

“The Resurrection of Hope”
Easter Sunday • March 27, 2005
Unitarian Universalists of the Cumberland Valley
Boiling Springs, PA • The Rev. Judy Welles©

Invitation to Worship
The Rev. Duane Fickeisen

Easter celebrates the resurrection of hope even in the midst of our deepest despair. It's not an accident that we celebrate this holiday in the early spring, a time when the ground thaws from winter and renewal of the plant world is so readily apparent to us, a time when the Earth sings with fertility and rebirth.

In our darkest hours of despair, it sometimes feels as if a heavy stone blocks all possibility of hope. But when we search for hope, often we discover to our surprise that the stone has been rolled away. We find a shining ray of light that gives us the courage to keep on. Hope.

As the song says, “There is more hope somewhere, and I’m gonna keep on ‘til I find it!” The poet Rainer Maria Rilke penned these lines about the search:

“I know that nothing has ever been real
without my beholding it.
All becoming has needed me.
My looking ripens things
and they come toward me, to meet and be met.

And:

“I feel it now; there’s a power in me
to grasp and give shape to my world.”

That’s how hope works — your looking ripens it, and it comes toward you, to meet and be met. Seek and ye shall find. You do have the power to grasp and shape your world — to transform your life and to help make the world a better place. The search is itself a sign of hope. The greatest despair comes when we abandon seeking.

So come, let us look at hope this morning. Hope is present in the act of our gathering in community; in the faces around you; in the music we make; in the silence we share; in our prayers; in our care for the world and for each other; in our worship together. Our looking ripens hope. It will come toward us to meet and to be met.

Come, let us worship together.

Sermon

Proclaim the news: “Love is come again like wheat that springeth green.” Easter is *the* day for good news! This is The Big Day for our Christian sisters and brothers, and for anyone among us who is inclined toward the Christian message. This is the day when your faith is affirmed, when God’s great promise is affirmed, when your hearts are once again filled with the assurance of God’s enormous love for all of humankind.

I remember asking my mother if we were Christians when I was young. As a child in Unitarian Sunday School, I somehow had a hunch that we were a bit different from my Congregational and Episcopalian friends, and I thought it had something to do with being a Christian. I really wanted to be a Christian like my friends, because I

wanted to fit in. My mother was no theologian; her vague response was deeply unsatisfying to me, and I was left disappointed and confused. I *think* she said that we weren't Christians —sort of, in a round-about way. Whatever she said, it wasn't what I wanted to hear.

This business of wanting to be a Christian on Easter feels a little bit like wanting to be Irish on St. Patrick's Day. It's a day to be in the "in" crowd, a day to be on the winning team. The joy of celebration is so enticing, who could help but want to be a part of that? With a clear awareness of how deeply our own Unitarian Universalist roots are sunk into the Christian story, and how many of us personally have come into this faith carrying gifts from our Christian past, I invite all of us today to celebrate the good news! We celebrate renewal; we celebrate coming into the light after a long darkness, and we open our arms wide to the promise of hope.

Now, lest you think that I am being a complete Pollyanna about the place of hope in our world today, let me assure you that I have been having my own struggle to feel hopeful over the past months. There is much in the world around us that causes me grief and despair. I see people treating one another very badly, with violence and cruelty that breaks my heart. I see a cultural ethic of consumerism, competition, individualism and selfishness that goes against everything I believe is necessary for a rich and satisfying quality of life. I see policies being enacted at all levels of government that seem shortsighted at best, disastrous at worst. I see a huge and growing disparity between the wealthy and the poor. Programs and causes I believe in keep losing; I feel like I am swimming upstream against a powerful current of mean-spiritedness and selfishness that is sweeping me downstream despite my best efforts.

But I've been reading a book that really helps, and I want to tell you about it. The book is titled *God's Politics: Why the Right Gets It Wrong and the Left Doesn't Get It*. The author is Jim Wallis, an Evangelical Christian social liberal who is the editor of *Sojourners Magazine* and the founder of the Sojourner Community and the Call to Renewal movement in Washington, DC.

This book is getting a LOT of attention these days, and I suspect that's because Wallis is a paradox, or he appears to be. He is challenging the line that has been so conveniently drawn by the media and encouraged by others who are interested in keeping the country polarized, keeping the issues black and white. This line puts religious fundamentalists and social conservatives on one side, and secular people and social progressives on the other. (In this division, there's no place at all for religious liberals.) That's a false distinction, Wallis says. Real life and the complexity of real issues doesn't allow for such a simplistic division of belief and opinion. As an Evangelical Christian who believes in the literal, bodily resurrection of Christ, Wallis occupies a very different theological territory than I do, yet I find myself in complete agreement with his impassioned arguments about the rightful place of religious values in the public arena.

The thesis of the book is that "the privatizing of faith has weakened its impact on critical public issues and opened the door for a right-wing 'Christian politics,' which both narrows and distorts a biblical agenda... The witness of the biblical prophets and

Jesus must be recovered for these times and courageously applied to a whole range of moral and political issues.”¹

This book is a call to you and to me to move beyond a politics of complaint and to once again embrace the prophetic tradition, which requires us to practice a new politics of vision grounded in hope. I found myself absolutely *galvanized* by these words toward the end of his book,

The real battle, the big struggle of our times, is the fundamental choice between cynicism and hope. The prophets always begin in judgment, in a social critique of the *status quo*, but they end in hope — that these realities can and will be changed. The choice between cynicism and hope is ultimately a spiritual choice, one that has enormous political consequences.

First, let’s be fair to the cynics. Cynicism is the place of retreat for the smart, critical, dissenting, and formerly idealistic people who are now trying to protect themselves. They are not naïve. They tend to see things as they are, they know what is wrong and they are generally opposed to what they see... They know what is going on, and at one point they might even have tried for a time to change it. But they didn’t succeed; things got worse, and they got weary. Their activism, and the commitments and hopes that implied, made them feel vulnerable. So they retreated to cynicism as the refuge from commitment...

Perhaps the only people who view the world realistically are the cynics and the saints. Everybody else may be living in some kind of denial about what is really going on and how things really are. And the only difference between the cynics and the saints is the presence, power and possibility of hope... More than just a moral issue, hope is a spiritual and even religious choice. Hope is not a feeling; it is a decision. And the decision for hope is based on what you believe at the deepest levels—what your most basic convictions are about the world and what the future holds—all based on your faith.²

These words made me realize that it’s time to stop feeling sad and demoralized by all that I see going wrong around me. It’s time to make a clear, firm decision for hope, based on my faith, and then bring that faith-language and all the beliefs and actions that spring from it into the public discourse. The decision to hope must be made again and again, with a clear-eyed gaze at the reality of the situation and a creative mind, open to many possibilities for response. As Duane reminded us earlier, that’s how hope works — your looking ripens it, and it comes toward you, to meet and be met.

Wallis writes about the prophetic tradition, so I want to talk for a few moments about the prophets and how they operated. There is a common misconception that a prophet is someone who foretells the future. But that is only part of a prophet’s job. What a prophet really does is describe the present — the real picture, the back side of the tapestry, the part of reality that others would just as soon not hear about. “This is

¹ Wallis, Jim, *God’s Politics: Why The Right Gets It Wrong and The Left Doesn’t Get It*, Harper Collins, 2005, p. xx.

² *Ibid*, p. 346

terrible!" the prophet shouts in every public venue. "This can't go on! Look at what is happening!"

And then comes the part about foretelling the future. The prophet says "If we keep on this way, we're doomed! Awful things will happen. It will be the end of civilization as we know it." And then the prophet says something else, something that often goes unnoticed. He says "We should be doing it this way instead! If we do these things, our righteousness will be restored, and our lives will be good again!"

Hear, for example, some words of the Prophet Isaiah:

How the faithful city has become a whore! She that was full of justice, righteousness lodged in her — but now murderers! Your silver has become dross, your wine is mixed with water, your princes are rebels and companions of thieves. Everyone loves a bribe and runs after gifts. They do not defend the orphan, and the widow's cause does not come before them.³

He goes on to say:

Rebels and sinners shall be destroyed together, and those who forsake the Lord shall be consumed... The strong shall become like tinder, and their work like a spark; they and their work shall burn together with no one to quench them.⁴

But there is a way out, and Isaiah exhorts everyone to turn toward the house of the Lord and to walk in his paths. If they do, then

They shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more.⁵

This is what we must be doing ourselves, my friends. Of course we will find our own voices, and the redress of the wrongs we proclaim will be more suited to our times and our values. But is it such a far cry from walking in the paths of the Lord to say that the world's children have a right to food and safe shelter, or that workers deserve a living wage for their works? Micah condemned "those who cry "Peace" when they have something to eat, but declare war against those who put nothing into their mouths."⁶ Nowadays we say that if you want peace you must work for justice. How different is that, really?

Think about the teachings of the prophet Jesus, the man whose love and sacrifice are celebrated this day. Jesus was a tireless advocate for the outsider, the marginalized, the despised. Jesus promised that everyone could live in the kingdom of heaven *right here on earth, in this lifetime* if they would practice the same love and forgiveness toward one another that God displayed for them. Jesus advocated for peace, for the poor, for the sick and the discouraged. We can do the same.

³ Isaiah 1: 21-23.

⁴ Isaiah 1: 28, 31

⁵ Isaiah 2: 4

⁶ Micah 3: 5

We need to become the prophets of a new society where we bring our own good news to the public square. This is the right response to fundamentalism — not cynicism and withdrawal, not a dried-out, cerebral secularism, but a righteous and hope-filled, faith-filled proclamation that there is a better way. We need not to shy away from religious language, religious stories, and religious values in the public discourse – we need to embrace them and proclaim them. We need to share the joy, integrity and power that we have found in our free faith with everyone who has ears to hear and eyes to see.

We need to risk becoming evangelical ourselves, by testifying to the power and the possibilities embedded in our faith. As Unitarian Universalists with deep roots in the Judaic and Christian traditions, we stand in the line of the prophets whose message has always been grounded in love, justice and mutual respect.

And here's the best part: we don't have to stand alone. We have the potential to align ourselves with thousands of other progressives of many religious persuasions who are beginning to speak up, to form alliances, and to exert their influence on the social agenda. There are hundreds of groups such as Call to Renewal, Faithful America, the Interfaith Alliance, the National Religious Partnership for the Environment, the National Interfaith Committee for Worker Justice, Every Church a Peace Church, the Interfaith Center on Corporate Responsibility. These groups invite interfaith cooperation on a multitude of issues — our voices belong there, too. We are not alone.

On this Easter Sunday, this day of hope and promise and rebirth, let us commit ourselves to participate in the resurrection of hope, the promise of commitment and the rebirth of the spirit of life. The day of days is here, the festival of hope has arrived. Allelulia, allelulia!