

# *Time into Eternity: A Sermon for Easter Sunday*

**Rev. Dr. George Kimmich Beach**  
**[The Unitarian Church in Summit](#)**  
**April 23, 2000**

There are no religions, there are only ways in religion. Our liberal way in religion affirms the dignity and the creative freedom of each human life. It invites us to believe in ourselves and all "great companions" of the way. Our liberal way in religion knows that the final measure of any person's life is the fruits of justice and kindness, and truth and compassion, that it bears. "By their fruits you shall know them" was the way Jesus of Nazareth put it; "salvation by character" was a chief item in the Unitarian's creed a generation ago. The liberal way in religion celebrates the human adventure, and says that history is going somewhere. It invites us to give ourselves to something good and great that will outlast us.

Some will listen to this and say, "That's good. I like the way you people are rooted in this world and this life. If we ask you to speak of another life, you say, 'One world at a time.' But I still want to know, what does your 'liberal way' have to say to a person in the face of death? In the face of the brevity of our days, our time on Earth, what do you say of eternity?"

Easter reminds us of these questions: What part have we time-bound beings in eternity? Have we only conceived the idea of eternity to torture ourselves with the thought of something from which we are forever excluded?

This is an existential question. Questions of meaning (and the anxiety of meaninglessness) underlie them: Is eternity an endless duration of time? Or is it a state of timelessness? Is it something totally different from time, such that we must escape time (perhaps by drugging our minds) in order to have some sense of eternity? None of these ideas sits easily on our minds -- or hearts.

Somehow, I think, whatever we know of eternity must be at least tasted, must be at least glimpsed, in our present experience of life. What experiences do we put credence in? Henry Vaughn, the English metaphysical poet of the 17th century, reported this mystical experience:

I saw eternity the other night,  
Like a great ring of pure and endless light,  
All calm, as it was bright,  
And round beneath it, Time in hours, days, years,  
Driv'n by the spheres

Like a vast shadow mov'd, in which the world  
And all her train were hurl'd ...

I say, if it be anything at all, eternity must include time, must somehow finally take time up and transform it -- just as a single seed must break open and die to itself as a single entity, in order to grow into a great plant and give an abundance of fruit.

Where might we experience time's transformation into eternity? Consider our experiences of creativity, of compassion, and (to make it three c's) of *caritas*, love, in Latin. From *caritas* we get the word "charity," meaning not just something you can deduct from your taxes, but a gift given in love.

About creativity: I have been a potter, and I will be, once again. I love getting my hands on a good hunk of clay and seeing what I can create from it. I used to hang around a studio -- a good place to see what the competition is doing. One thing you learn when you get into this kind of craft is that there is always somebody better than you. Well, one day I looked into the trash bin and saw a small teapot, bisque fired but unglazed. I took it out for a closer look. Mmmm, how refined, unlike my own, squat teapots! "Surely it is cracked," I said to myself. But no, nary a crack or a chip or a flaw could I see. Somebody had trashed this piece, but apparently with care, gently, almost like a burial. Taking it wouldn't be stealing, would it? It would be more like a resurrection.

I looked around the studio and asked, "Is this somebody's teapot?" Joel spoke up: "It was mine." "You mean you don't want it?" "No," he said, "it was just for practice, and the handle's too big." "Oh," I said, wondering how come I hadn't noticed that. I didn't say another word after that, but gently, regretfully, put it back in the trash bin. If Joel was letting go of a below-his-standards teapot, well, I guessed I couldn't make it my own, either. I'm not sure I can explain why, but it seemed like a lesson in giving up superfluous material things and holding fast to your integrity, the one non-superfluous thing.

Call it a story for Lent, a story of sacrifice, of giving up something. Here is a related story, which I think of as a parable of Easter. It comes from the Taoist tradition of ancient China. In *Centering*, a book about pottery-making as a spiritual practice, M.C. Richards tells this Taoist story: A nobleman is riding through a town and sees a potter at work. He admires the grace and rude strength of his pottery, and asks the man how he is able to create such beautiful pieces. "You are looking at the mere outward shape," the potter replies. "What I am forming is within. I am interested only in what remains after the pot has been broken."

M.C. Richards -- herself a master potter -- says this: "It is not pots we are making, but ourselves." In the process of making ourselves -- giving ourselves to a truth, a goodness, and a beauty that are beyond us and yet uniquely embodied in us -- we taste eternity, something timeless and indestructible. Eternity is not the endless duration of time but time's transformation. Eternity is what remains -- the sheer beauty, the inner strength, the moral integrity -- after the pot is broken.

Just so, we cannot hang on to every beautiful or good thing -- or even to our own lives -- forever. If making pots, or even making ourselves, is a kind of incarnation -- the embodiment of a self in the form of a human life -- then there must also be a breaking of things, even ourselves, a willing self-sacrifice. How cluttered the world would be if ceramics were unbreakable! Or if people were unbreakable! But so much pain and grief is bound up with the recognition of death that we avoid contemplating such things.

I believe that what is precious in time endures in eternity. Does life promise such a resurrection? We can only answer by our very lives, by the way we give ourselves to the creation of something good and great, something worthy of eternity.

Resurrection may strike you as a very "orthodox" thing to hear about in such an unorthodox church as this! Perhaps, but perhaps not -- if the meanings we find in it are universal to humanity. These words are ascribed to Jesus in the Gospel of John: "Truly, truly I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain, but if it dies, it bears much fruit" [John 12:24]. All peoples have told stories about the seed that must sacrifice its separate being in order that a plant may grow from it and bear much fruit -- stories about the eternity we seek in the little time that is allotted to us.

Consider compassion. Several years ago, a fine film, "Shadowlands," told a true story of the transformation of two lives in the face of death. C.S. Lewis was a professor who made a scholarly career of writing studies on ancient pagan and Christian ideas of love. Then he began to write books of popular theology, like *The Screwtape Letters*. For years he lived among books and ideas, at one remove from life itself; then, late in life, with a woman named Joy Davidman Gresham, he discovered love in the flesh.

This is the story of two strong personalities, "Jack" Lewis, a bachelor and Oxford don (played by Anthony Hopkins), and Joy Gresham (played by Debra Winger), a brash, no-nonsense American, recently divorced from an abusive husband. She breaks through Lewis' emotionally guarded existence, liberating this academic expert on ideas of love actually to love here and now.

Joy has moved to England with her young son, to start a new life in a new land. She goes to hear Lewis' erudite and witty lectures -- he is famous well beyond the university -- and they develop a friendship. Their relationship is increasingly intense, but he also keeps her at an emotional arm's length. Soon after, Joy is diagnosed with bone cancer. Radiation treatments follow, and her almost miraculous remission gives them several months together. Only in this "borrowed" time, a time of crisis, does Lewis discover the truth of his feeling for her -- in fact, discover his capacity to give love. Only now, in the face of her medical death sentence, does he overcome his reticence and directly, verbally, face to face, declare his love. Is it doubt of his own self-worth that has thwarted his life for so long? Now compassion for her frees his compassion for himself -- letting him own his pained feelings for himself.

Sometimes it seems we are given about as much time as we need. When life is so starkly set against death -- when an immense happiness has been found, only to be snatched away with the onset of a fatal illness -- it is heart-rending. It is a kind of crucifixion. Yet we may be given a little time to come to terms with it.

C.S. Lewis grew up in the Anglican Church, but upon reaching maturity, he concluded that atheism was the only logically rigorous and realistic worldview. His mother's death when he was young probably contributed to his blatant rejection of religion: How can there be a God in so cruel a world? Gradually, in his mature years, he began to find his way back into the church. Lewis' autobiographical story of his early life, titled *Surprised by Joy*, was written (surprisingly enough) before he had met Joy Gresham. The "joy" of his title referred to certain "magical" moments, moments of joy that "take us by surprise." He came to interpret such events as God trying to get through to him. In another sense, in an entirely humanistic interpretation, we could say he was trying to break through to himself. By any understanding, he needed to weep tears of compassion for himself.

Joy Gresham was raised as a secular Jew. Along with her first husband, she had become a Communist in the 1930s when it was fashionable in intellectual circles. Later, in a period of sharp disillusionment, she had turned to Christianity. It was Lewis' books that led her to seek him out when she went to England. The displacement of one certitude by another is a familiar phenomenon. But now, meeting the author in the flesh, she saw the fragile man behind the quick wit and the intellectual certitude. She saw how he encouraged the adulation of his students and his reading public, all the while keeping himself -- the man who had suffered pains and wrestled with doubts -- at a safe distance.

Yes, it is an astonishing coincidence. The woman who loved him and taught him that he could love her, the woman who broke through his infernally self-protective "rightness," the woman who brought him joy, was named Joy. In her he met his match.

The turning point comes during the time of their greatest happiness. They have driven into the countryside, to see the valley that Lewis had known only from an old painting that was hanging in his study. When Joy asks him about it, he explains that it had been in his childhood home, and while he'd never seen the place that it depicted, as a child he'd imagined it as a picture of Heaven, as the place his mother had gone. Now they stop their car at the spot where the artist had stood years before, and together they walk into the scene depicted in the painting. Now the valley, like their love, is real.

It rains (the heavens weep) and they take cover in an old barn. Joy knows she is dying, and she wants to know if Jack is really with her in the life-and-death struggle that lies before her. She needs to know: Does he truly love HER, or is it only for the happiness she brings him? Finally, she says, "The pain is part of the happiness. If you take the joy now, you have to take the suffering later. That's the deal." Shortly after this time, she dies.

I am saying: Affirm life even in the face of death. And be a friend, a lover, a soulmate. Let your greatest passion be compassion. We shall need all the help we can get in the face of our mortality. With com-*passion* -- feeling with -- we must befriend others as we can.

Rejoice with those who rejoice, but equally, suffer with those who suffer -- that's the deal.

I have spoken of creativity, and of compassion. I have said that these are signs of time's transformation into eternity. I noted before a third thing: *caritas*, the gift that is given for no other reason than love. This is where it all comes together, if it ever does. The final imperative is this: Be in love. Be in love with some one, or with some others, and with life itself, Life and each of its incarnations. For this is the very image of Eternity, an image made present and real in moments of joy.

In the last scene of "Shadowlands," Jack Lewis takes Joy's young son by the hand, and leads him through the same lovely valley that he had first imagined as Heaven and then, with Joy, had learned was a real place -- on Earth, in time. Still, it stood for eternity, as he had touched and tasted it. The child longs for his mother desperately. So does Lewis. Together they have begun to emerge from their grief. Lewis now transposes the words that Joy had spoken to him. Quietly, he says to the boy, "If you take the suffering now, you can take the joy, later." It's not a "deal" any longer; it's a promise.

These are the imperatives of Easter: Be somebody, with soul. Be a friend for life. Be in love. Then we shall taste eternity and be raised to new life. That's a promise.