

Easter Sunday, April 1, 2018

Thought to ponder:

Love works in miracles every day: such as weakening the strong, and stretching the weak; making fools of the wise, and wise men of fools; favouring the passions, destroying reason, and, in a word, turning everything topsy-turvy. – Marguerite De Valois

Reading: Mark 16:1-8

When the Sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices so that they might go to anoint Jesus' body. Very early on the first day of the week, just after sunrise, they were on their way to the tomb and they asked each other, "Who will roll the stone away from the entrance of the tomb?"

But when they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had been rolled away. As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man dressed in a white robe sitting on the right side, and they were alarmed.

"Don't be alarmed," he said. "You are looking for Jesus the Nazarene, who was crucified. He has risen! He is not here. See the place where they laid him. But go, tell his disciples and Peter, 'He is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him, just as he told you.'"

Trembling and bewildered, the women went out and fled from the tomb. They said nothing to anyone, because they were afraid.

Reading

Easter Exultet

~ James Broughton ~

Shake out your qualms.
Shake up your dreams.
Deepen your roots.
Extend your branches.
Trust deep water
and head for the open,
even if your vision
shipwrecks you.
Quit your addiction
to sneer and complain.
Open a lookout.
Dance on a brink.
Run with your wildfire.
You are closer to glory
leaping an abyss
than upholstering a rut.
Not dawdling.

Not doubting.
Intrepid all the way
Walk toward clarity.
At every crossroad
Be prepared
to bump into wonder.
Only love prevails.
En route to disaster
insist on canticles.
Lift your ineffable
out of the mundane.
Nothing perishes;
nothing survives;
everything transforms!
Honeymoon with Big Joy!

Reflection

Easter Reflection

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Last Sunday, the *New York Times* published an article entitled, “Easter is Calling Me Back to Church,” by Margaret Renkl. Easter calls many back to church, even to Unitarian Universalist churches, so I read the article with interest. Renkl a life-long Catholic, had always attended Mass regularly. Both she and her husband grew up in the church, and they raised their children there, too. What changed everything for her was the 2016 presidential election. She writes:

I just couldn't forgive my fellow Christians for electing a man who exploited his employees, boasted about his sexual assaults, encouraged violence against citizens who disagreed with him, mocked the disabled and welcomed the support of virulent white supremacists.

This is what Jesus meant when he told his followers to love one another?

At church, all I could think about were the millions of people likely to lose their health insurance thanks to Catholic bishops who opposed the birth control mandate in the Affordable Care Act.

I was supposed to be thinking about the infinite love of a merciful God, but all I could hear were thousands of Christians shouting, “Build that wall!” By the time Easter had come and gone, I was gone too.

My aim this morning is not to point fingers at Catholics or any other group of religious people. We are all human and equally clueless in the face of the vast mystery we ponder week to week. Rather, I want to consider what is drawing Margaret Renkl back to church. More, I want to think about what she intends to do when the Easter service has ended.

Renkl's words again: *The year away from church hasn't made me miss the place itself. I don't miss the stained glass. I don't miss the gleaming chalice or the glowing candles or the sweeping vestments. But*

I do miss being part of a congregation. I miss standing side by side with other people, our eyes gazing in the same direction, our voices murmuring the same prayers in a fallen world. I miss the wiggling babies grinning at me over their parents' shoulders. I miss reaching for a stranger to offer the handshake of peace. I miss the singing.

So I will be at Mass again on Easter morning, as I have been on almost every Easter morning of my life. I will wear white and remember the ones I loved who sat beside me in the pew and whose participation in the eternal has found another form, whatever it turns out to be. I will lift my voice in song and give thanks for my life. I will pray for my church and my country, especially the people my church and my country are failing. And then I will walk into the world and do my best to practice resurrection. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/25/opinion/easter-church-faith.html>

I think I pretty well understand that call to be part of a congregation. It's a call I have been answering for nearly my entire life. Even with the difficulties that can be introduced when any group of human beings gathers, I have always felt hope when people come together in the presence of the Most High, however they define it – whether as God in some form, or simply the greater power of the gathered body, or something else altogether. I have always sensed a solidarity and comfort in a community of people traversing the wheel of life together, celebrating the births, mourning the deaths, and facing all that happens in between. So I think I understand why Renkl returned to church today.

What I find most arresting in her statement is the last line: “*And then I will walk into the world and do my best to practice resurrection.*” Renkl doesn't say it, but in *my* world, attending church might be something that could fill up my tank so that I could go out into the world to practice resurrection. But how does one practice resurrection? What does that even mean? That's the question. And, this being Easter, and Easter being a resurrection holiday, let's think about it.

My guess is we all know the general Easter story. After practicing his ministry elsewhere, Jesus came into Jerusalem for the Passover observance. This past Thursday was the commemoration of the last supper, possibly a Passover feast, shared with his disciples. After being betrayed by his disciple Judas, Jesus was arrested later that night, as he prayed in the garden of Gethsemane. By Friday afternoon, he had been tried, convicted, brutally tortured, and put to death on the cross. With the sabbath nearly upon them, his bereft followers laid his body in a cave, awaiting proper burial when the sabbath ended. And when the women, whose job it was to prepare his body for burial, returned on Sunday morning, the body was gone. In Mark, a strange man tells the women what has happened. The other gospels describe Jesus' interactions with his people after he has risen. So, in the literal Biblical sense, resurrection is returning from the dead.

It happens. My own brother came back from the dead a few months ago. He had a cardiac arrest. His wife administered CPR until the EMTs came. All told, my brother was without a heartbeat for around 15 minutes, with nothing more than his wife's persistent ministrations to carry him along. He's back. I spoke to him just this past Wednesday. As far as I am concerned, he was resurrected from the dead.

But, there is more than one kind of death, and thus more than one kind of resurrection. A physical death is one kind. The death of the spirit, the heart, the soul, is another. Today I'm thinking of the kind of

resurrection that comes when we refuse to let goodness, kindness, hope, love, and beauty wither and die – when we call those things back from the brink. The resurrection of the spirit, heart, and soul.

Listen: Back in the middle of the last century, as the Nazis overran Germany and the rest of Europe, some Jews hid in a cellar in Cologne. One of them inscribed some words on that cellar wall, the words that comprise the lyrics of the anthem the choir just sang:

I believe in the sun even when it does not shine.
I believe it love even when I feel it not.
I believe in God even when God is silent. Alleluia

There they were, maybe cold, probably huddled in the dark, probably hungry, certainly terrified. Terrified every time a car stopped on the street outside. Terrified every time someone rapped on the door upstairs. Terrified every time they heard a strange voice in the building above them. Terrified every time they heard soldiers marching on the street. Perhaps terrified by gunshots, air raid sirens, screams, and more. Terrified in ways I cannot even begin to imagine. But, in spite of all that, someone wrote:

I believe in the sun even when it does not shine.
I believe it love even when I feel it not.
I believe in God even when God is silent. Alleluia

Whoever wrote those words was practicing resurrection by refusing to give up the most positive deep-down things, refusing to give up a better vision of the world, refusing to give up the things that made him or her feel most human. Even in the face of terror and cruelty, refusing to give up. Whoever wrote those words may have given up eventually. God knows, it would be pretty hard *not* to in the circumstances. But the resurrection lives on, the words later discovered and eventually put into a song by Betsy Pusey, the song called “Whispers from the Wall.” A few weeks ago Heidi Neufeld, our choir director, practiced resurrection when she chose that song for an Easter Sunday anthem. Today the choir practiced resurrection when they sang to us.

The gospels all tell of Jesus rising from the dead after he was crucified. But what I prize about his example and prophecy are the resurrections the gospels describe him practicing all during his ministry. In my view, every time Jesus reached out to the poor, the lepers, the blind, the bleeding women, the people living at the margins, he was practicing resurrecting life from the deadening of the spirit, heart, and soul. And that's something all of us can do.

Sometimes I feel so discouraged, living in these times of widening divisions, escalating fear, rampant greed, and decaying morals and ethics. I know I am not alone. People frequently confide to me that they feel heartsick and lost these days, that they struggle to know simply how to keep hope in their hearts, much less respond to the steady assault on decency they witness in the world around them.

I understand. I see evidence of selfishness and cruelty every day – everywhere from Damascus to Washington. Everywhere human beings shun one another – shutting the doors to refugees, immigrants, asylum seekers, the poor, people who are non-gender-conforming, people of differing skin colors,

people from different cultures, people who are “different” in any way. Closing in like that deadens spirits, hearts, and souls. Practicing resurrection is to push back against those ills, those closed in, pinched up, selfish, fearful, and greedy approaches to life, and, instead, to speak out against injustices and to reach out to those who need a steady, comforting hand.

I see resurrecting acts of generosity and kindness – here, in this community, with the medical people who volunteer at Oasis Health Clinic, or the citizens who volunteer at the Gathering Place or Midcoast Hunger Prevention. I see it in my neighborhood, which rallied to assist a young, single mother, who was leaving an abusive marriage, and setting out on her own with nothing, *nothing*, except herself and four young children. I see it in our church's collaborative work with other faith communities who are helping to settle asylum seekers and refugees in our area. I see it in all those solar-powered Luci lights Ted Berrett inspired us to send to Puerto Rico as an honor to Lynne Caswell in her last days. I see it in the faces and hear it in the voices of our young people now rising to fill the moral breach left by spineless and morally corrupt leaders. Last week's March for Life, here in Brunswick, and all over this nation and world, was an act of resurrection. I see it in the countless acts among the people right here in this room who reach out to help when they can, however they can.

Each act of resurrection rises above what is bleak, soul- and heart-crushing – rises above what is most base and intolerable. I often say the work of the church is to help us grow into our best selves, to grow into what Abraham Lincoln would have called “the better angels of our nature.” (First Inaugural Address.) Or, as Jesus would say: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.... and love your neighbor as yourself.” (Matthew 22: 37-40)

Today, may we interpret that ancient story of resurrection as a call to turn our hearts to love – to love the Most High, however we experience or name it, to love ourselves, and to love our neighbor – (and who isn't our neighbor, when the whole world is our neighborhood?). Then maybe the day will come when we can write our own alleluias on the wall of life.