

Easter 2005: The Hard Work of Second Chances

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Reading:

"Eastering" by Barbara Pescan
Why this sadness toward spring?
Half smiles at the first yellow flowers,
Tears pooling for no reason with each rain and sunset?

Each year this green show
blows wide winter's covering and lets us see
the swell and push of beginning again.

Am I meant to rise too?
To push away what leans against the door of my pinched heart?
I cannot.
Compassion for myself
is a slow growing crop,
however carefully tended
it yields an unreliable harvest.

These resurrections
ask more of me than I can give
every time
this hurts more
than the pains of my body
than the old world full of sorrows
this offering of love
this unbearable gift of another chance.

Sermon:

For many Unitarian Universalists, even Christian Unitarian Universalists, the challenge of Easter is to decide its meaning for us. Having cut ourselves loose from the fetters of another's interpretation is both a blessing and a weighty obligation. This particular morning, that obligation leaves us the doorway to an empty tomb looking with fresh eyes

to this part of the story, this set of events and the challenge of finding meaning for ourselves in it all.

Classically understood, a focus of the Easter message has been on the resurrection of Jesus. Classically understood, this bodily resurrection is a sign of life's triumph over death, of God's forgiveness to a world that tried to banish his presence in its most potent form from the world. It is a message that tells of the most remarkable kind of second chances that are offered to us all.

This morning I'd like to take up the resurrection, not Jesus' but the promise of our own. It's a theme that has been present not only in the Easter story this week but an undercurrent in the Terri Schiavo case. For some, the promise of resurrection, of body and spirit, is very real and compelling.

Let me say that I don't want to speak today about the promise of the resurrection of the body. Whether or not we are all to be bodily resurrected is something we will all know in time. And I'm not really sure what I would do with that belief or knowledge even if I had it. What intrigues me more than the possibility that our bodies will be resurrected in some distant time is the possibility of other kinds of resurrection that I think is also part of the Easter message, and the far more compelling part for me.

A colleague of mine, Frances Manley, pointed out that resurrection is different from rebirth. Easter, it seems, gets tied up in both. Rebirth, as she sees it, is what happens in the natural cycles of the earth and in our internal selves also. Rebirth is what happens almost without our permission or participation, like changing seasons of the year. It is about the reality of the times to celebrate that follow times to mourn; about the times we pluck up what is planted, after seasons of dutiful sowing of seed.

Anne Morrow Lindbergh in her "Gifts of the Sea" talks about love in terms of such natural cycles. She puts it in terms of the ebb and flow of the tides. There is an

ebb and flow of life, of love, of relationships ... [Relationships are like islands], surrounded and interrupted by the sea, and continually visited and abandoned by the tides. One must accept the security of the winged life, of the ebb and flow ...

Rebirth is about the *flow* of those tides. It is about the return of hope or expectation, a fullness that fills us any time of the year, but so often and so much more easily at this time of the year, when the Earth itself is coming back to life. It is about the irrepressibility of spring, what e.e. cummings described as the flood of "everything which is natural, which is infinite, which is yes."

Part of Easter is about this rebirth. It is about this promise that comes like clockwork with the change of seasons; the promise of new life and new beginnings. We feel it in relationships that light up again. We find it in passions for some part of life that well up

again, and in the simple joy at each day that magically seems present again. This is the work of rebirth that so often *just happens to us*.

Resurrection, according to my colleague, is about something that is more like a radical break from the natural order of things. It is harder and less common. It is about "not waking from sleep," or winter's hibernation, "but a return from the dead." Resurrection is about rolling back the rock from the parts of ourselves we have shut away, parts that Manley says have been "crucified by some great hurt or betrayal or loss or tragedy." It is about reviving pieces of ourselves. Committing to resurrection is about the larger commitment to ourselves and our yearnings for wholeness.

The story of resurrection seen in this light is all around us. I see it in the stories of your lives and in the world outside this community.

* There is resurrection in the woman whose partner left her, but who one day chooses to love again and risk feeling the vulnerability and the hope for the promise of lifelong partnership again.

* It is in the story of the man who gave up his art for a career in business, but years later digs out his sketch pad and pencils and faces the buried urge to create and the gift at creating that were his.

* It is about the woman who reconnects with her family, casting aside long-standing slights to be more imbedded in the larger context of who she is.

* It is in the *community* that looks hard at its traditions and creeds that have frozen them in irrelevance, and rediscovers what once inspired it to great work in the world, creating new traditions and creeds that reflect this.

Resurrection seen in this light is about any time we roll back the stone that seals a tomb that holds some piece of ourselves hostage to death and breathe life back into it.

This resurrection is complicated work. To begin with, it takes discernment. There are parts of ourselves that have rightly been laid to rest. There are, for example, pieces of who we are or how we were in the world that served their time, but don't serve us in the present. We rightly let die outdated coping mechanisms, passionate pursuits that have run their course. We are right to leave behind relationships so painful, so destructive or so beyond repair that they do not feed life on any level. So not all that is dead and buried is a rightful candidate for resurrection.

Resurrection is also hard work and offers us no guarantees about its outcomes. As my colleague Frances Manley says, Easter is about the promise "not that the stone *will* be rolled away, but that it *can* be." It *can* be, however, only if we are willing to let go of what once was and the comfort of what is known and enter the unknown. This is the resurrection that Barbara Pescan resists; the work that asks us to rise again, to look once more at what we have already given up on. This is the sometimes *unbearable* gift of a second chance. The couple who chooses to try to rediscover what holds them together after an experience of betrayal faces that unbearable gift of a second chance. The mother or father who tries to live again after the death of a child faces it. The woman or man who

learns to walk or talk again after an accident or stroke left them unable to do either faces that painful and uncertain work of second chances.

Finally, resurrection, when it does happen, requires what Dorothy Solle calls a "revolutionary patience." Here's the paradox of this Easter gift: We not only have to want new life and hope for and work for it, but we have to be able to wait for it. Nikos Kazantzakis, in his autobiographical book *Report to Greco*, captures this waiting and watchful quality of resurrection in a story he tells about a chrysalis. Remember that in Greek tradition, the butterfly is a symbol of the human soul. He writes:

Once ... I ... detached a chrysalis from the trunk of an olive tree and placed it in my palm. Inside the transparent coating I discerned a living thing. It was moving. The ... future, still-enslaved butterfly was waiting with silent tremors for the sacred hour when it would emerge into the sunlight. It was not in a hurry. Having confidence in the light, the warm air, in God's eternal law, it was waiting.

But I was in a hurry. I wanted to see the miracle hatch before me as soon as possible, wanted to see how the body surges out of its tomb and shroud to become a soul. Bending over, I began to blow my warm breath over the chrysalis and behold! A slit soon incised itself on the chrysalis' back, the entire shroud gradually split from top to bottom, and the immature, bright green butterfly appeared, still tightly locked together, its wings twisted, its legs glued to its abdomen. It squirmed gently and kept coming more and more to life beneath my warm, persistent breath. One wing as pale as a budding poplar leaf disengaged itself from the body and began to palpitate, struggling to unfold along its entire length, but in vain. It stayed half-opened, shriveled. Soon, the other wing moved as well, toiled in its own right to stretch, was unable to, and remained half-unfolded and trembling. I, with a human being's effrontery, continued to lean over and blow my warm exhalation upon the maimed wings, but they had ceased to move now and had drooped down, as stiff and lifeless as stone.

I felt sick at heart. Because of my hurry, because I had dared to transgress an eternal law, I had killed the butterfly. In my hand I held a carcass. Years and years have passed, but that butterfly's weightless carcass has weighed heavily on my conscience ever since.

There are no guarantees in the work of resurrection. We don't know whether resurrection will take place, nor can we predict where this work and this miracle when it does happen will take us. We can reach out to the child we gave up for adoption only to discover they have no desire to reach out to us. We can decide we are ready to love again, but not find the person who will be that partner we hoped for. We can roll back a stone and find that what's in there cannot be coaxed back to life. All that is beyond our control.

In the end, all we can do to participate in resurrection is know that there is something in our lives that we want to bring back to life. The work of resurrection, like any transformation, is ultimately about surrender to the unknown. Kathleen Norris writes,

"We have to ask to be led someplace we never dreamed of going, a place we don't want to be. We'll find ourselves there, one morning, opened like leaves and *it will be all right.*"

So this is the promise of Easter. First, the promise of rebirth. This is the easier work of Easter. It happens around us and even despite us. Second is the promise of resurrection, far more challenging, and far less common.

Rebirth, you might say, is the promise of the Easter *season*. Resurrection is the promise of the Easter *story*. May there be room in our lives for both -- for the spontaneous shoots of new life that come in the natural cycles of life's seasons, *and* the occasional hard-won transformations that come from finding the rejected, buried or shut-away pieces of ourselves or our lives and slowly, lovingly weaving them back into the living fabric of who we are.

Easter offers us both. It is a season of second chances -- gorgeous and difficult, easy and unbearable second chances -- that invite us into fuller and more hopeful living. May we support each other in this journey of heart and soul. And may the promise of Easter be ours and a life more vibrant and alive and whole be the miracle of this season for each of us and for all humankind. Amen.