

# *Easter Sunday: A Chance to Be Reborn*

**Rev. Vanessa Rush Southern**

**[The Unitarian Church in Summit](#)**

**March 31, 2002**

In the Beliefs column of the New York Times two weeks ago, Peter Steinfelds talked of surveying children's books about Easter and Passover. What he found was that while the Passover books took seriously the religious meaning of the feast, the Easter books all but ignored the religious story behind that holiday. Children's books about Easter tended to be filled with stories of bunnies and horses, and egg hunts, with almost no mention of Jesus, while the Passover stories told the entire history behind that festival.

You might say that one of the reasons we avoid telling the Easter story is that we don't want to tell children stories about things like crucifixion. Yet the Passover story is filled with tales of plagues and pharaohs who want firstborn children killed. It is just as hard a story to tell, and yet it seems that, for Jews, the desire to communicate that story in its fullness comes out of a desire to communicate to their children what the story's message of liberation and oppression really means, in concrete terms. There is the sense that if they make the message vivid, then they can make the call to combat oppression real for their children.

I think Easter also loses its theological punch if we leave out the hard part of the story. Just as with the Passover story, if we are afraid to tell our children the full story around Easter, we neuter that story's message and its power. So, to begin the story of Easter Sunday where it is meant to begin is to begin a few days before on what is called Good Friday.

Good Friday, not so surprisingly, is not a high holiday among religious liberals. The reason is obvious: Our faith tends to focus on human goodness and possibility and Good Friday is all about when human goodness deserts us. But then, we liberals are often accused of taking human sin too lightly.

So let us deny our heritage for a moment and enter the Easter story where it truly begins, on the Friday that preceded it.

The protagonist in this story was a good man. We are told he was patient and wise, that he befriended common men and prostitutes, supped with his supposed enemies, lived by the Golden Rule, always did what his conscience demanded. According to the stories written about him, he was also a man of integrity and courage, who witnessed to his beliefs by exposing evil and untruths wherever he found them. He also followed a sense of calling into the world, though sometimes he wished he could avoid it. And he paid a great personal price for that calling.

At our best we are like this man and at our worst we are like those who did him in. Either way, what happened to him was awful. This man was tried on false and trumped-up charges. He was convicted by a bloodthirsty crowd, taunted and beaten and humiliated by men who should have had nothing against him, and he was killed through the slow and agonizing sentence of crucifixion, left to suffocate under his own weight, exposed without reprieve to the noonday sun of Palestine.

I know that what some folks find a barrier to taking this story seriously is their wonderings as to whether this man, named Jesus, walked this Earth 2,000 years ago. I am not saying that the quest for the historical Jesus is useless. It has its place, but I would not want that pursuit to get in the way of entering deeply into this story and taking seriously the questions it raises.

Whether or not Jesus walked the Earth, men like Jesus -- good men of courage and conscience, and good women, too -- have walked this Earth. They still do. And whether or not he was crucified, others have been. Moreover, people of good faith still do suffer at the hands of others and for no good reason at all.

And so, whether or not this tale is a creation of the human imagination of late antiquity or the work of mythologized history, the truth of this story, in the largest sense, remains. Humanity will do evil to humanity. Humans at their worst will try to kill what is best in each other, and good and courageous people, prophets who cry out against injustice and speak new truths, will be and are at grave risk. What Good Friday asks us to consider is what it would mean to live in a world in which this evil reality triumphed.

This weekend I went to see the *Lord of the Rings* movie, "The Fellowship of the Ring." It turns out it is a perfect Good Friday movie.

The backdrop of the movie, if I have it right, is that the dark forces of Middle-earth are gathering strength to defeat the forces of good. In the movie, you watch as these evil forces conquer kingdoms, denude the land, murder and enslave people. For three hours (it is a long movie), you feel the hot breath of evil -- true evil -- on your neck, and in vivid imagery you are caught up in a tidal wave of cruelty and vice that builds such that it begins to feel almost unstoppable. At one point, an elven princess says that the motley crew of humans, hobbits, an elf, a dwarf and a wizard who seek to turn back the tide walk "as if on the edge of a knife." The whole fate of the world and all its races rests with this group, which cannot make *a single false step* without risking losing everything worth loving.

What the movie does so well is to make evil concrete. In vivid and powerful imagery, you see the cruel leaders and ashen landscape that would characterize a world in which evil is victorious. Moreover, you *feel* the emptiness, lifelessness and lovelessness of this world. To see all this is to *know* what you risk losing and what poor shadow of the life you cherished you would have if this motley crew were to fail in its venture.

Well, Good Friday is supposed to take us to that same place. When Jesus dies on that cross, and the sky turns black and the earth shakes, and the temple curtain is ripped, it is because on this day, evil has triumphed. On this day, all that is good, all that is kind and courageous has been taken from the Earth, *and* it has not been banished by accident or divine ordinance, but by human cruelty and vice. Facing all of this, we are supposed to ask ourselves on this day: Would we want to live in such a world?

It is up against this Good Friday story that the Easter message is framed and makes sense. For it is in the face of all that is beautiful having been lost, up against this backdrop of despair and unmitigated loss, that two women enter the scene.

These women come to perform last rites. In a symbolic sense, these last rites they come to perform are not just for Jesus but for the whole human race. The women come, full of despair, to carry out this one last act of love.

And what they find is astounding. At the tomb, they find proof of what they didn't believe was possible -- namely, that death, cruelty and hate have not been allowed the last word. Here they find an empty tomb, a Jesus who (impossibly) is still alive -- whether in body or in spirit. Here they find hope when they thought there was none left. Here they find that the world, undeserving as it is, has been given a second chance. Here is proof that goodness may still prevail. It is a moment captured well in this excerpt from "The Cure at Troy" by Seamus Heaney:

Human beings suffer.  
They torture one another.  
They get hurt and get hard.  
No poem or play or song  
Can fully right a wrong  
Inflicted and endured.

History says, Don't hope  
On this side of the grave,  
But then, once in a lifetime  
The longed for tidal wave  
Of justice can rise up  
And hope and history rhyme.

So hope for a great sea-change  
On the far side of revenge.  
Believe that a farther shore  
Is reachable from here.  
Believe in miracles  
And cures and healing wells.

Can miracle self-healing,  
The utter self-revealing

Double-take of feeling.  
If there's fire on the mountain  
And lightning and storm  
And a god speaks from the sky

That means someone is hearing  
The outcry and the birth-cry  
Of new life at its term.  
It means once in a lifetime  
That justice can rise up  
And hope and history rhyme.

Now what we must do is remember both parts of the story of Easter. We who have lived through this story and through the last year know what a horrible world it would be if evil were allowed to triumph. Knowing that, we must then keep our eyes peeled for the inroads of such a world. We must keep protective watch over the Earth and its natural beauty, watch for erosions of human dignity, protect vulnerability, be wary of a system of arbitrary and retributive justice, allow prophets to speak even if we disagree with them, foster an early warning system against those who would have us live out of fear rather than vision, speak often of what we cherish and invite others to save and savor it as we do. And when what we love is threatened, we know the urgency of the call and must be ready to leap into the breach.

So this is the Easter story. It is a Good Friday story that brings an urgency to our protection of what is good and beautiful and true in our world. And it is the Easter morning story that reminds us that despite everything, the Good will have a fighting chance, and *sometimes more than one*. So let us seize the day, cherish what is good, be brave in our living, and make this an Easter world in which hope and history rhyme.

May it be so. Amen.