

# *Finding Hope When All Seems Lost*

**Rev. Vanessa Rush Southern**

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

**April 20, 2003**

The message of Easter is that there is life and promise even in the most despondent of times. Roll back the rock on the tomb in which you buried the most precious thing you knew and loved, and this world is transformed and surprised by what you find there. The message is that sometimes the impossible happens. The Easter message is about hope and a reminder to take heart, for it tells us that life trumps death, good is not cowed or banished by evil or ignorance. It is a story of how a world that deserved no second chance got one.

But let's look at the world in which we are living.

I don't need to tell all of you that this winter has been long and hard. This last snowstorm a few weeks ago, the one that buried the daffodils, seemed like the final insulting blow of a season that didn't know and didn't care that it had worn out its welcome months before.

Moreover, our woes haven't just been the clouds and cold of winter. To the tenacity of winter we have had to add the horrors of war. We've had to listen to talk about precision warfare, but also add up the inevitable body counts. We've seen our hopes that the "liberated people" would dance in the streets replaced by the reality of them shooting back instead. Even Baghdad's liberation was accompanied by news of looting and chaos in the streets. Perhaps it's all for a good cause, but we won't know that until the work of reconstruction is through. In the meantime, news of war is never pleasant. Deep shades of gray played out at the end of a long, cloudy winter.

And, as if all that weren't enough, we've continued to sit under the shadow of a languid economy. People are out of work or worried about losing their jobs. People are in jobs they hate but are staying for fear of not being able to find anything else. Retirement funds are dwindling.

Add to this all the normal troubles of life -- illness, challenges of parenting, bills, marital stress, and the insane schedules by which most of us live -- and this has been a tough winter. Maybe even a difficult *year*. It has been a winter of discontent, and it hasn't always been clear that glorious summer would ever break through that deep and dreamless sky that low'ed over us.

In theological language, I would say it has been a Good Friday season, even a Good Friday world for this last year or so. Good seems to be in retreat. Hope has been on a long unpaid leave.

So I must admit that I have not felt in much of an Easter mood lately. Indeed, the Good Friday part of the story has made much more sense to me. However, you cannot ignore Easter forever, especially if you have to *preach* on it. So recently I set out on a kind of spiritual quest -- an Easter egg hunt, you might say -- for those hidden treasures that might jolt me into the Easter spirit. I went looking for those signs of life that triumphs over death and good that will not be cowed by ignorance and evil. And I found three treasures that I want to share with you, for any of you who might also be stuck in Good Friday and yearning to be lifted into Easter's promise.

The first of these treasures was by far the most obvious. Maybe it is trite to even mention it, but it was nature that was my first find. I tried to ignore her, because her mood was not mine, but trying to ignore nature in spring is like trying to meditate while a toddler throws a tantrum. Both are loud and unrelenting in their efforts.

This year, like all years, I suppose, spring is a poster child for rebirth and resurrection. Oblivious to what we humans do, she continues like a Mack truck, insisting on beauty. This last week, she sprang full force into action, surprising us with joy and majesty at every turn. The daffodils were like an army of yellow soldiers standing proud in a thousand gardens, the hyacinths perfumed the air, the cherry trees and magnolias were awash in pink blossoms.

I remember after September 11th being a bit perturbed by nature and her oblivion. On that day, I'm sure you will remember, she offered up one of the most beautiful days imaginable. That same day, a friend of mine gave birth to her first son, pushing him into the world at Overlook Hospital in the few minutes between when the first and second towers were hit.

At first I thought it a horrible cruelty on nature's part -- lavishing beauty and joy on such a tragic day. Later, however, it seemed that maybe she was simply reminding us of our place in the world. Were we humans important? Yes. All-important? No. Much more important than we was the work of life itself going on, unstoppable, inexorably moving forward. And so it would, with or without us. There was a strange kind of comfort in that fact.

This season, the message seems to be that rebirth goes on, with or without us. Not up to Easter? Nature doesn't really care. She has work to do. So she is the first piece of treasure on my hunt for resurrection. A cheerleader for the cause. A reminder that you either get on the Easter bandwagon or get left behind.

The second piece of treasure was right under my nose (as treasure so often is), but I saw it as if for the first time this week. It came when I met with the Pastoral Care Associates. This is a group of lay ministers that has been gathering together all year, once a month, for training and planning.

I must confess, I'm not always the best leader of this group. I'm only beginning to figure out how to use them. I don't always carve out the time to call and check in or give them

new assignments, but they faithfully come to our meetings and respond to every request that comes their way. They are doing incredible work. They reach out to people who are new and people whom we haven't seen for a while. They reach out to people who are in the hospital or home recuperating. They even reach out to strangers and friends of friends whose names have been brought to our attention.

At our first gathering, I asked them all why they wanted to do this work, to commit to this particular lay ministry. As we went around the table, a theme emerged from these very different stories. It was the story of people's own pain or suffering and those moments or gestures that eased that suffering. There was divorce that left you feeling alone and the friend who called and asked if she might drive you to church, so you could walk in with someone else. There were the awful medical problems and hospitalization, and the nurse you'll never forget who didn't make you feel embarrassed when you threw up or lost control of your bowels. There was the child who needed help and the gratitude for all those who came to offer you their connections to get him the help he needed. The stories went on -- tales of suffering, loneliness, pain, frustration, despair, and the other tales of gentleness and care that eased the burden and bound up the wounds.

According to Will Durant, the historian, there have only been 27 years in the world's history in which no two nations somewhere have been at war. So war, like human struggle, pain and fear, has always been a part of the human condition. As Lynn Ungar writes in her poem "Passover":

You were born  
through a doorway marked in blood.  
We are, all of us, passed over,  
brushed in the night by terrible wings.

So we cannot avoid suffering, but we can find ways to ease it. Perhaps one of the most precious lessons of this last year, for me, has been a deeper appreciation of simple kindness and its power to resurrect the spirit. And also how the experience of kindness, in some ways, can be fully understood only in the light of pain and despair, and how such experiences of pain prompt us to reach out to others in pain. One of the lessons of this last year, for me, has been a reminder of simple, gentle acts -- if they don't discharge a burden, at least they make it more bearable.

Poet Naomi Shihab Nye in her poem "Kindness" writes:

Before you know what kindness really is  
you must lose things,  
feel the future dissolve in a moment  
like salt in a weakened broth.  
What you held in your hand,  
what you counted and carefully saved,  
all this must go so you know

how desolate the landscape can be  
between the regions of kindness ...

Before you learn the tender gravity of kindness,  
you must travel where the Indian in a white poncho  
lies dead by the side of the road.  
You must see how this could be you,  
how he too was someone  
who journeyed through the night with plans  
and the simple breath that kept him alive.

Before you know kindness as the deepest thing inside,  
You must know sorrow as the other deepest thing.  
You must wake up with sorrow.  
You must speak to it till your voice  
catches the thread of all sorrows  
and you see the size of the cloth.

Then it is only kindness that makes sense anymore,  
only kindness that ties your shoes  
and sends you out into the day to mail letters and purchase bread,  
only kindness that raises its head  
from the crowd of the world to say  
It is I you have been looking for,  
and then goes with you everywhere  
Like a shadow or a friend.

So, in the work of the Pastoral Care team and within our community, I find another treasure -- all the simple acts of kindness that reach out to connect one to the other, to share a bit of the load, kindness born of pain, responding to pain, alleviating pain. In a Good Friday world, or a Good Friday year, there is hope and the promise of new life in each and every such act. So seeing this and being reminded of its power to resurrect the spirit was my second treasure on the search for Easter.

Finally, I would say there are some stories I've heard in recent weeks about your lives in the world beyond these walls that offered me clues to the last treasure.

\* Two couples poised on the brink of divorce have found the strength to work toward reconciliation.

\* A woman struggling with cancer is determined to beat it and smiles every time I see her.

\* On a hard-fought child custody issue, middle ground seems to have been found, just when I was ready to urge the father to give in.

In other words, I have been reminded recently of, and find succor and inspiration in, our human willpower. I am buoyed up by our steadfast refusal, as people of faith, to give up. I am uplifted by our *stubbornness* as human beings. From peace marchers who march in

force after war has begun, to soldiers who insist on giving the enemy the benefit of the doubt even when it imperils their own lives. From those who buy hybrid-electric cars when trucks and SUVs far outsell them, to the New Jersey voters who organized a hue and cry to protest the cutting of all funding for the arts in this year's budget wranglings. From the decision to rebuild at Ground Zero, to families' decisions to move back downtown. We human beings, for all the ill we do to each other and our world, have a foolhardy, headstrong love of life and devotion to hope that sometimes defies all odds. It gives me hope.

So this Easter, I want to say a quick blessing on all these people. On every man and woman who risks death to speak out against unjust governments. On every human rights activist who looks the most atrocious abuses of human life squarely in the face out of a dream of stemming that abuse. May happiness descend on every couple who marries against the specter of divorce; on every parent who gives a child to this hurting world; every gardener who plants a tree or bulb. Our headstrong and foolhardy human trust in life and devotion to it is an Easter message lived by all of us day after day, every day of our lives. It is part of the world's hope for redemption.

This isn't the first hard winter humanity has ever lived through, nor is it the first difficult and painful era. There have been Good Friday years and Good Friday worlds before ours. And there will be such after we are gone.

But what choice do we really have when faced with all of this? Can we really just surrender to loss or despair? Do we give up on the good? And what happens if we do? *We are the handmaidens of resurrection.* Nature may remind us of the beauty of the call, cheerlead us on our way, and perhaps great forces do intervene from time to time in human history and work miracles, but we cannot count on those. Instead we must trust that there is resurrection to be had, and call ourselves to its work.

The Easter story tells us that we cannot give up -- that in the worst of worlds, the most surprising miracles can take place. Nature tells us that life will go on. Kindness can break the hold and stem the tide of despair. And all around us are people whose stubborn refusal to give up inspires our own determined love of life. So this Easter, we cast our lot, as Adrienne Rich says, with those who perversely, for no particular reason, reconstitute this world.

Let us remember that what stands behind us and within us is always more powerful than what stands in front of us. Let us, as Mary Oliver says, breathe in the pain of the world but breathe out flocks of red-winged blackbirds. Breathe in terrorists, and breathe out sleeping children and freshly mown fields. Let us practice resurrection. Be agents of rebirth. Be Easter people in a Good Friday world, and in so doing, make the miracles of this season take shape and form, and heal and reclaim this world for Good. For good.

Happy Easter, everyone. I love you. God bless.

Amen.

