

Some Glad Morning!

The Revs. Duane H. Fickeisen and Judy Welles¹
Unitarian Universalists of the Cumberland Valley
April 24, 2011

*Easter is not a time for groping through dusty, musty tomes
or tombs to disprove spontaneous generation or even to prove
life eternal. It is a day to fan the ashes of dead hope,
a day to banish doubts and seek the slopes where the sun is rising,
to revel in the faith which transports us out of ourselves
and the dead past into the vast and inviting unknown.*

Author Unknown

Opening Words²

Judy Welles

As a Unitarian household, my family's regular Easter observances were not necessarily inspired by the miraculous story that our Christian sisters and brothers are celebrating today. The pre-breakfast jelly bean hunt was an annual event anticipated with only slightly less excitement than Santa's early morning visit months earlier.

After a breakfast that always included hot cross buns, we got dressed up — the women even



¹The Revs. Duane H. Fickeisen and Judy Welles are parish co-ministers of the Unitarian Universalists of the Cumberland Valley, PO Box 207, Boiling Springs PA 17007; 717/249-8944; www.uucv.net.

² ©2011 Judy Welles, Boiling Springs, PA

wearing hats! — and went to church, followed by a big dinner featuring a leg of lamb.

Even without a lot of emphasis on the story of the stone rolled away from the tomb, I understood from a young age that the Easter celebration was something deeply significant. As a child, I would have said that this spring holiday was about the return of new life after winter, light after darkness, and warmth after a long season of cold.

Whatever we each believe about the veracity of the tomb story, I think we would all agree that today's celebration signifies something very deep in the human psyche, something that goes far beyond bunnies and tulips and new spring clothes: today we celebrate the restoration of hope.

When you live in a desert climate such as the land where Jesus walked, warmth and light might be less significant than they are here in North America. But every human heart yearns for hope in the midst of despair, and every person who weeps desires comfort and reassurance. We don't need the tomb story — compelling as it may be — to rejoice from the depths of our hearts at the universal reminder that life begins anew each day and there are always reasons for hope.

In the Seder dinner that is part of the Passover holiday we're also celebrating this week, there is a song that expresses gratitude for the gifts that God gave the Israelites by freeing them from slavery and giving them the Torah and the Sabbath. The song says that even if God had given them only one of those gifts, it would have been sufficient — “dayenu.”

And so I find myself reflecting that whether the holiday includes holy scripture, roast lamb, prayers of gratitude, or jelly beans, it is enough that we remember the potential for hope that arises from the spirit of life in every heart. *Dayenu*. It is enough.

Reading

Mark 15:44 - 16:8

Then Pilate wondered if he [Jesus] were already dead; and summoning the centurion, he asked him whether he had been dead for some time. When he learned from the centurion that he was dead, he granted the body to Joseph. Then Joseph bought a linen cloth, and taking down the body, wrapped it in the linen cloth, and laid it in a tomb that had been hewn out of the rock. He then rolled a stone against the door of the tomb. Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Joseph saw where the body was laid.

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.

Reading
i thank You God
e. e. cummings

Hear e. e. cummings read this poem at
<http://elliottmusicstudio.blogspot.com/2011/02/video-of-we-ek-e-e-cummings-i-thank-you.html>

Sermon³
Duane Fickeisen

Today is the birth-day of life and love and wings. Let us meet this amazing glad morning with wonder and with gratitude, just as the daffodils and tulips are nodding to shake off the morning rain. Let us lift up our faces to the morning, without the shy embarrassment of the fritillaries hiding their orange splendor and glory under a crown of leaves.

This particular day — Easter Sunday — calls us to ponder the mysteries of life and of death. To wonder at the paradox of the transient and the permanent — the brief tenure of our individual lives, the longer, but still finite presence of life itself, and the everlasting spirit of love that surely must have been here before the big bang and the creation and will endure beyond it.

Easter calls on us to grapple with the mysteries of eternity and finitude, with inevitable death, and the ultimate destiny of our souls and spirits. It demands of us reconsideration of the possibilities of renewal, of rebirth, and of life arising again from the ashes and the dust, from the muds and the mucks. Hope arising yet again in the midst of disaster and defeat, even when we feel disappointed, desperate, or despondent.

³ ©2011 Duane H. Fickeisen, Boiling Springs, PA

The possibilities for hope and renewal are the promises brought to us by the universal love that abides and holds us no matter what. On Easter we celebrate the unquenchable potential that arises from the spirit of life and love that dwells in every heart. It is a holiday that marks fertility, creativity, and eros as well as the resurrection. It is powerful stuff, mysterious, and sometimes baffling.

Not only Easter, but every ordinary morning, calls us to arise from the night's deep sleep, to welcome the day, and to ponder the mysteries of the dream worlds we're leaving behind as we choose how we will invest our life energy in the day that lies ahead.

Mary Oliver greets and celebrates the dawning morning as she invites it to witness the choices she makes, in her poem, "Why I Wake Early"⁴

The poem expresses wonder and gratitude, not just for the sun, but for awakening to experience it yet again. It lifts up the universality of the blessing — even unto the miserable and the crotchety, she says. And it acknowledges accountability for our response to the blessing. "Watch, now, how I start the day."

For today — indeed every day — is the birth-day of life and love and wings. We who have died a thousand, thousand deaths, are alive again to greet the new day. We are born again, and again, and again to claim a place for ourselves on this "gay great happening illimitably earth."

Surely ambiguity and mystery arise with every morning. We don't — and can't — know what might happen in the next moment. Unexpected events bring both joys and sorrows and

⁴ The poem is omitted from this manuscript due to copyright restrictions. You can read it here:

http://www.panhala.net/Archive/Why_I_Wake_Early.html

change even our best-laid and well-thought plans. Floods, earthquakes, wild fires, accidents, and gut-wrenching bad news intrude rudely and when least expected. We go about our lives with oh-so-reasonable expectations, when suddenly we're jolted by unexpected and sometimes unimaginable happenings.

Like the women who walked in sorrow and grief to the tomb, expecting to anoint Jesus' body and found the stone rolled away and the body missing, we discover things we never expected. The empty tomb on the first Easter Sunday morning is unexpected and it changes everything.

When the unexpected appears it can stun us into disbelief and an inability to act. Like the two Mary's and Salome, who discovered that Jesus' body was gone, we may have trouble taking in a new and novel, surprising experience. We search for an explanation, a reason, and a way to fit the new and surprising experience into our framework for understanding the world, the paradigm we have used to organize and to craft meaning from the unfolding moments and movements of our lives.

We can try to ignore the new information by denying the reality of our experience. We respond that it simply cannot be or say "I can't believe it!" And this is sometimes literally true, yet it usually doesn't work for long as the reality intrudes.

When something as unexpected and stunning as that first Easter catches you, perhaps you first turn away, as if by not looking you can make the unexpected go away. We turn away from an accident scene, we fold up the newspaper with the staggering news inside the fold, or we say "What!" and ask the caller to repeat the bad news he or she has just given us, even though we heard it perfectly clearly the first time.

When the reality overcomes our resistance and can no

longer be denied, we may struggle make meaning out of it, seeking to understand, demanding to know why, and struggling to figure out how we will live in the new world that we have just glimpsed.

We wrestle with the new information to try to fit it into our cognitive framework for understanding. Sometimes it just won't fit — our existing paradigm can't accommodate the new data that has been presented to us and our reactions to it.

So next perhaps, we attempt to create an understanding of the experience by unconsciously altering its details in our memory or by imagining details that we didn't actually observe. Often the created details become indistinguishable in our memory from the actual facts. Witnesses to an accident often give conflicting descriptions of what really happened, each certain that she or he is right. This happens because it is easier and far less threatening for our minds to invent or ignore details in order to fit an experience into our existing frame of understanding than it is to throw out the framework and seek a new paradigm.

When our perception of an experience, even with the altered details, no longer fits our frame, we are faced with crafting a fresh and new paradigm that will contain our perceived reality and experience.

We can't ever know the same experience that the women had when they went into the open tomb on Easter morning. We can imagine it, and we can form our own perception of the experience, but we will likely never solve the underlying mystery, despite theories that seek to explain it, which might make for interesting parlor games, but always leave some uncertainty and rob the story of its more essential meaning and potential to lead to transformation.

The mystery of Easter morning and it's paradox is that

even in the unexpected there is a constant that abides. Through the absolute and unimaginable suffering of crucifixion; through the deep grief at having the man Jesus — the one who so manifested love and compassion — taken so violently from our midst; even through fear of the tyranny of an occupying army— through all of those — hope and love abide.

The sun rises every day, again and again and yet again. “Best preacher that ever was... you who just happen to be where you are ... to hold us in the great hands of light.” Some things are constant. There is a love that abides, that has the power to overcome despair and to bring hope. It brings us the courage and strength to go on, to begin again, and to recreate our lives even out of the most awful experiences. That love will outlast even the sun and the stars. It is not a thing that can ever be destroyed, but a power that transcends.

This love is very real. It lures us into relationship with the holy, entices us to choose pathways that lead toward the good, and grants us courage to take the next step and the next and the next.

And that’s what Easter is about — celebrating that which abides and holds us in love, the spirit that cannot be killed or contained even behind the heavy stone of the tomb.

And so love arises in glory, bathed in bright light, and returns to grab hold of us, support us, and encourage us. To lure us into ever more robust relationship with the holy.

The great question for us is how to respond to that love.

How will our days be different if we invite the sun each morning to witness how we start the day. If we hold ourselves explicitly accountable for the choices we make each moment. Of course the choices open to us are conditioned on the past, and yet always, always we have the power of choice to bend

the arc of the universe toward love and justice. To choose to stand on the side of love. To manifest the compassion and love that Jesus taught and demonstrated in his life. To devote our lives to caring for each other and for all of the world.

This is not easy. If it were, we would all be more Jesus-like, bringing deep compassion to every encounter, recognizing the holy in every being.

As much as the divine is a part of each of us and cannot be quenched, we have evolved to be cynical, to seek vengeful justice, and to hoard love. We mess up. We act out of fear and scarcity. We too easily forget our essential relationship with love, we ignore its call to us. And yet we can always begin again, even if we can't undo all of the harms we've caused, for the deeper truth is that we are held in universal and forgiving love.

So here's my challenge to you for Easter and for every day — dare to invite the sun to witness your life, to notice how you start each day and how you make your intentions manifest through the way you live each day. Let every day begin with some glad morning.

This will take courage and commitment. The flame that burns within us, calling us on the way, is fueled by the abiding love that will never, ever let us go.

May it be so. Amen.