

Hope Where You Least Expect to Find It

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Easter is a complicated story for us Unitarian Universalists, perhaps because Jesus is complicated for so many of us. The questions we have are myriad: Did he live? Did he not? Do the Gospels record the truth of his life or a distorted, mythologized retelling? Did the miracles happen, or, if not, what do we make of them?

Krista Tippet, host of the radio program “Speaking of Faith,” parried some of these questions beautifully in a recent program. She implied that a culture’s great stories do become more like myths in their retelling. But Tippet said, “Myth, as the ancient Greek statesman Solon once said, is not about something that never happened but about something that happens over and over again.” In other words, the great stories of every tradition, mythologized as they inevitably are, are in some ways *as true* in their mythic telling as any work of science or history, in that they capture something in the human experience that is persistent and eternal.

So each year, if we can leave the questions of historicity behind, the question we are left with when we retell the stories is: What is it in each story that captures something persistent in human experience that we have felt is worth naming over and over again? And each year, as we answer that question, the story gathers layers and texture with the retelling, growing richer in its significance for us. That is how I hope we approach stories such as Easter’s -- turned on to what might live just below the surface of that fantastic telling.

For me this year, what leapt out of the story is how the two women find hope where we’d least expect them to find it. It made me wonder whether this is part of the story that is true again and again for us also. How often is it that we find hope in the most unlikely of places, and what could be the purpose of remembering that?

It is easy for me to imagine life for the two women at the tomb that morning. We know they come with the spices they prepared two days earlier, ready to anoint Jesus’ body. They are two people who loved this man, his message, who pinned their vision for life and what made it meaningful and radiant on his. How clearly each would have stepped into Jesus’ ill-fated shoes if life would have allowed them to make that switch, but like so many of us, they aren’t given the choice. Instead they are forced to watch the end of his life unfold in Technicolor cruelty.

They arrive at the tomb two days later to bless what is already lost to them. Yet what they find at the mouth of the tomb is one (or some gospels say two) men in dazzling clothing. We are told these are angels, and they ask the women why they are looking for the living

among the dead. They say that Jesus is not in the tomb, and not because Pilate's soldiers came to claim him, but because Jesus has come alive again. A few sightings later, the message is unambiguous and unanimously accepted by the disciples -- God has had the last word in this story. Not Pilate. Not the betrayal of false friends or the cruelty of the crowd. Life, not death, will write the last word in this story. Jesus' work is not yet done, and neither is ours.

I'm hard pressed to come up with a story of hope as dramatically and unexpectedly offered as that in the Easter story. But the story has smaller resonances and refrains in many of the stories we tell, real and fictional, and in the lives we lead. Here are some of those stories:

A member of this congregation, Gretchen Rosenberg, whom I asked about this subject of hope in unexpected places, talked about the years she spent doing hospice work. She said it always amazed her how often it was in the room of a dying patient that she was ministered to or given hope. Others who do similar work talk also of the laughter so omnipresent in the rooms of the dying. Family around the bed, holding hands, telling stories of good times and mishaps they rose above. People saying goodbye in ways so tender and honest, the air feels softer and the whole ordeal somehow brings the family closer together, when it might have torn them apart.

Hope in unexpected places.

I think of the story Jeff Grob tells of arriving at his home one of the first mornings after it burned down, with the building still smoldering, and finding in the middle of his driveway a huge basket filled with clothes and food -- everything you'd need, a kind of post-disaster survival kit filled with canned food and underwear. It had been left without a note by no one in particular, but the message was clear: It was a message of hope, that others saw his suffering and cared, and that he wouldn't go through this ordeal alone.

How often hope comes in unexpected places and from unexpected messengers.

The story that comes to mind for me on this subject is something that took place when I was still living in Washington, D.C. I had gone away for a week and left behind some pretty difficult circumstances. While I was away, I must confess, I completely forgot my troubles and the anguish they were causing me, but when I landed at the airport, it was as if my problems came to the airport to meet me. No sooner had I deplaned than they threw themselves in welcome across my shoulders and bore down on me ton for ton.

By the time I made it to the baggage claim area, I was back in the grip of the anxiety and despair over painful circumstances that I didn't see any good way out of. I didn't think it showed, but it must have been evident on my face and body, because while I was walking some long concourse, I felt a tap on my shoulder. I looked around and a face peered up into mine. There stood a man I did not know; his wife was looking perplexed and embarrassed, tugging at his sleeve as if to say, "Harold, come on!" But the man wouldn't be pulled away. He held me for a second, looking straight into my eyes with gentleness

and a sense of confirmed resolve, and said: “Young lady, whatever it is, it cannot be *that* bad.” He hesitated a moment for his remark to register, smiled a slight, easy smile, nodded, and then walked away.

I was dumbstruck, stunned for a second. What chutzpah, I thought! And then I thought about what he had said and had to laugh. He was right, of course: What I was facing wasn't *that* bad. I would get through it all one way or the other. Most miraculous, however, was that it was as if his act broke a spell. No sooner had he yanked me out of my place of despair, than I set about making the tough decisions I had to, and moving on. Life *was* too short for despair, and he'd somehow managed to remind me of that, though what possessed him to do so I cannot imagine.

All of us have stories of someone who reached in with a passing word or a courageous act that changed the air we breathed and us with it. We all have stories of seemingly random experiences that opened us wide at a time we were shut tight to life and its possibilities. A key gets slipped under the door of our routine; a letter comes in the mail; love or forgiveness makes an appearance in a place we thought only fear or distrust or pain knew the way.

Or perhaps, like those women at the tomb, we sometimes do the only last thing we can imagine doing, and it ends up being the first step in a new journey.

In this vein, I think of a friend of mine who graduated from college with an art degree and did what any good person with an art degree does -- she went to work for an advertising agency. The day she got a promotion, the panic attacks started. She felt embarrassed about them, like they were proof that she wouldn't be able to function in an adult world. Wasn't the promotion a huge vote of confidence by the firm -- wasn't it a good thing??

Well, it didn't matter how she thought she *should* feel -- the panic didn't go away, until her only option was quitting. When she did so, the only thing she could think to do with herself was go to Greece. Going to Greece had been a lifelong dream, but it was hardly the beginning of a functioning life. It felt like failure and running away to her, but she told herself that perhaps if she bought herself a few months away, she could find the strength to return home and face the music of what she imagined adult life was all about.

The truth was that what she lacked wasn't maturity, but clarity of call. Life in Greece -- three years of it -- opened up all kinds of doors, internally and in the world, for her. The woman found her vocation in her time there and functions beautifully “as an adult,” doing something she is inspired and gifted at. That act that felt like shameful retreat and a last-ditch, Hail Mary pass in life's big game became the key to a new life.

Hope comes in unexpected places, from unexpected people, at unexpected times. In the hospital room; while standing on the charred lawn of your home; at the baggage claim in an airport; at the tomb of a loved one; or even on the far shores of failure. It can be born of whim or accident or the intent of an outside actor who takes a walk-on role in our

lives. The messengers are often strange and unlikely bearers of the truths and insights they offer us. And very often, hope in its unlikely form seems to come at just the point when all hope seems lost. Why is that?

It occurs to me that there are two possibilities:

Perhaps the reason is that hope is actually around us all the time, hidden in unlikely places, there for us to find. The problem is that we so often only open ourselves to its unusual manifestations when the usual suspects have failed us. This, then, would be a wake-up call to look more broadly for signs of hope in this world, rather than past it. This Easter story would be an invitation to see the good will of the universe more broadly etched into the nooks and crannies of our lives.

The other possible explanation for hope in unexpected places is the one that is more common to Easter pulpits. It is the possibility that there is something in the universe, among us, within us, flowing through this world -- call it God, or call it the Spirit of Life -- that will fight to rescue and reclaim life whenever it teeters on the edge. Perhaps it is the same force that is there pushing a seedling through the concrete in a city street, and which throws down roots in the dark pumice of volcanic rock just cooled from its destructive flow down the mountain.

This last option, I'll grant you, is a tough theological premise to swallow, particularly for those who have teetered a long time on precipices of loss. Perhaps that is why we tell it in spring, when there is a natural echo in the world that says life will prevail despite the worst of the winter.

Either way, the Easter message is a call never to give up believing in life, even when life as we know it seems lost to us or we lost in it. The story says that in such places and at such times, we should be ready, because life and hope may come in forms and enter through gateways we didn't even know were possible. This is the heart of the message of resurrection.

Let us take this message to heart, and not just be passive recipients of resurrection, but party to it. Let us open ourselves, as unworthy as we might sometimes feel, to be conduits of healing, dogged in our refusal to let love or hope be lost in any dark corner of this world. That we aid in resurrection of our natural world. That we, as Wendell Berry once wrote, "practice resurrection." One kind word, one basket left on a lawn, one failure to give up at a time, until the Easter story is true in all hurting places, a myth made real, an Easter world of life and hope resurrected in all the unexpected and unexpecting places.