

Eternal Rebirth

*sermon by Rev. Ken Jones, delivered March 27, 2016
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Many of you are probably aware that for the last few months, we've been devoting our services on the fourth Sunday of each to what we call "Gathering Spirit" Sundays. This is a project, if you'll call it that, conceived and brought into being by Linda King (our celebrant today) and Susan Kaphammer. The idea behind the Gathering Spirit Sundays is that it is an opportunity for each of us to share with the congregation aspects of our own personal spiritual journeys. This is an excellent embodiment of one of our traditions in which our collective spiritual essence as a religious community is not determined solely by one book or one pastor or one denominationally-sanctified set of instructions. Rather, our collective spirituality is determined by a mix of all these and more, including one more very critical component – you. You each bring your own spiritual quests into our community so that as you share your thoughts and experiences, and sometimes put some effort into articulating them in a way that others might understand, this religious community helps you clarify, develop, and grow in your spiritual life. But you also, as you share, help shape the collective experience of this congregation, and indeed, all of Unitarian Universalism. This pulpit – indeed, this very church, belongs not just to me or to any other one person. It belongs to all of us.

I say this partly as a way to explain what I'm doing in this pulpit today in one of our regularly-scheduled "Gathering Spirit" Sundays. This being a fourth Sunday, it would normally be one in which one of you might be asked – or might volunteer – to stand up here and share some aspect of

your own spiritual quest for all of us to hear, react to, and maybe be fed by. But perhaps in part because it is Easter Sunday, nobody else stepped forward except for me – your “official” Minister – to share today. And this is what I intend to do – it may be a bit different from my normal sermons, and certainly a break from the history series I’ve been doing the past couple months – to talk more personally about my own spiritual journey. But that’s okay, right? I mean, even an “official” Minister has a personal journey to share, one that may even have some relevance to our collective spiritual essence, as I’ve called it.

I say that this fell to me perhaps because it is Easter because, yes, even though Easter is not a big deal on the Unitarian Universalist holiday calendar, and even though it is probably not a big deal for most of you on your own spiritual calendars, it is, after all, a holiday. So many of you may have social or familial obligations of one sort or another that may prevent you from deciding to make this the Sunday that you’ll prepare a talk to share with this congregation. That may indeed be a very good reason why nobody except the one guy around here who gets paid to lead these services stepped forward today. But I think there might be another reason, a bit less practical and maybe more spiritual. That is that Easter is, in many ways, a really hard holiday for us Unitarian Universalists to embrace, or even, for that matter, to know what to do with. Very few of us take the biblical story of the crucifixion and resurrection literally, and even those of us who think that Jesus has something significant to offer in terms of spiritual teachings tend to think we should focus more on his life and ministry than his death and resurrection. It’s a lot different than, say, the typical UU observation of Christmas, the celebration of Jesus’ birth, for

which we typically do dust off our Bibles once a year and suddenly feel okay talking about Jesus in our liberal church. I've been around UUs for quite a few years and have seen many theatrical re-enactments of the child born in the manger, but have yet to see a UU staging of the passion play. Instead, we usually just point out that Easter – the name of which comes from the ancient Germanic goddess Ēostre – is really just a celebration of springtime and fertility, and it just so happens that long ago Christians decided that their story of resurrection could dovetail into these celebrations nicely, and so the rather odd juxtaposition of a risen Christ with a rabbit that hides colored bird eggs was born. So we Unitarian Universalists sing songs celebrating springtime and pontificate with analogies of springtime being the season of rebirth, and other than that pretty much dismiss Easter as anything significant.

As a card-carrying Unitarian Universalist and a bona fide skeptic, I certainly understand the reasons for that dismissal, and agree that the Christian resurrection story is at least in part influenced by many strains of mythical stories about birth, re-births, fertility, springtime, and renewal. So I could, today, simply embrace that larger story and lead us all in a celebration that Hey! Spring is here! Time to get out in the garden and enjoy the flowers budding on the trees, and to enjoy the longer daylight hours by breaking out the patio furniture.

But I'm not going to do just that in part because this is, after all, a "Gathering Spirit" Sunday. While I certainly can and do embrace a celebration of springtime and its seasonal re-birth as a bona fide spiritual experience, I also feel moved to move a little more deeply into this Christian resurrection story, in part because it has a depth of meaning that

goes beyond a cyclical regeneration of life story, and partly because, try as I might, it is a story that has deeply affected me – and continues to affect me – in my spiritual life. I was reminded of this just this past Friday – Good Friday – when I participated in an interfaith service with the Yakima Association of Churches and Faith Communities. I try to take part in this tradition every year, not because it is a vital part of my adopted religious practice, but out of a sense of solidarity and community with my interfaith friends and partners here in Yakima. But this past Friday, I was a bit taken aback, a bit surprised, even, by the power and depth of faith that gets expressed, and how it brings back to me so many spiritual experiences of my youth. Although there are many aspects of Easter that express an exclusivist, oppressive spirituality, I think we lose something if we ignore the story of Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection altogether. Something important. So I don't want to throw the baby out with the bathwater.

One of the things I was reminded of in the Good Friday service two days ago, was an article that I saw recently written by UU colleague Peggy Clarke. In it, she writes of the different symbols found in Protestant and Catholic churches – Protestants with their empty crosses, and Catholics with their often times all-too-vivid crucifixes. “Sometimes it's quite graphic – full bodied suffering in Technicolor.” She writes. “He's suspended in anguish, nails through flesh and bone, a crown of thorns pressed into his head, blood dripping, eyes beleaguered.” As a religious liberal I, like Rev. Clarke, find such imagery, particularly in a place like a church which is supposed to be spiritually uplifting, to be a bit unsettling. But I also know that it represents something real that shouldn't be ignored. It represents brokenness, and the ability to love in spite of the brokenness.

I thought about this as I sat there at St. Joseph's Church (a block from here) last Friday, listening to my local colleagues reflect on Jesus' seven last words on the cross (six, actually, since I reflected on one of them myself,) and looking over their shoulders at the somewhat vivid crucifix hanging in their chancel. My colleague at Englewood Christian church reflected on the well-known quote from Mark 15: "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" In her reflection, she named some of those moments of brokenness or agony that we all face – a terminal diagnosis, the death of a loved one, the end of a marriage. These tragedies may not be what we want to think about when contemplating the season of re-birth, but they are nonetheless real. It brought back to me a memory of my Presbyterian upbringing, when I wondered aloud why they call it "Good" Friday when it is commemorating an event that doesn't seem very, well, "good." The answer I was given then, which I still hear is the consensus today, is that the "good" in Friday means it is a day to be pious, or good. Hmmm. Yeah, not a very convincing answer. It also might just be an accident of history or linguistics, or maybe it means something more. For I believe it is more than a day to be good, it is a day to reflect on and live in the brokenness of the world, and even when experiencing those doubts by asking God "why have you forsaken me?" deciding that even though we may not have an answer we can still follow the example of Jesus and choose to love not just the flowers and the springtime and all the newborn life, but everything. We can choose to love the whole world and all the people in it, in all our brokenness and imperfection. If we can choose to do that for even one day, I'd say that was "good."

“I believe our power comes from our brokenness.” Rev. Clarke writes. “I don’t think the end of that story is the crucifixion. In fact, I’m not sure there is an end to that story. We are still called to live our lives with our hearts wide open.”

Of course, I wasn’t raised in a Catholic Church with its crucifixes. I recall, though, the generic form, the cross, hanging in the chancel of my family’s church. I generally agree with Rev. Clarke and many others who lament the plainness of the Protestant cross. When you think about it, it seems sanitized, artificial, as if the actual crucifixion wasn’t an act of human violence and involved human suffering. It’s all good. Cleaned up. Better now. That has the potential – often realized, I think – of leading to a theology that is “cleaned up” of all the problematic realities of the world, the brokenness that pervades real life. I think this is particularly true in some upper middle-class circles in which many strains of mainline Protestant churches have thrived, and in its worst cases, has led to what is called today a “prosperity gospel,” in which it is believed that people with material prosperity – a lot of money – are so because they are rewarded by God for their good deeds or faith. This is a convoluted version of the gospel, one which portrays Jesus not as standing side by side with and loving the poor, the outcast, the sick, and the criminal, but a sanitized Jesus as a cheerleader for the wealthy, shouting “victory!” Oh, if we could have a bloody crucifix hanging in one of those slick and shiny victory churches.

I must also add that I think this tendency to “clean up” theology, especially theologies of suffering such as the crucifixion, has affected, in some ways negatively, liberal religion and Unitarian Universalism as well. To construct a theology – or a worldview – that doesn’t account for

suffering, for violence, or for evil is not really responsible, in that it doesn't respond to the needs of the real world. To skip over the difficult parts of the Easter story to just affirm the springtime celebration of re-birth runs the risk of doing this. I certainly don't advocate we go too far in the other direction and glorify suffering or violence as did one famous Hollywood celebrity some years back with a film called *The Passion of Christ*. But there is something poignant and powerful when we can keep our eyes and ears open to the suffering of the world and have enough faith that we emerge from it committed to living a loving, compassionate life. Or, to again quote my colleague Rev. Peggy Clarke, "It's when we allow ourselves to feel the pain of the world that we become brave."

Which brings me back to the Presbyterian Church of my youth. Yes, they had a plain white cross behind the chancel, but something else I remember about it is they had three spotlights shining on it, I assume to simply illuminate it better. I don't know if it was intentional or not, but the way those spotlights were arranged it appeared as if there was a ghost-like figure surrounding the cross, with slightly more illuminated patches one above and one to either side. I always imagined that there was, indeed, a ghost there, which in my mind represented the third and most elusive triune of the trinity: the holy ghost, the holy spirit, the risen Christ. I remember finding that image both a bit more disturbing and a bit more comforting than a white cross alone. There is death around that cross, and there is eternal life. The only thing is, the eternal life is a bit more elusive, and is significantly different in form.

The gospel accounts of the risen Christ differ, but I like the story in Luke where the risen Jesus appears before Simon and one other disciple and spends the afternoon walking and talking with them, and it is not until they break bread together that evening when they suddenly realize who they were talking to. I like that story because I think resurrection is like that. It's not just a simple matter of one coming back to life or being re-born in the springtime. Rather, it is the transformation that we go through when we let go of our fear, face the unknown and the suffering, and emerge a different person because of it. This is what I like about the Easter story – and what I believe, too. Not that Jesus actually rose from the dead in the same form as he had been, but that his spirit carried on in some form or another. Probably millions of forms, in the hearts and minds of all who believe not in one story, but in the transformative power of love and compassion. It's just like the story with the raindrop we heard earlier: in the end, it matters not whether one particular drop of rain survives, what matters is how we embody the spirit of those who have gone before, and bequeath it to those to come.

This is what lies at the heart of all the deeply spiritual religious traditions of the world; not just a simple platitude that all is good and right and there is no such thing, really, as death and suffering. They all, including the story of Jesus' suffering and resurrection, live and breathe in the real world, a world of imperfection. No, not everything is always reborn in the spring – there is loss. But to be able to accept and even embrace the suffering with faith and love enables true resurrection in the face of loss. That true resurrection is found not in a body or a plant or a raindrop, but in the spirit of those who find courage to say “yes” when the darkness

descends, when even we feel forsaken by God we know that the spirit – the ghost surrounding the cross – lives on.

Odo.

Recasting Easter Hymn



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