

Could They Understand? No. Can We?

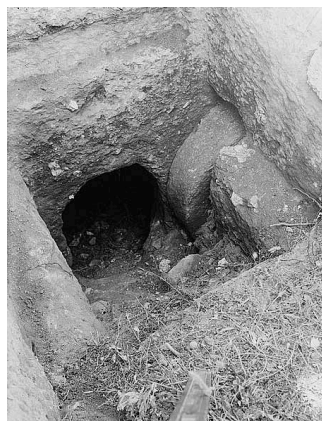
The Rev. Duane H. Fickeisen¹ and Marc Renault
Unitarian Universalists of the Cumberland Valley
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*Wouldn't he want to see us like this?
Wouldn't it be a miracle to live for just one day
So that if he did, by some amazing feat,
come riding into town
He could take a look around and say
"This is what I meant!"*

— The Rev. Victoria Weinstein

Invitation to Worship Marc Renault

For almost all my life I have taken the resurrection of Jesus literally. As a child my brother and I would wake up on Easter morning, find the jellybeans my parents had hidden around the house, and eat about a pound of chocolate. Then my mom would make sure we wore our best clothes as we went to church where I learned the truth of the resurrection. The pastor proclaimed: "He is risen!" and I joined the congregation saying "He is risen indeed!" As I grew, my faith deepened and matured. I prayed with hands clasped tightly, and I played guitar for Easter sunrise services. What power! What glory! My sins washed away through the atoning sacrifice of Christ on the cross. And then, not only were sins forgiven, but resurrection! - life after



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death! It was possible, it was real!

I can't pinpoint the moment my faith faltered. But as I look back searching for some event that changed my thinking, I'm taken to September 11, 2001 when the World Trade Center was demolished, the Pentagon was attacked, and a plane went down in a Pennsylvanian field. Those hijackers - they believed. My faith was nothing compared to theirs. What did I believe? Did I really believe it?

And after a few years of struggling with my faith, I saw the death...but I had lost the resurrection. And now? Well, I have some doubt about the literal resurrection story.

And yet, we are now in our 8th spring since that September. I've seen the forsythia bloom blazing yellow and the magnolia tree blossom. I am blessed to hear my six-year-old Olivia shout with glee on our walks as she discovers one more "sign of spring." As we will sing shortly, "All nature lifts in chorus the resurrection hymn." Buildings are rebuilt, memorials established. Scars (and uncertainty) will remain to be sure, but there is healing.

T.S. Elliot wrote:

April is the cruelest month, breeding
Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing
Memory and desire, stirring
Dull roots with spring rain.

In this month and Easter season, we find ourselves at the edge of life and death. And you know what? I'm betting on life. I will celebrate resurrection. Come let us celebrate together.

First Reading

The Gospel of Thomas: Saying 13

Jesus said to his disciples, "Compare me to something and tell me what I am like." Simon Peter said to him, "You are like a just angel." Matthew said to him, "You are like a wise philosopher." Thomas said to him, "Teacher, my mouth is utterly unable to say what you are like."

Jesus said, "I am not your teacher. Because you have drunk, you have become intoxicated from the bubbling spring that I have tended." And he took him, and withdrew, and spoke three things to him.

When Thomas came back to his friends, they asked him, "What did Jesus say to you?"

Thomas said to them, "If I tell you one of the sayings he spoke to me, you will pick up rocks and stone me, and fire will come from the rocks and devour you."

Second Reading

The Gospel of Mark: Chapter 16

When the sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices, so that they might go and anoint him.

And very early on the first day of the week, when the sun had risen, they went to the tomb. They had been saying to one another, "Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?" When they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had already been rolled back.

As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man, dressed in a white robe, sitting on the right side; and they were alarmed. But he said to them, "Do not be alarmed; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here. Look, there is the place they laid him. But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you."

So they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.

Sermon

Duane H. Fickeisen

The Easter story presents a great mystery. We can understand the cruelty of punishment by crucifixion — the horrible and painful death and the public shame and spectacle of it. We can understand how Jesus was a threat to the civil authorities and to the temple officials and why they might have wanted to kill him in a way that clearly demonstrated their power and served as a warning to other perceived troublemakers.

We can understand why his followers would have hastened to care for his body, to wrap it and place it into a sealed tomb before

sundown and the start of the Jewish sabbath.

Our Unitarian faith is founded on the Christology that Arius of Alexandria advocated in the late 3rd and early 4th Century that Jesus was a created being, not consubstantial with God. Our religious ancestors argued that Jesus is not made of the same stuff as God, but rather that he was a human being, made of the same sort of flesh and blood as the rest of us. From that perspective, we can certainly understand and feel empathy with his suffering on the cross, even if we can't imagine the full horrors of torture by crucifixion. It is a horrendous way to die. We can certainly understand the sense of betrayal that led him to ask God, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

But the resurrection is a mystery that defies our understanding.

In many ways it would make more sense for us as Unitarians to mark the crucifixion and martyrdom of Jesus — to observe a religious service of Tenebrae with a focus on going into the darkness and grieving the death of this practicing radical lover than it does for us to celebrate Easter. To hold a service of remembrance of his death and of the reported last sayings of Jesus and to reflect on their meaning to us would make more sense than trying to explain the empty tomb.

But Easter morning is not about what makes sense or what we might understand. It's about celebrating the mystery inherent in the empty tomb and the promise it carries of the possibility of transcending death — the possibility that some part of us remains — as a possibility that is open to every one of us.

Thomas got it right that the nature of Jesus is ineffable — impossible to name by comparison. It's not that Simon Peter and Matthew were wrong that Jesus is like a wise philosopher or like a just angel. It's just that those only give us one small piece of the much larger truth of his whole life and ministry.

Jesus responded to Thomas by denying that he was his teacher. No, he said, I am the one who has tended the bubbling spring from which you have drunk and become intoxicated.

One of my father's oft repeated injunctions was "Actions speak louder than words." It's more likely he got that from Mark Twain than John Locke, though both repeated it. Or maybe my grandmother was his source. I think we probably rolled our eyes

and didn't ask. But we did learn more from the examples he set than we did from the sayings we heard over and over — even the sayings that have stuck with me.

When Jesus told Thomas that he is not his teacher, but the tender of the spring, he's declaring that it is his works — the actions he takes — that are a more powerful source of inspiration than his stories, parables, and preaching. Remember the context for the metaphors Jesus used. Natural springs are magical places and sources of inspiration, respite, and renewal, but if we lived in the desert, where water is scarce, a spring or a well with pure cool water would be vital and essential to life.

So the one who tends the spring, keeps it clean and protects it, assures a steady flow of clean, life-giving water, would fill a critical need, bringing the waters of life to the thirsty.

When Jesus says he is not a teacher, but the tender of the spring, he's declaring that his work is to make life-saving (metaphorical) water available to us.

It is our experience of his practices that intoxicates us with the spirit of life that gives us hope. Paying attention to what he did matters far more than having listened to his reported words. The experience of having drunk from that spring quenches our thirst for justice. It is intoxicating in the sense of drawing our full attention, making us overjoyed, and inspiring us to act irrationally — to practice radical love and to stand up to injustice even when it might not make sense to do. This intoxication isn't about numbing the senses — quite the opposite, it's about becoming hypersensitive, alert and aroused, ready for action. Compare it to the intoxication of falling in love, not that of falling off the wagon.

That intoxication gives us hope. But it is not the hope of magical thinking that good things will happen without our effort and intervention. Rather it is the hope that arises when we take action — from doing the right thing because it is the right thing, even if it doesn't make sense. Not the action we undertake because we have weighed the probability of success and determined that the odds are in our favor. But what might seem to be the irrational action that we take because it is right, even if the odds are stacked forcefully against us. Vaclav Havel spoke of that hope in an interview. He said:

“Hope is not prognostication. It is an orientation of the spirit,

an orientation of the heart; it transcends the world that is immediately experienced, and it is anchored somewhere beyond its horizons."²

Havel continued, "[Hope] is not the conviction that something will turn out well, but the certainty that something makes sense, regardless of how it turns out."

That is the hope that springs from the intoxication of knowing that what we are doing is right, even when it doesn't make sense — even when it goes against expected social norms and political expediency. Even when it may well lead to public shame and punishment.

In the letter in the Christian scriptures that is attributed to James, he says, "For just as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is also dead."³

The text from Thomas says Jesus isn't only a just angel, a wise philosopher, or a teacher. We believe he is a person, fully human. He is keenly aware of injustice and his compassion amazes us. But what really intoxicates us is that he has the courage to work for justice, to tend the spring and keep it flowing as the source of hope. That's the spirit that quickens the body, the works that inspire a living faith.

And it was what made him such a threat to those who held political power. For if enough people drank freely from that spring and were intoxicated, the tables would be turned — the first would be last and the last first. The weak empowered, the powerful brought down.

And so he was killed. Brutally. In a way that served a warning to others not to tend that spring, not to drink from it.

It was supposed to be finished and done. The radical removed. The threat dealt with. The body buried, the tomb sealed and guarded.

But the first Easter morning came and with it the great mystery of the empty tomb, the stone rolled aside, the body missing. Confusion and fear.

² Vaclav Havel, *Disturbing the Peace: A Conversation with Karel Huizdala* (New York: Vintage, 1991).

³ James 2:26.

The canonical Gospels tell somewhat different versions of the story. It was women who discovered the empty tomb — one, two, three, or several of them. The tomb was already open or an angel came down and opened it in front of them. There was a young man, or maybe two in the tomb, who reassured them that Jesus had risen from death and was not present. They ran back either in joy or terror to tell others, or they simply went back to their homes and didn't tell anyone. Jesus himself appeared to the women, or he didn't, or he appeared only to Mary.

Ever notice how witnesses to a significant event recall very different versions of what actually happened? How sure we can be of a detail that other witnesses are equally sure didn't happen quite the way we remember? The Gospels were most likely written several decades after the crucifixion, each in a particular context and each with a purpose in mind, or perhaps even written by different people and edited together. It shouldn't surprise us that they report somewhat differing versions of the story, even if they drew from some common sources. The great mystery is that we will almost certainly never know more details or be able to do historical fact checking. Despite claims to have found the burial shroud or the ossuary that held Jesus' bones, the evidence is hardly conclusive, and we're left with the mystery of the event. That's probably best if it makes us pause and wonder. If it inspires us to seek meaning, even if we can't understand what happened.

Could those who were present on that first Easter Sunday morning understand what they saw? No. Can we understand it? No. But we can seek meaning in the story. We can be inspired by it. We can imagine how he lives among us through our actions, through our quest for justice, through our personal commitments to the greater good, to radical love. We can drink freely from that spring.

The spirit of Jesus, the lessons, the examples, the hope are surely still with us. His life calls to us, inviting us to drink freely from those pure waters and to be intoxicated, to be inspired, to act irrationally, to pursue justice.

And we know this — that by his example Jesus showed us that it is possible to love even the most unlovable among us. The lepers, the criminals, the poor and the untouchables, slaves and prostitutes, those people from the next town who don't practice their rituals like we do, even the enemies who are bent on our destruc-

tion. None of them were beyond his love.

If even the most unlovable can be loved, then surely you, too, each of you, each of us, is loved. As Universalists, we assert that every person is held in God's eternal, abiding love. Even you. Even me. All are welcome at this table, all are welcome to drink from the spring Jesus tended. All are invited to become intoxicated, to do irrational things, to become more like Jesus ourselves by practicing radical love, by standing on the side of love, by working for justice and compassion, not because we necessarily expect it to turn out well, but because we are sure it is the right thing to do. Irrational, perhaps, but so clearly right.

Each of us is invited to take up tending the spring. To ensure that it will flow clear and clean and abundant for anyone who wishes to drink from it. For we each incarnate God and are God's agents here, now, in this life, in this world.

The body is dead without spirit; faith is dead without works. But with a resurrection — a renewal — of the spirit, the body springs to life, hope returns through our actions, and our thirst is quenched by drinking freely from the bubbling spring.

Our faith — and the meaning of our lives — is deepened by our works. By our positive response to God's call to bring more love to the world; to work for justice with peace; to choose beauty, compassion, and care. By the ways we tend the bubbling spring and offer its healing waters to those who thirst for it.

The world around us shows the way — returning life in the green buds, the pink of the opening apple blossoms, the sunny yellow daffodils, the ducks nesting — a spring-time riot of renewal and fertility and hope and beauty in the warming and lengthening days after the long, dark winter.

The spirit is resurrected, hope returns, love abides. Even if we can't understand the mystery of Easter, surely we can embrace renewal, we can recommit to life, and we can celebrate the resurrection of spirit, hope, and love. The day is here. Let us show our thanksgiving and praise by living well. By tending the bubbling spring. By doing what's right. Alleluia!

Image: Rolling Stone of Tomb at Michmash, Israel. Image c. 1900-1920, unknown photographer, from the G. Eric and Edith Matson Photograph Collection, Library of Congress.