

The Unitarian Church of Montpelier
Rev. Mara J. Dowdall
April 4, 2010 – Easter Sunday

“The Light That Endures”

First Reading – Excerpts from the “Maasai Creed,” available online:

<http://speakingoffaith.publicradio.org/programs/pelikan/masai.shtml>

Second Reading – “Poem About Light,” by Kathleen Sheeder Bonanno

From *Slamming The Door Open*, Alice James Books, 2009, available online:

<http://poems.com/poem.php?date=14395>.

Sermon

Occasionally, it’s fun to start with a confession. So here is mine for today: I have struggled mightily with what to say to you this Easter morning.

I’m sure this was in part due to expecting a little bit bigger crowd than the average Sunday. I knew there would be some folks at church today who come only on the high holidays – as well as some visitors and out-of-town-family members. I’ve been calling this the Easter bounce – the church’s version of what happens to the President’s poll numbers after a major legislative initiative passes.

But Easter bounce aside, I think my struggle had less to do with how many people would be here this morning – and more to do with the question of how to approach this holiday in the first place – a question that I suspect is resurrected in the heart of many a Unitarian Universalist as this holiday approaches.

What does Easter mean to we in this liberal, living, diverse faith tradition, we who have moved so far from our Christian origins that most of us don’t think of ourselves as Christians? Or, as my Lutheran friend asked me in divinity school, with a tone of earnest bewilderment:

“Mar, what do the UU’s talk about on Easter?”

As my preaching professor Gary Smith put it in his Easter sermon last spring: “Lest you have wandered in here for the first time this morning, even wandered into a Unitarian congregation for the first time, we welcome you and we hope you caught the warnings and disclaimers at the entrance. It is Easter,” he writes, “and we are a congregation with decidedly heretical leanings.”

He goes on, “We love the Easter hymns, but some of us can be heard humming, instead of singing, a phrase here and there. We look more to Jesus’ humanity than to his divinity. We are inspired more by Jesus’ teachings than by the teachings about him. Did Jesus die on the cross? It seems likely. Did he rise from the dead? We allow for the possibility.”ⁱ

Gary points to the tension we UU’s face when Easter rolls around each year. Yes, we may champion the lessons Jesus taught – the “love your neighbor” and the “blessed are the peacemakers” – but when it comes to the today’s focal point – the resurrection – most of us, as Gary points out, are agnostic at best.

And when it comes to the related theology of atonement – that Jesus’ death on the cross was somehow required to save humanity – we’re probably skeptical.

Given these difficulties, it might be easiest to throw up our hands and avoid the relevant events altogether. Perhaps it’s better to focus on the aspects of the holiday that resonate with the earth-based, nature-oriented outlook that is more comfortable for most of us contemporary UU’s.

After all, Easter comes at just the right time to celebrate spring – and the rebirth of life after winter. And we know now that Easter is tied to a pre-Christian pagan fertility festival honoring an Anglo-Saxon fertility goddess.

That’s certainly one tried and true Unitarian approach to Easter. Growing up as a UU kid, this was how I learned about the holiday. The Easter theology I learned boiled down to three simple words:

And as you can probably guess, they were not: He is risen.

No, mine were: Spring is here.

That variation of Easter is so deep in my own Unitarian DNA that I found myself saying in hushed tones to some of you I saw at meetings this week: “You know I’m going to talk about Jesus on Sunday” . . .

It seemed like a green light when no one keeled over. And a couple of you said, “well, yeah, it’s Easter.”

Joking aside, it’s not that I think celebrating the earth’s renewal is unimportant. To me, that is a crucial spiritual project, as well. And the natural world is something we will touch on again in the coming weeks’ services.

But for today, on this Easter Sunday, I invite you to take up with me a different story – a story about a man named Jesus who lived and died many hundreds of years ago. I know it took a little while to get here – to the heart of the matter – so let’s get down to it:

Whether or not we believe that Jesus literally rose from the grave, the Easter story is our story, too. It is a story we need to tell each year because it testifies to a powerful truth.

Which is this:

There are some things that survive even death.

There are some things that cannot be destroyed.

There are things that endure, and there are things that will not end.

The poet writes:

*You could make it your mission to shut out the light forever,
to crouch in the dark, the blinds pulled tight –
still, in the morning, a gleaming little ray will betray you,
poking its optimistic finger through a corner of the blind,
and then more light, clever, nifty, impossible,
spilling out from the crevices warming the shade
. . . light has its way.ⁱⁱ*

Ages before Kathleen Sheeder Bonanno wrote those words in the wake of her daughter’s murder, a world away, another sage also talked about light.

It was Jesus, who said to the disciples early in his ministry:

“You are the light of the world. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under a bushel basket, but on the lamp stand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Well, let it shine they did. So much so that the crowds of thousands came to hear Jesus preach and teach and to see him heal.

But the brighter the glow cast by his message, the more dangerous Jesus became to the powers that be. Like many modern-day martyrs, the more widespread and popular his teachings became, the more the authorities, whom his gospel challenged, sought to put Jesus’ lamp under a bushel, lest he keep shining a light on injustice and oppression.

And that is how it came to be that Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor, set out to quash Jesus and his teachings once and for all.

Of course, Pilate was not the only one culpable in Jesus' death. There were Judas who betrayed him and Peter who renounced him. There were the other disciples who gave up on him and the chief priests who decried him.

And yet it was Pilate who was the final force behind the execution, flogging Jesus, then handing him over to the imperial soldiers to be crucified. My text notes for Mark's Gospel, the earliest of the four, describe Pilate as "an experienced imperial official who underst[ood] Jesus [was] politically more dangerous to the Roman order than an anti-imperial assassin."^{iv}

Well, we know what happens next. In the words of our first reading, Jesus "was tortured and nailed hands and feet to his cross, and died."^v

So Pilate got his way, it seemed; mission accomplished, lights out.

Except, except, this time, death does not have the last word. Here's how the author of Mark describes it:

When the Sabbath was over, the women 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 of the tomb?"

But when they looked up, they saw that the stone had already been rolled back. As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man, dressed in a white robe – and they were alarmed. But he said to them "do not be afraid. You are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. But he has been raised, he is not here."

He was raised; he was not there.

This is the stubborn sun, choosing to rise, like it did yesterday, like it will tomorrow. You have nothing to do with it. Light has its way.^{vi}

Now Mara, you might point out, this part of the story brings us right back to that whole UU Easter dilemma – the one in which we struggle with the historical accuracy of the events. Did he rise? Didn't he rise?

But that's the great thing about our wisdom stories. We don't need to claim every part of them as fact for them to have meaning. Not everything has to be a "true story" for it to tell a truth about our lives.

So I, for one, propose we let this story stand as it is, on the merits of metaphor – as a testimony to that which endures even when it seems all is lost.

At the same time, for those who are more material-minded and like to be sure that all the facts check out, I would say this: The bodily resurrection is not our only indicator that Pilate’s mission to snuff out Jesus’ light sorely failed.

Consider this: far from eradicating Jesus’ teachings, the events of his death bolstered his weary and scattered disciples, encouraging them to continue spreading his message.

The later New Testament books speak of the women and men who carried the torch, casting their light in new places – even when they, too, faced persecution for their religious beliefs. They brought with them love for their teacher, and sought to love their neighbors and God with all of their heart.

My colleague Barbara Pescan tells a story about missing her father after his death – and she describes all the ways in which he lives on in her, even though he is gone. She mentions the gestures she makes, her love of poetry and music and even her voice as evidence that her father’s spirit still lives.

Pescan writes, “if this is not resurrection, I do not know what is. Bodies do not survive death. If minds and souls do, I do not know where they gather. But,” she goes on, “I know that love is stronger than the grave. It survives, it abides, and all the dead rise again and again in us, giving themselves to us for as long as we receive them.”^{vii}

Love is stronger than the grave.

This message is likewise captured in an essay^{viii} from one of my favorite novelists, Isabel Allende, who like Kathy Bonanno, lost a daughter too young.

Allende explains that her daughter Paula, who died at 28, had lived a life of service, always giving of herself to others, volunteering helping women and children. Allende writes, “during [Paula’s] illness, I had to let go of everything: her laughter, her voice, her grace, her beauty, her company, and finally her spirit. When she died I thought I had lost everything.”

“But then I realized I still had the love I had given her. I don’t even know if she was able to receive that love. She could not respond in any way. But I was full of love and that love keeps growing and multiplying and giving fruit.”

Allende concludes that, in giving to others, she can connect with both her daughter's memory and her living loved ones alike. She says "It is in giving that I feel the spirit of my daughter inside of me, like a soft presence."

Bonanno, Pescan, Allende – for me, all of these women's words show the way to the heart of the Easter story and the message I hope to leave us with. It starts with a basic fact that we all know well – first from our intellect, and then from our experience: death and loss are part of life. They are inevitable.

We will all lose someone we love and we will all face our own deaths. The circumstances of these losses will each be different – and some, like the death of a martyr or a crime victim or a person who is far too young – will be imbued with their own particular sense of sadness and tragedy.

No matter the particular circumstances, of course, where there is loss, there will be grief. Where death casts its shadow, there will be darkness. That is Good Friday's part of the story.

But Easter testifies to another truth, one we can nearly lose sight of when we are mired in the depths of sorrow, when we are caught in the nightmare of grief. Which is this: there is something that lives on after a death. There is something that endures. There is something that does not end. It may seem small, it may seem fleeting, it may seem, in the face of our loss, like not enough.

And yet, it is there, and it matters.

In the words of another poem that church member Tami Calliope wrote during her own time of grief many years ago:

All that is left us at last
is the Love that we have been
becoming,
the Light that we cast
as we pass
through the open door.

Love and light, my friends. Love and light. When you think about it, these are no small things. They are the living and enduring forces which connect us, each and every one, to each other and to that which is Infinite.

And that, in the end, is my Easter sermon.

But try as I might, I can't resist just a little more Jesus. So as we near the finish line, let me offer you again a brief portion of our first reading, the end of the story, with which we began:

Jesus died and was buried in the grave, but the hyenas did not touch him, and on the third day, he rose from that grave. He ascended to the skies . . . He is alive. He lives. This we believe.

And now I leave you with the words of another poet as our final prayer:^{ix}

i thank You God for most this amazing
 day: for the leaping greenly spirits of trees
 and a blue true dream of sky; and for everything
 which is natural which is infinite which is yes

i who have died today am alive again today,
 and this is the sun's birthday,
 this is the birth day of life and of love and of wings,
 and of the gay great happening illimitably earth.

May it be so for all of us this Easter Sunday, and in the days to come.

Amen.

Works Cited

ⁱ Gary Smith, "From Blossom to Blossom."

See <http://www.firstparish.org/cms/sermons/947-from-blossom-to-blossom>.

ⁱⁱ Kathleen Sheeder Bonanno, "Poem About Light," *Slamming the Door Open*, Alice James Books, 2009.

See <http://poems.com/poem.php?date=14395>.

ⁱⁱⁱ Matthew 5:14-16.

^{iv} *The New Oxford Annotated Bible*, ed. Michael D. Coogan, notes accompanying Mark 6-15.

^v From the "Maasai Creed," as heard on NPR's *Speaking of Faith*, March 20, 2008. See:

<http://speakingoffaith.publicradio.org/programs/pelikan/masai.shtml>.

^{vi} Bonanno.

^{vii} Barbara Pescan, "Resurrections," in *Quest*, April 2010.

^{viii} Isabel Allende, "In Giving I Connect With Others," As heard on NPR's *This I Believe*, April 4, 2005.

See: <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=4568464>.

^{ix} e.e. cummings, see *Singing the Living Tradition*, #504.