

Sermon: More Is Possible

“All you need to remember
is how it sounded
when you stood
in the place of death
and heard the living
call your name.”

I ended up asking one of my friends who’s an Episcopal priest if she had any favorite Easter poems, and she sent me this one from Jan Richardson. The program committee had asked me what Easter’s like in the Southern Hemisphere, meaning, if it’s not spring. This was a good question. I did my usual search of our gray hymnal, our Soul Matters packet, and the entire UUA worship database looking for Easter readings that were not about spring. I found exactly nothing. Zero worship materials that didn’t conflate Easter and springtime.

So I asked my friend and what ensued was a hilarious conversation in which I explained to her that I was trying to do an Easter service that was just about Easter and not actually just about springtime. She was so baffled that she asked me a series of clarifying questions and just became more bewildered and amused by the answer.

Yes, a story about resurrection has some clear overlap with the journey from winter to spring. And we know that so many Christian holidays co-opted Pagan traditions to spread Christian teachings more easily. And Easter is not about springtime. It’s about Jesus. Or, perhaps, it’s the story of how the people who loved him lived after his death.

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A few weeks ago, in reporting about the Russian attacks on Ukraine, NPR mentioned something about the Ukrainian Orthodox Church in Boston. It occurred to me that Ukraine is a predominantly Christian country. What does Easter mean under siege?

Here’s what I appreciate about the Easter story: it isn’t sweet, it isn’t flowery or cute. Contrary to all the sugar associated with this holiday, Easter is not a cloying story about “everything happens for a reason” or insert any other vaguely religious platitude that skirts around suffering with an extra dose of polite nicety. Easter is about the life outside the tomb, the intersection of horror and wonder.

Easter is a story about what happens after someone dies, after the most beloved of your life dies in impossible anguish. This is crown of thorns pain, mocked and left to die in slow agony pain. It’s not sweet. And I think that’s why it matters. Perhaps Easter under siege makes for a more honest re-telling, a more profound sense of despair held together with the impossible resurrection hope. It sounds less cheerful and more like breath re-entering a collapsed lung.

The miracle of this story is the way life re-enters that place of grief beyond hopeless grief. The miracle is that those who are staggering through their loss get to experience wonder again, that life continues.

As Unitarian Universalists, we sell ourselves short if our faith doesn’t help us hold steady in the face of that kind of pain and retain a belief that more life is still possible. But here’s where individualism fails as a worldview. Because it is true that everyone dies, sometimes in tragic and unimaginable ways. Our belief in life is not about individuals, it’s about the way that people keep showing up after the depth of grief has held you hostage, it’s about your community being a place of hope and love when you’re lost in despair. It’s the family circled around

a fresh grave, it's the way Mary enters the empty cave and more becomes possible.

Imagine Easter in Ukraine, for all the people who call that place home and this day sacred. Imagine what this day means for people living through war.

I know Easter can feel squeamish for UUs and there are certainly theological interpretations of Easter that are certainly at odds with Universalism. It's not surprising that we get around this with the easy conflation of Easter and spring. But what if it's not spring? What if your home is a bombed out ruin of cement and debris? The story of the tomb, the death, the grief tied up in the telling of Easter can only mean more, not less.

And in truth the resurrection of Easter is entirely separate from spring. Because spring is something we know - we trust that it will come, perhaps at a different time or with different weather, but we know, still, that spring will come. We see the snowdrops and the redbuds, the changing light, the pollen green of the treetops. We see spring coming, we know it is upon us when it arrives.

And that is precisely the opposite of the kind of resurrection that is Easter. Easter is about unimaginable life, a renewal that we only have reason to think is impossible. There is no anticipation in Easter, no accumulation of evidence that life is returning. Good Friday and Holy Saturday are precisely the opposite - the only evidence is that death has won.

And yet, when all hope is lost, something changes.

The Rev. William Shulz, who served both as UUA president and later as the Executive Director of Amnesty International, presented the Berry Street Address at our annual UU conference, General Assembly, in 2006. The essay was part of our required reading for ministerial credentialing and it was the very last thing I read before I went before the credentialing panel at the UUA. I have not forgotten it.

Rev. Shulz writes in horrific detail about the things he saw in his time with Amnesty International. He ends his essay with this, which I'll quote at length - this portion is not graphic:

“What torture has taught me, what all those brave souls and, yes, even a few of their tormentors, have taught me, is to never give up on the glimmers of grace for not everything is all that it seems. If even survivors of torture can reclaim a sense of life's bounty, then surely you and I and all to whom we minister can too. If the torturer cannot fully break the human spirit, nobody can.

For we Unitarian Universalists know, out of the depths of our faith and the teachings of our tradition and the succor of our community, that the chess master was right. Chancing upon a great painting in a European gallery of a defeated Faust sitting opposite the devil at a chess table with only a knight and a King on the board and the King in check, the master stopped to stare. The minutes changed to hours and still the master stared. And then finally, "It's a lie," he shouted. "The King and the knight have another move! They have another move!"

And that's finally what torture has taught me—that it is not just the King but the knight, not just the Queen but the rook, not just the Bishop but the pawn, not just the wealthy but the pauper, not just the fortunate but the weary, not just the torturer but the tortured, not just the powerful but every single person, every single blessed person, until the day we die, every single blessed person on this earth, every single blessed person has another move. We all have another move.” end quote

More is possible, more life is possible. Death does not win on the scale of ultimacy. Yes, people die, we know this. We know it in our lives, in images of war, in this story of resurrection. Death is the presumption in Easter.

Here's the thing that matters, that flips the table and fills the tomb. We're not alone. The world isn't empty. We are connected to each other, to the places we've loved, to the food we eat, to the history we tell. The summation of

connectedness is a thing beyond our fathoming. Sometimes, in glimmering moments of wonder we see it, we bump up against it and we call it serendipity.

Here's what I know: death is real and so is life, but death doesn't destroy the world. It causes grief and great suffering, but it cannot erase the ways our life imprinted in the great connectedness.

Maybe you have lost someone you couldn't imagine losing. I have. And the miracle was that life kept filling in around that cave of impossible horror. Not the life of that beloved person, but life nonetheless.

Yes, Easter can be a difficult or at least confusing holiday if you harbor any cynicism about the Bible or Christianity. That's understandable, but there's a line our covenant asks us not to cross - don't spoil it for the people who need it, don't belittle this holiday just because it doesn't work for you. I think the world needs some resurrection right now, a reminder to look for the possibility appearing in empty places, a hope that says more good is possible in the most harrowing of times. I'm thankful that it's Easter in Ukraine, thankful for the reminder of hope resurrected for a people living through extraordinary violence.

What if your worldview held hope in possibility, what if your worldview assumed that creativity and connection win, that more good is possible even in the face of profound violence? Would it change how you live? Would you have the courage to make different choices, or retain a greater sense of resilience alongside the world's suffering?

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Amen and blessed be.

<https://www.uua.org/re/tapestry/adults/movesus/workshop9/282806.shtml>

<https://paintedprayerbook.com/2019/04/21/easter-sunday-where-resurrection-begins/>