

“New Thoughts on Resurrection”

March 23, 2008

Unitarian Universalists of the Cumberland Valley

The Rev. Judy Welles©, The Rev. Duane Fickeisen

Invitation to Worship

Duane Fickeisen

I just read an analysis of the failure of retailers to shape Easter into a major marketing opportunity as they have managed to reframe Christmas. Easter is still mostly a religious holiday with limited commercial trappings.

Sure, the makers of chocolate and marshmallow bunnies, purveyors of eggs and ham, and milliners and haberdashers look forward to a revival of moribund profits. But the Easter story doesn't have a loving parental couple, cozy barn animals, the newborn baby, and the giving of gifts. Instead we have a story with both gruesome and puzzling elements.

For Unitarians, the Easter story is confounded by a Christology that sees Jesus as fully human, an important mentor and prophet, but not God. That makes the empty tomb stories mysterious and confusing.

We don't usually mark Tennebrae, the Good Friday recognition of the horrible death of Jesus on the cross, even though theologically that would make more sense for us than does Easter. But very few of us enjoy suffering, and there is simply no way to understand a crucifixion except as a horrendously awful, painful, and slow way to die.

For Universalists, the redemptive part of Jesus' death is also theologically challenging. The essence of the Christian understanding of redemption is that it comes only through accepting Jesus as one's savior. Yet we assert that all of humanity is saved through inherent worth and dignity and God's universal love, and we object to the notion that suffering should be endured — welcomed even — as a means of atonement and the path to redemption.

So we struggle with the meaning of Easter beyond celebrating fecundity and mating or the arrival of spring. We sing about flowering bulbs and awakening spring. We dye eggs, unwrap chocolate bunnies, and don our spring hats, but what does this religious holiday — this most

important day in the Christian calendar — offer us as Unitarian Universalists?

Maybe its meaning can only be found in metaphor, in the mystery of the empty tomb, in the opportunity for a new beginning. Perhaps if we attend to our inner wisdom, if we let the music and the silence of our worship wash over us, if we pray together, if we listen deeply, and if we embrace the mystery, the meaning of Easter will begin to take shape. Let's try it and see what happens.

Come, let us worship together.

First Reading From "The Sovereignty of Ethics"
 Ralph Waldo Emerson

You may sometimes talk with the gravest and best citizen, and the moment the topic of religion is broached, he runs into a childish superstition. His face looks infatuated, and his conversation is. When I talked with an ardent missionary, and pointed out to him that his creed found no support in my experience, he replied, "It is not so in your experience, but is so in the other world." I answer: Other world! there is no other world. God is one and omnipresent; here or nowhere is the whole fact. The one miracle which God works evermore is in Nature...

Second Reading Why I Wake Early
 Mary Oliver

Hello, sun in my face.
Hello, you who make the morning
and spread it over the fields
and into the faces of the tulips
and the nodding morning glories,
and into the windows of, even, the
miserable and the crotchety —

best preacher that ever was,
dear star, that just happens
to be where you are in the universe
to keep us from ever-darkness,
to ease us with warm touching,

to hold us in the great hands of light —
good morning, good morning, good morning.

Watch, now, how I start the day
in happiness, in kindness.

Sermon
Judy Welles

New Thoughts on Resurrection

I love Mary Oliver’s line referring to the sun as the “best preacher that ever was.” Indeed, what more of a sermon do we need on Easter Sunday than the one the sun preaches every day: “I’m back! I told you I’d come back, and I did. I will always be here for you.”

Today our Christian sisters and brothers are celebrating that very message of good news, the Easter story that Jesus rose from the dead and came back to offer eternal life to those who believe. This is the central story of Christianity, the most important aspect of the Christian faith — God lifted Jesus’ body from the dead and gave him eternal life, implying the promise of eternal life to all who are baptized in his body, the Church.

For those of us with a lower Christology, who see Jesus as exemplar and prophet, but not as God, the question then becomes “what are we to do with Easter? Is there anything in the Easter message for us?” It calls for a little bit of shifting of gears for us to find personal meaning in the Easter message if we don’t believe in the bodily resurrection of Jesus, but it can be done, and I’d like to invite you to come along with me this morning as we explore some new ideas about the meaning of resurrection and what it has to do with us.

Easter is a good day to talk about the Universalist side of our heritage, since the Universalists were convinced that everyone would be saved after death and would be returned to God, or to the source of life. Of course there is a distinction to be made here. On the one hand we have “being saved,” which means not going to hell and facing eternal damnation when one dies, but rather going to heaven and enjoying eternal salvation. And on the other hand we have “resurrection,” which means bodily ascension into heaven. But for my purposes this morning, I don’t think that the distinction is that significant. Talking about resurrection and talking about being saved are similar enough to be considered one subject for a Unitarian Universalist Easter morning.

At the time in the late 18th century when American Universalism was taking root, it stood in stark distinction to a dour and grim Calvinism which argued that only the elect would go to heaven, and there was nothing anyone could do to become part of the elect; it was all predetermined before one was even born.

Universalists, on the other hand, cheerfully maintained that everyone was born forgiven, everyone was among the elect, and everyone would end up in heaven. (There was, for a while, a split among the Universalists themselves; some believing that a period of time would have to be spent in purgatory atoning for the sins one had committed during life, and others insisting that everyone would immediately ascend to heaven at the moment of death.)

Not only were they cheerful, they had a sense of humor about it, too. Once, when Hosea Ballou's doctrine of universal salvation was roundly questioned by his congregants who asked what he would do with persons who died reeking in sin and crime, Ballou replied, "I think it would be a good plan to bury them, don't you?"¹

It was another early Universalist, John Murray, who entreated his followers:

Go out into the highways and by-ways of America, your new country. Give the people, blanketed with a decaying and crumbling Calvinism, something of your new vision. You may possess only a small light but uncover it, let it shine, use it in order to bring more light and understanding to the hearts and minds of men and women. Give them, not Hell, but hope and courage. Do not push them deeper into their theological despair, but preach the kindness and everlasting love of God.²

To a people accustomed to cringing in church while being bludgeoned with threats of hellfire, a people accustomed to regarding themselves as sinners in the hands of a wrathful God, this message of hope, courage, and the everlasting *love* of God was as welcome as a breath of fresh air or a cool drink of water. Hungry for something to hope for, eighteenth and nineteenth century Americans grabbed onto the good news gospel of Universalism and attempted to live lives centered on hope and love rather than on terror and guilt.

¹ Owen-Towle, Tom, *The Gospel of Universalism*, Skinner House, 1993, p. 2

² quoted in Owen-Towle, *op cit*, p. v

Now, a bit more than 200 years after John Murray's exhortation extolling God's love, I personally find that people — at least the people I am most likely to talk with — don't appear to think much about whether they are going to heaven or hell. Perhaps this is still a huge issue for Christians, but I am less likely to have the conversation about what happens after death with Christians than with members of my own congregation, and when I am talking with you, it just doesn't come up. If this is something you want to talk about with me, I'd love to have that conversation with you. And if you want to talk about it among yourselves, I hope the Small Group Ministry leaders are listening, because this could be an interesting path to follow with your groups.

I suspect that it doesn't come up very much among us because we are more focused on life after birth than on life after death. What happens after death will always remain a mystery, no matter how strong people's opinions are about what they *think* will happen — they'll never know. But what happens in this life, as we make decisions and create relationships and ponder and make mistakes and forgive ourselves and one another — all that is something that we have at least some control over. So it makes sense (and we are a sensible people, are we not?) to focus on life after birth, and to try to lead lives centered in hope and love rather than fretting about something that we can't control and can't even really know about.

The resurrection of Jesus was a miracle, one of the central miracles of Christianity. Yet as sensible, objective individuals grounded in reality, we Unitarian Universalists would have a difficult time believing in that miracle. How much more likely we are to side with our own historic forebear, Waldo Emerson, who said "...there is no other world. God is one and omnipresent; here or nowhere is the whole fact. The one miracle which God works evermore is in Nature."³ In another passage, Emerson wrote that "the word Miracle, as pronounced by Christian churches, gives a false impression; it is Monster. It is not one with the blowing clover and the falling rain."⁴

³ Emerson, R.W. "The Sovereignty of Ethics," quotation found on line at http://www.emersoncentral.com/sovereignty_of_ethics.htm

⁴ Emerson, R.W. "An Address Delivered before the Senior Class in Divinity College, Cambridge, Sunday evening, July 15, 1838," in *Ralph Waldo Emerson Essays and Lectures*, Literary Classics of the United States, 1983, p. 80.

And indeed, for many of us, nature is the miracle. The blowing clover, the falling rain, the staggering variety of colors and hues that paint the flower petals every miraculously recurring spring. Cell division and growth, electricity, gravity. The solar system and the nebulae. Of course there are laws that explain these things; we have sought and discovered those laws because we want to understand. And doesn't that make the human mind a miracle in itself? The capability to grasp such complexity, to break systems down to their smallest components and see how they interrelate... And isn't the human heart a miracle, with its capacity for love, compassion, forgiveness?

It's enough to make me stop in my tracks, to raise my eyes in wonder and say "Wow! It's a miracle that I'm here, that we're all here."

So if you can look around you and see miracles abounding in the insects and the grasses, then perhaps it's not such a far cry to also think about the way we ourselves can experience resurrection. Because we do, you know. We experience it every day.

Every day we get to start over again. Every day begins fresh, even if the day before was a terrible, horrible, no good, very bad day. Most days, we don't wake up with gum in our hair and the dentist doesn't find a cavity. Most days we awaken somewhat rested, somewhat refreshed, and somewhat ready to meet the new day with the resources we can muster for it. Regardless of what happened the day before, this day is new and it offers fresh possibilities.

We get to start over again. And again, and again, and again. And isn't this the meaning of resurrection? We get to awaken to new life, new possibilities, new ideas, new understandings, new commitments. We get to re-create ourselves every morning.

I remember a man coming to visit a Sunday service here years ago, standing up during Joys & Sorrows to say with pride that he had been sober for twelve days. I remember thinking "Hmmm, that doesn't sound like a very long time to me," but who knows what effort had gone into those twelve days of sobriety? Who can say what effort it took him, hour after hour of those twelve days, to refrain from picking up a bottle. Surely he faced each new morning thinking "This is a day when I won't have a drink — this is a day in my new life as a sober person." Resurrection, day by day.

I have just finished reading a gripping book written by a woman doctor who has been providing abortions in women's clinics for over

twenty years. Much of her story is about withstanding the hatred and verbal viciousness of the anti-choice demonstrators who stalked her and her family constantly. Surely there must have been many mornings when she woke to make the difficult decision to continue in her work, a decision that she had to make and re-make time after time, day after day, despite her fears and the frightening confrontations she had endured the day before. I imagine that every day she recommitted herself to helping women end unplanned pregnancies in safety and with dignity, so that they, too, could begin anew.

It was her stories about her patients that I found the most compelling, having worked for Planned Parenthood myself and being familiar with the devastation that an unplanned pregnancy can bring to a young woman's life. Each woman's story was unique to her, yet each abortion offered the patient the opportunity to redirect her life and get back on course. Often their lives were already compromised by poverty or abuse, often they were already challenged to manage the children they were raising. Often they had to travel hundreds of miles and risk losing their jobs in order to get to a clinic where they would receive the care and service that they deserved. And often their first words after the procedure were "And now I'm not pregnant any more, right?" Yes, you can start again. Resurrection.

In many cases, the opportunity to start over again is a lot less dramatic. Perhaps it means starting the day with a longer fuse, and not slipping into a pattern of argument so quickly. Perhaps it means starting the day with a fond look at your partner and remembering what it was about her or him that drew you together, when that initial attraction is fading from memory or being smudged by the reality of life together. Perhaps it means deciding to have more patience with your children (or your puppy). Maybe it's something as simple as the decision to really focus on the to-do list today and get a lot of loose ends tied up. It can be the simplest things that give us a sense of accomplishment and energy, renewal, resurrection.

And of course in many cases, this chance to start anew means really making the very difficult effort to get it right this time. Use birth control. Put some distance between yourself and a potentially abusive partner. Stay away from friends with a drinking problem. Walk past the shopping mall where you've overspent in the past. Take your sails out of the wind of a co-worker who wants to make trouble for you.

These matters will require making the effort over and over again, not just once. But that's the point. You get to do that, to try it again and again. You get to start over as many times as there are mornings.

I'm making this sound easier than it is, I know. Day after day after day can be pretty daunting, and when we make mistakes and fall short and mess up, it can be hard to summon the wherewithal to try still again, one more time. Those are the moments when it would be good to remember our Universalist heritage, to preach to ourselves the sermon about hope, courage, and the everlasting love of God. Remember that you were born already forgiven, and let the knowledge that you are always held in love give you the courage to try again.

When times are hard and things aren't working out, we need to find hope that things will change. Like Waldo Emerson, we can find our inspiration in nature, even if it's snowing when we look out the window. Just knowing that there really will be a morning — and not long from now — when the sun shines warmly and the daffodils reveal their yellow throats — knowing that can give us the courage to hold on and keep trying.

I am remembering the song that Gordon Bok sang last weekend as the finale to his concert. Tears were running down my cheeks as he sang:

Oh, my Joanie, don't you know
That the stars are swinging slow,
And the seas are rolling easy
As they did so long ago?
If I had a thing to give you,
I would tell you one more time
That the world is always turning
Toward the morning.

It's true. We know it because it's real science, and we know it in our hearts. The world is always turning toward the morning, and every morning we get to start over, again and again. Resurrection. Hallelujah and amen.