficulties of our suffering world – but she clearly feels in her bones that the Marvelous is drawing near anyway.

It's a powerful statement. Sometimes the Marvelous is not just that sense of ecstasy under the stars or cherry blossoms, sometimes the Marvelous is alive in those of us, in our progressive religious community, who together reach out to the homeless guy on the street. Or the harassed immigrant woman down the way; or to those crucified on the bureaucratic crosses so well devised by so-called health care systems. Or field workers paid slave wages. Or recently, to all of us effected by the economic debacle, supported entirely by the Supreme Court, that keeps those who have the wealth and means in absolute power over those who don't have such wealth and means. The Marvelous comes up radiantly against cruelty – it's the Easter story, divorced from either belief or unbelief or any "kept faith," which gives me hope that outlasts my despair every year.

In just three weeks, Andrew is moving out to Washington State. He does not know what he is going to do, but then, when I was in my early twenties, I did pretty much the same thing, moved out west to discover myself. But before he goes, I will have to thank my favorite trapeze dancer for handing me my Easter sermon on a plate, so to speak. Thanks, Andrew. You're amazing. Safe travels.

Offering

Returning

The Flower Ceremony

Prayer of Consecration (from Norbert Capek, 1923)

hands may be held aloft in blessing

Precis: Norbert Capek was the minister of the largest Unitarian church in the world, the one in Prague (Praha). He came up with this ceremony to help celebrate the unity in diversity of his vast congregation.

When the Nazis came into his country, they warned him to stop being so critical in his sermons. He did not stop. One day, his daughter Bodhana told me 35 years ago, there was a loud knock at his door, and the Gestapo came in and took him away, and his family never saw him again. Later on they found out he had been killed at Dachau. We celebrate this ceremony not in his memory, but for the same reason he did, to celebrate the power of diversity in unity. We use his words, adapted for our generation:

East: Spirit of Life, we find your blessing in these messengers of fellowship and love.

South: May they remind us, that even though our skills and what we know can be very different from each other, and even though we can do different things, to be yet unified in our desire for mutual affection and devotion to Love's holy purposes.

West: May they also remind us of the value of working and playing together, and sharing ourselves openly and kindly. May we cherish the gifts of deep friendship.

North: May we not let our awareness of another's talents discourage us, or warp our relationship with each other; but may we realize that, *whatever* we do, great or small, it counts; and that, therefore, the efforts of *all* of us are needed to do spirit's work in this world.

Then these unison words, from a hymn by Capek:

**With the sun on our brows, enthusiasm
will bloom once again. Along the dangerous
narrow straits of your life, the sun of hope
will bring warmth. Let peace touch every
flower; forgive, play host to everyone.
Freedom was, and it will be again.**

(children distribute the consecrated flowers)

Singing #14 The Sun at High Noon

Blessing