

Sermon: “And Still, We Rise” (Laurel)

I shared a few weeks ago that I spent a day with our local sixth grade class for their World Religions Symposium. The kids rotated between speakers, learning all about different religions from people of those traditions. I talked about Walden Pond and Universalism, the church that was the town hall, and being a people bound by covenant. And throughout I answered their questions.

There was a group of boys who were fascinated by the idea of universalism and essentially wanted to know if it was possible to get ex-communicated from Unitarian Universalism. The answer, if you’re wondering, is no. We don’t do that. We do sometimes set boundaries around how people can engage in a congregation if they’ve done specific harm - “like murdering someone” one of the boys interjected - but we don’t cast people out or say they’re damned.

I answered all the questions. And then one boy raised his hand after I explained that UUs weren’t necessarily Christian, but that plenty of UUs are also Christians. “So what about Jesus dying on the cross” he asked. And I paused. And my brain felt like it was short circuiting as I tried to figure out if I could succinctly translate some very complicated theology to a room of sixth graders of wildly different religious backgrounds. And then I said, “Uh. That’s complicated.”

I think our reading did a good job leaning into the “uh, that’s complicated” part of Easter. There are ways of telling the story of resurrection that focus on the hope and the life that comes even after death. There are also ways of telling the story that focus on the blood and sacrificing one life to cleanse the sins of others.

One of the complicated things about religion, especially when we’re talking about the Bible, is that everyone is always cherry picking, choosing what matters more and what can be skimmed over. The text itself is both so massive and includes so many contradictions and strange minutiae that everyone is leaving some things out. Always. So when it comes to the Easter story, we have to make choices. Choices about how we engage, what we highlight, what helps us to live fully and authentically and what doesn’t.

And for a lot of people, that means just not going there.

There is a theological lens that says Jesus died on the cross to cleanse us of our sins, so that we might live. But we, in this place, we are Universalists. We will call no one damned - back to the never ex-communicating people thing. So the idea that someone was killed as a kind of sacrificial peace offering to an angry God in order to create some goodness doesn’t make sense for us. That theological lens, that way of reading the story, doesn’t help us live more clearly.

But it's not the only option. There are other ways of seeing the story. And theological pluralism doesn't scare us - it's maybe the thing we UUs are best at. We assume that wisdom is a garden, not a single tree. Or, to continue my lens metaphor, wisdom is that big contraption at the eye doctor, and spiritual seeking is the process by which we figure out the lenses that make our eyes hurt and the lenses that will help us read the random letters clearly, the lenses that will help us engage in our lives fully.

So what do we choose? How do we engage with the Easter story in a way that does help us live more clearly? Or, perhaps more specifically, what do you choose? Because I can't tell you what it means to you. But I can invite you to wonder and to remember that there are options.

I'll tell you, the first time I experienced Holy Week, the first time I experienced the progression from Good Friday to Holy Saturday to Easter, I was honestly a little envious. I had never experienced anything like it before. I was awestruck and it felt like a gut punch - awe isn't always sweet.

Sitting in the University Church in the silent, cavernous darkness, having watched the pastors tenderly strip the altar and leave the congregation alone with the emptiness - it was one of the most honest things I'd ever experienced in any kind of religious setting. Because to be human is to know devastation. And there it was in front of me: stark and silent and keening, echoing a kind of pain that has no words.

We UU's can be guilty of leaving so much out like, for instance, the whole Jesus part, that we treat Easter like a holiday that is exclusively about springtime. As a person named after a flowering shrub, I assure you that I love springtime, *and* conflating Easter with spring leaves a lot to be desired. Even if we talk about winter. Because winter can honestly be kind of cozy and magical.

Good Friday is not cozy. It's empty and sobering and piercing all at once. And what good is a faith that can't reach into the worst moments of the human experience and remain steadfast. Or at the very least show up. At least say that the sacred mystery of life abides with us in the tomb of despair, knows something of that kind of pain. Easter doesn't happen without Good Friday - the two are inextricably linked.

I don't think it matters if the story of Easter is historically or scientifically accurate. I'm more interested in whether or not it's true. True that life keeps returning. True that hope rises. True that despair cannot destroy us. True that our lives are so intertwined that the death of one still doesn't mean that death has won.

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

call your name,”
writes Jan Richardson

Universalism is an invitation to believe that the call of the living can reach into the place of death, an invitation to believe that hope rises. That, even after the worst devastation and despair, love is still possible, still undaunted.

We are a people of a covenant, a people bound by a promise to love and care, not a unity of belief. So make of this day what you will. Maybe the Easter story can open your heart. Or maybe it can't right now, maybe it's too closely tied to a theology of shame and punishment for you. It's good to know our limits. It took me a really really long time to be able to hear the story of Easter without feeling the hackles of cynicism and disgust rising. It is a gruesome story, one that can and has been used to cause harm.

I also know that it can be a profoundly honest story of hope and the human experience, one that can meet us in the empty places and withstand the echo of despair.

Again, the words of Elena Westbrook:
“Let us celebrate that even after murderous betrayal,
After days and nights suspended in torture,
When all the world has gone dark and we cried out,
“Why have You forsaken me?”—even then,
there is a sunrise.
Even then, there is a resurrection,

if we will climb the hill to look for it.
If we will roll away the stone
And recognize the different shapes that Hope can take
To walk among us in the returning light.”

May it be so.

Amen.