

Rising Again?

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Readings

Luke 24:1-5

...on the first day of the week, at early dawn, they came to the tomb, taking the spices that they had prepared. They found the stone rolled away from the tomb, but when they went in, they did not find the body. While they were perplexed about this, suddenly two men in dazzling clothes stood beside them. The women were terrified and bowed their faces to the ground, but the men said to them, "Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen."

"Many a Rock" by Rev. Leroy Egenberger

Many a rock is pushed from the entrance of many a tomb by the force of the human spirit.

The rock is pushed away from the tomb of silence by the courage to speak when others hold their tongues and lose their conscience.

The stone of superstition and delusion is split in two by the clear thought of reason. The boulders of dead habit, set in place by many years, are rolled aside by the quickness and newness of imagination.

The crags of inequality and selfishness are set astir by the piercing cry for justice.

The brick walls of indifference and callousness are eroded by a single tear of sympathy and cracked by the warm smile of kinship.

The dry gravel bed of vanished hopes is washed over by the waters of new possibilities.

Many a rock is pushed from the entrance to many a tomb by the force of the human spirit.

Sermon

One of my Unitarian Universalist colleagues, Daniel Budd, once wrote: "We received an invitation from our neighborhood newspaper to place an ad for Easter. Someone suggested to me that, should we advertise, it should say something like, 'Join us. We're not sure what happened.'"

"We're not sure what happened."

True enough. Though believing Christians the world over affirm that Jesus was crucified and then on the third day was raised from the dead... Unitarian Universalists are notably skeptical. Some of us dismiss the story out of hand, as either complete fiction or at best as created by followers of Jesus so inspired by his life and teaching that they could not and would not believe he had died once and for all. Others among us might go so far

as to say that the story reflects the kind of experience we all either know or will know, the experience of coming to feel the presence of a loved one who has died still in our hearts and in our lives yet in a new way – missed physically but never far away from our thoughts and even a kind of felt presence. Yet others affirm symbolic or metaphorical truth in the story... (as in fact do many Christians).

In any case, all this said... when it comes to the end of Jesus's life... we Unitarian Universalists are not sure what happened 2,000 years ago.

We are even less certain of course (along with everyone else) as to what might happen 2,000 years from now – even twenty years from now for that matter. To put it another way, we cannot know how the story now in progress – our lives, the world... will turn out.

This is sometimes poignantly clear in our personal lives.

When my grandmother lay dying, forty-five years ago, my father was with her. He reported to us later that in her last hours she wondered what “the boys” would do – that would be my brothers and me, just teenagers at the time. She was oh so naturally curious... but she would not know how our lives would unfold or turn out.

When my father lay dying, over twenty years ago, he wondered about *his* grandchildren. He wondered, too, about the arms race, still at full throttle before the collapse of Soviet communism, and against which he had devoted passionate energy during his all too brief retirement.

Jesus himself, dying on the cross and saying, we are told, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”... couldn't know in his human knowing that his message of love and healing, his message of welcome to *all*, the poor, the sick, the lonely, his message of peace among nations, would echo through the centuries, would rise and rise again, through millennia, long after the empire which had put him to death had crumbled.

Did you know that it is likely that there were *two* processions which entered Jerusalem on what we have come to remember as Palm Sunday, what was at the time the beginning of the week of Passover? Biblical scholars Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan write about the two processions in an article in the March 2007 “The Christian Century.”

Jesus – we have all heard this part of the story – entered from the east with his disciples, intentionally riding a simple donkey, a peasant's beast and helper, symbol of humility, peace, solidarity with the poor.

Yet we know from other histories of the time that on that same day at about the same time another procession would likely have been entering Jerusalem from the west. During a period in which Passover often meant unrest among the oppressed Jewish community in Jerusalem, this second procession would have been led by the Roman governor at the time, Pilate, riding what would have been a war horse, having come from the imperial capital of Caesarea to reinforce the garrison at Jerusalem.

Two processions. One bearing a message of military power, the power of the elite, of the oppressors, of implicit violence. The other bearing a message of spiritual power, the power of ordinary people, the power of non-violence and peace.

Now it seems to me that though Jesus likely realized that his actions would be seen by the ruling authorities as subversive, and therefore would put his life in danger... he couldn't have known for certain that the week would end in his death, and he would be

even far less likely to have known that though his life would end, his message, his teaching, in an important sense his spiritual presence would endure for centuries.

Yet from our perspective 2,000 years on, though there is much about the circumstances of the end of Jesus' life about which we are and will be uncertain, we do now know that in the confrontation between Jesus and the imperial power of Rome... Jesus lost only for the moment, imperial power was triumphant only for the moment.

And when I say that Jesus' message has endured, I am not speaking of the institutional church triumphant, a church hardly without blemish, indeed with blood on its hands over the centuries. I am speaking of what I understand to be a two-fold teaching:

First, a message that the kingdom of heaven is here and now and spread before us had we eyes to see and ears to hear – a kingdom of compassion and welcome and kindness and beauty which is within us and around us even in the midst of cruelty and hate and ugliness, even in the midst of personal suffering and struggle.

Second, a message that change and transformation, whether of the individual spirit or of entrenched political and social power structures, can and does happen, again and again, yet does not happen automatically or miraculously, but requires courage and perseverance – the kind of courage and perseverance Jesus himself demonstrated in Jerusalem centuries ago.

Here, then, is what I take away from all this on Easter Sunday. It is actually quite simple:

Though we can never be certain about events of the distant past – after all, historians even differ and argue about events in our own lifetimes...

And though we can never know how the story in which we are now living will “turn out” – whether our personal stories or the lives we share in community, in our nation, in the world, in the family of life...

We *can* choose with certainty how we will live now, according to what values, seeking which goals, caring about what issues – we can choose which procession to join...:

We can choose, for example, to make that phone call to someone we know is in the midst of grief, that they might, after their long, hard road rise again in this life to shape a new way of living.

We can choose to send a card to someone we know who is ill or lonely, that they might rise to health again.

We can choose to offer a word of encouragement or simply a silent hand to someone we know is living through depression, that they might rise to a sense of well being again, and at the least that they will know someone is walking the way with them.

We can in the depths of our own valleys seek a helping hand, a companion to walk with us, so that we might rise again.

We can choose every day to say the kind word, to spend caring time with those we love, to pitch in with spirit when its time to pitch in – in our homes, our neighborhoods, our workplace, our church.

We can choose which procession to join.

In the larger story of our shared lives, we can choose to speak out against an unconscionable war, against torture in our name.

We can speak out in support of peaceful resolution of conflict, speak and act for justice and for racial reconciliation, speak and act on behalf of the earth.

For just as the people of Jerusalem 2,000 years ago had a choice as to which procession to join... so, too, do we have a choice... every day.

Knowing with no more certainty than my grandmother or my father how things will turn out, knowing with no more certainty than the people of Jerusalem 2,000 years ago how things will turn out, with no such expectation, we can be part of a rising of the human spirit in this age, this rising at the beginning of the 21st century which *could* come to be viewed by future generations as a turning towards more cooperation, more compassion, more peace, more justice transcending distinctions of race and ethnicity, more sustainable ways of living on our shared home planet.

Yet whether or not that will someday come to pass, living guided by our deepest compassion and our highest ideals ... must and does bring satisfaction on its own terms. This is its own spiritual, moral, ethical rising... no matter how things may or may not turn out.

The snowdrops and crocuses, and soon the daffodils, stick *their* green necks out not knowing if yet another early spring storm will flatten them. But no matter. There is joy in their rising even so.

As for us, who knows what creative moment is about to happen? Or has already happened and we just haven't yet heard of it? Who knows but that something you or I have done or said or might do or say tomorrow is part of the transformation – the rising – we desperately need in this century?

I who speak and you who hear these words will not know how this century will “turn out.” But we can put our hand back on the plow and do the best we can to help one another along the way and together to meet the challenges of our age.

Rising again? There may be miraculous forces at work about which I know little. But surely a good part of the answer as to whether we will rise again – whether in our personal lives or in the lives we share – is up to us.

This means the answer is in good hands – this Easter Sunday and always.

So may it be.