

SERMON “Lo, We Awake”
Easter Sunday, April 12, 2009
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Alleluia! Lo, the Day of Days *is* here, when we celebrate the end of a winter that at some point we thought might never end. Alleluia! I can stand up here in with the masses of blooming bulbs in front of us—and knowing that they are also blooming in our yards and our parks. Alleluia! We can hear the words of Denise Levertov’s poem about a yellow tulip which opens, a “gift beyond gift, beyond reason.”

This morning we have also read from the Gospel of Mark from the New Testament, as millions this world over are doing this day. The words I read are part of the common lectionary readings selected for Easter. The lectionary provides a comprehensive method for reading almost the entire Bible in the context of worship over a three year period. Each Sunday of the year has its appointed readings from the Hebrew Bible or Old Testament and the Christian Scriptures or New Testament. For instance, today, among the recommended readings are from the book of Isaiah (Isa 25.6-9) and the text from Mark we heard earlier. Here is the text from Isaiah: “On this mountain the lord of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines, of rich food filled with marrow, of well-aged wines strained clear. And he will destroy on this mountain the shroud that is cast over all nations; he will swallow up death forever...” I suspect many of you will be going home to a feast of rich food and we all rejoice as the shroud of winter is thrown off for the sun and the buds of spring and the promise of warmer days.

The lectionary also chooses a passage from the letters of the New Testament. Today’s selection is from I Corinthians (I Cor 15:1-11) from a letter by the Apostle Paul to the young Christian community at Corinth. It begins like this: “Now I would remind you, brothers and sisters, of the good news that I proclaimed to you, which you in turn received, in which also you stand...” He is reminding them of the Alleluia- for him the gospel of Jesus’ death and resurrection. He goes on in the ensuing passage to discuss at length the controversy which was apparently raging amongst the Corinthians about the meaning of the resurrections. Even at this most early time in our history, there was not agreement on its meaning.

The lectionary is used by all the denominations, from Roman Catholic to every stripe of Protestant, including quite a number of our Unitarian Universalist churches, believe it or not. We

read these words that are so familiar and seem strange at the same time. Here at the UU Church of Wakefield, we do not often read from the Gospel of Mark or any of the other gospels, yet in the Principles and Purposes of our association, we declare proudly our drawing from Jewish and Christian teachings. The structure of our services and the way we go about things in our congregations comes straight from the Christian Protestant tradition, which is our heritage. We don't often speak the words or read the texts which were once our scriptural basis. I'm not sure our founding UU mothers and fathers would recognize the place!

My very personal feeling is that we are leaving out something very major in our very make-up, if we *never* consult these texts and think about what they might mean to us today, as members of a faith community. I read a book recently which named those who regularly attend a faith community as “resident aliens” in the larger secular culture.¹ We are leaving out something major if we never think of, name or try to define the theological terms which once were the ground of our own faith. Words like grace and forgiveness. Words like redemption and salvation. Rebirth and resurrection. Faith, hope and love. And stories of a man named Jesus. And certainly at Easter, I believe we are remiss if we only talk about tulips, daffodils and rebirth and never grapple with the other “R” word, resurrection.

Before I get to the “R” words this morning—rebirth and resurrection—I want to think about the “L” word which, to me, is what is central about Jesus of Nazareth: love. In the Gospel of John, in a chapter which inexorably leads up to the passion narrative, Jesus gives what he calls a new commandment to his disciples. He asks simply “that you love one another” and he adds to that, “*just as I have loved you, you also should love one another*” (John 13.34). Simple to say—not so simple to do! Just as he has performed the lowliest of jobs such as washing the feet of those he has well loved, his disciples, before the Last Supper, we may take this exhortation to love into our own lives. Love expressed in the simplest tasks of living. For me, it is central to ministry, whether as an ordained clergy person or as lay persons, living from a place of your faith. It is the ground from which we work and serve.

I have realized that, *along* with inspiration from many sources, from many people and Prophets—Buddha, Martin Luther King, Jr., Frank Laubach with his admonition of “Each One Teach One,” Gandhi, composers from John Sebastian Bach to Peter Gabriel, poets from Chaucer to Denise Levertov, *along with these*, the inspiring model of Jesus is most central to my own

¹ Hauerwas, Stanley and William H. Willimon (1989). *Resident Aliens*. Nashville: Abingdom Press.

theology. His prophetic voice speaks strongly to me in this materialistic age. His command to love is a touchstone in the midst of moral dilemmas and conflicting demands.

How did this command to love play out in the ministry I was called to as a Unitarian Universalist community minister for twenty years, before I left that work in the fall and came to you? As you may remember, a major piece of my former ministry was the focus on the elder chorus I founded, the Golden Tones. This is a group of over 50 singing members from all walks of life and faith backgrounds—several UUs, but also practicing and non-practicing Jews, Roman Catholics, Protestants of every stripe, a Taoist, some avowed atheists and some who do avow any particular religion or philosophy. How *can* we all love each other, especially when you have 58 people who come from many different backgrounds and experiences? Or how can we all love each other in a place like UU WAKEFIELD, where we often do not think and believe the same things? Is that even a reasonable expectation? What does that word love mean anyway? And what did Jesus mean when he issued the command to love one another, with the important addition of “as he loved us”. We do not always get along. But we agree to care. We have a lot of fun here in this community. But it is not always happy times. We have all been affected this year by the economic realities in our nation. Some of us are afflicted by illness. Death makes its appearance. We do not turn away. Rather, we turn towards each other. We turn towards community, to communion with each other. We choose to put the command to love as central. To feed each others’ spirits. To look towards the light in times of darkness. To look towards love, which is where Jesus pointed us.

So, okay—how do we get from the “L” word and bridge to that part of our heritage that wrestles with those “R” words—rebirth and resurrection? And are they really the same thing? You may know that our English word “Easter” comes from the Old English word “Eastre”, which was the name of a pagan spring festival. Most of the rest of Christendom has a word related to Pascha which referred to the Passover—Easter events. For instance, in French it is Paques—one wishes each other “joyeaux Paques”, in the plural form of joyeaux, referring to all the events that take place from the forty days of Lent, the celebration of Passover, Palm Sunday, Maundy Thursday, Good or Holy Friday, the Easter vigil, to, finally the ten days of Easter culminating in Pentacost. All these events have been celebrated from some of the earliest days of the church, especially from the fourth century when the liturgical calendar began to be set. In these early days, great emphasis was actually placed on the ten days of Easter—the alleluia days,

if you will. In the last centuries, much more emphasis has been placed on the forty days of Lent, the season of sorrow, rather than on the Easter days, the season of joy.

So, to those “R” words. I think that thinking about both rebirth and resurrection have always been bound up in the Easter holiday. They express two different realities that we connect with in this season and which come out of our heritage, which here in the Northeast is inextricably tied up in spring. I have often wondered about the experience of Easter in the Southern Hemisphere when it occurs as nature prepares for winter. We seem to combine these two “R” words, but are they really the same? Frances Manly, our minister in Niagara Falls thinks not, and I agree with her.² She says that “over the centuries, some religious traditions have tended to focus more on one, some on the other.” She goes on to say that “one of the great joys of being part of a religious tradition that draws from many sources” as we say in our Principles and Purposes, “is that we don’t have to choose. We can celebrate both rebirth and resurrection, and we are the richer for it.”

Rebirth is that Spring side of Easter—the hyacinths in each church window of my Episcopal youth, the Easter egg hunts, the rabbits, the chickadees, the gaily colored candies. Even the great old Irving Berlin song, *Easter Parade* (“In your Easter bonnet, with all the flowers upon it, you’ll be the grandest lady in the Easter Parade”). That brings back memories to me. I remember as a young girl going with my father to *downtown* Waltham, Massachusetts to the Easter parade. I remember it winding out of the parking lot of the old store, Grover Cronin’s, complete with marching bands and a giant bunny in a float at the end. I remember getting a new pastel spring coat and a frilly Easter bonnet, going to church and then all of us piling in the car to go to my Grandparents’ to eat a leg of lamb. Probably many of you have memories like that. I remember the music too—lots of alleluias! As an adult and a professional singer, I have many times sung the *Hallelujah Chorus* from the Easter portion of Handel’s *Messiah*—which, by the way, I almost decided to end with today but thought that might be a stretch...it is *not* in our hymnbook! However, *Jesus Christ Is Risen Today* IS in there...though we will sing the version *Lo, the Earth Awakes Again this morning*. Complete with Alleluias! In that case, singing the beautiful, rousing familiar melody feels in our bones like rebirth. So, we can say as Manly does: “Rebirth is the message of Easter that is grounded in the cycles of the earth and the cycles of our

² *Quest*, CLF, April 2003.

souls.”³ The cold will go—the warmth will come again. It will happen. It *is* happening. There is light at the end of the tunnel.

But what about the other “R” word? If we only talk about the flowers that bloom in the spring—tra, la! (with apologies to Gilbert and Sullivan)—aren’t we missing one whole part of the Easter we have inherited from our UU foremothers and forefathers? The concept of resurrection is very different from the cyclical concept of rebirth. Resurrection is a radical break—what some have called the “Easter surprise”. It is something that happens once, a radical break in the order of things, leading—always to transformation. It is NOT a waking from sleep but a return from the dead.”⁴ Hmm. That opens a new can of worms. And don’t worry, I am not going to take my can opener and pull them out squiggling all over the floor here at UU WAKEFIELD this morning. BUT suffice it to say that for me, and I suspect for most other UUs, the story of the resurrection is not one we take literally—whether Jesus of Nazareth was crucified on the cross, died, was buried in the tomb and three days later had somehow left that tomb, as in the Gospel of Mark. The Mark version is my favorite, by the way. The stone is rolled away, he is gone and we are left on our own to make what meaning we will from that. It is very different from the other Synoptic gospel versions or that of John.

That gets right to the nub of it for me. Just as Jesus asked his disciple elsewhere in Mark, “Who do YOU say that I am?” we can ask ourselves that question. How do these stories move me? Or you? What difference does it make how we answer Jesus’ question, “Who do you say that I am?” How does grappling with all this help us understand how to be human and ask questions of ultimate meaning? What is the danger in the asking? Who is giving the answers?

What about this danger? It has been there right from the beginning. Scholars now think that Mark was the first gospel written in the accepted canon. The original ending was just as you heard. The people you might expect to be there at the tomb, aren’t. Three women go to the tomb, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome, to complete the traditional rites of burial. But the stone had been rolled back and all they found was some sort of heavenly messenger. They were told that Jesus is no longer there, that he has been raised, and they will see them again in Galilee. Whoa! “We might expect them to be glad, to rejoice, to run off and tell the

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid., 1.

other mourners that Jesus is not dead after all. And indeed they do run off, but not in joy.”⁵ I would have thought that Alleluias would have been spread all around. But no. Mark tells us that they fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.” (Mk 16.8)

What do I think about this story? What do you? For those of us who don't consider ourselves Christians, is there anything here to talk about? For me the image of the tomb with its stone rolled away has much power. Just as in life there is a place for the tomb, for the darkness, there is a time when something can roll the stone away from that tomb. The story of Easter suggests that there is something bigger than us that can roll away the stone. There is some suggestion, as Manly says, that “we are not alone, not on our own, that our very being is grounded in a vastness which can hold us through radical change. Call it God, call it Goddess, call it Life, call it Love, call it the Great Web, call it Mystery.”⁶ Well, I say Alleluia! Alleluia!

I thank you for allowing me this far more Christian than usual words this morning. Rest assured that next Sunday we will be considering other things—the legacy of Charles Darwin in honor of Earth Day and the anniversary of his birth two hundred years ago this year. But today IS Easter, after all, and thinking about Jesus is a most central part of our heritage. We have been arguing about him for centuries. In fact, we can probably argue that our theological forebears were right there arguing on the losing side of some of the early debates way back when! We do love to argue and discuss as Unitarian Universalists. And, I, for one, will jump right in with that! But there are also times to be humble servants as Jesus modeled. To minister to each other. To embrace old models and see what they might have to teach us in new times. There are times when we will explore WIDELY but we just may, at the end of all our exploring, arrive where we started, as Eliot says, “and know the place for the first time.” To consider the command to love. To be in community. What more could we wish for this Easter morning. Or any morning. Blessed be. Amen.

⁵ Ibid., 2.

⁶ *Quest*, CLF, April 2003, 2.