

“Easter Presence”
Sermon Written and Delivered by Rev. Jennifer Youngsun Ryu
Williamsburg Unitarian Universalists
Williamsburg, VA
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Call to Worship

John 20:1-18 NRSV

Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed. She ran to the others to get the others. They looked at the empty tomb and returned to their homes.

But Mary stayed. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb; and she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet. They said to her, “Woman, why are you weeping?” She said to them, “They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him.”

When she had said this, she turned around and saw someone standing there. It was Jesus, but she did not recognize him and supposed him to be the gardener, she said to him, “Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away.”

Jesus called to her, “Mary!”

She turned, “Teacher!”

On Easter morning, Christians all over the world look into the empty tomb.

It is the most significant event in their tradition.

To them, the empty tomb means that he who was dead has now risen.

It is an occasion for brass trumpets and colorful hats, fresh pastries and chocolate eggs.

For certain Christians, like the writer John Updike, the literal fact of the Resurrection must be absolutely true. He explains why in his poem “Seven Stanzas at Easter:”

“Let us not mock God with metaphor, analogy, sidestepping transcendence;
making the event a parable, a sign painted in the faded credulity of earlier ages:
let us walk through the door.

And if we will have an angel at the tomb, make it a real angel, weighty with Max
Planck’s quanta, vivid with hair, opaque in the dawn light, robed in real linen
spun on a definite loom.

“Make no mistake: if He rose at all it was
as His body; if the cells’ dissolution did not reverse,
the molecules re-knit, the amino acids rekindle,
the Church will fall.”

The Church of Updike and countless other Bible Literalists would indeed fall, but ours
wouldn’t.

Come, let us look into the empty tomb with our own eyes and find our own meaning in
Easter. Come, let us worship together

SERMON

Mary Magdalene has hardly slept or eaten in days.
And so it isn't surprising to find her walking outside early Sunday morning.
The sun isn't even close to rising, it is still dark and she isn't sure exactly where she's going. Her feet take her to the tomb where they laid the body of her beloved teacher.

She knows very well that a large stone has been set to seal the entrance. She knows she will not be able to see him or touch him. But she longs for even a bit of his presence. She is seeking comfort, as we all do, by reaching for something solid--something she can touch.

Mary is startled to see that the stone has been rolled away. She runs to Simon Peter and the other disciples. "Come quick." They follow her, and together they look upon the empty tomb. Wasn't it enough to have to witness their beloved being put to death? Now grave robbers have taken his body.

The men return silently to their homes. The sun is coming up, and they are afraid for their safety.

Mary decides to stay, and that's when she sees the angels; that's when she sees Jesus. She runs to catch up to the others to tell them the amazing news.

This morning, it is the task of every Christian community to make meaning of this rather puzzling Easter event—the resurrection of Jesus.

It is also our task. Even though we don't call ourselves a Christian church anymore, we do claim 400 years of Protestant Christianity as our foundation.

It is also our task because we value the life and ministry of Jesus of Nazareth. The story of his Death and Resurrection is part of that life. We can't set it aside just because we don't believe it.

Last week I talked about religious metaphor and described Unitarian Universalists as taking the middle way when it comes to the traditional religious stories. We neither believe these stories as literal fact, as dogmatic truths, nor reject them as outright lies and therefore useless.

Taking the middle path, between the literal interpretations that some reject and some embrace, we find many kindred partners. Progressive Christians, Catholics and Protestants from many denominations use the story of Easter as they would a boat to cross a great river to the shore of new understanding. We join them in listening to the Easter story as myth, understanding it as spiritual metaphor.

A myth is not a lie. In everyday speaking we tend to equate those two words. But in fact, a myth can be truer than the facts of everyday life.

The myth of the birth, ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus is not a lie. A myth is a collection of images and stories that present a “metaphor of the possibilities of the human experience...” That definition of myth comes from Joseph Campbell, one who has spent his entire career thinking and writing about comparative mythology.

The myth of Easter presents us with a metaphor of the possibilities of the human experience: the possibility of an experience of life that is both full of joy and boundless love and is free from the mind’s cravings that separate us from true life.

Before we dive into the metaphorical meaning of Jesus’ death, we must first understand the meaning of his life.

Jesus did not just drop into human history from nowhere. Like every person born into the world, he was a continuation of the generations that went before him. Here was a man, born to a family of modest means. As a Jew, he was a member of a minority group. He was affected by the culture, politics and religion of his time. Legions of Roman soldiers lived near him in the region of Galilee; violence and conflict were constant companions in his life.

He watched as the Greco-Roman culture chipped away at his own Israelite culture. He saw his people take up arms to fight against the oppressors and he saw them quietly acquiesce as statues of Emperors were built on the Holy Lands and temples turned into commercial centers.

One theologian described how marginalized Jesus and his people were, saying: (Howard Thurman) “Jesus was not protected by the normal guarantees of citizenship, that quiet sense of security which comes from knowing that you belong and the general climate of confidence which it inspires. If a Roman soldier pushed Jesus into a ditch, he could not appeal to Caesar; he would be just another Jew in the ditch.”

In this way, he was very much like all the other Jews in Palestine in those days. He was quite ordinary. In other ways, he was quite extra-ordinary.

Jesus had somehow woken up to the true nature of his being, and of all human beings. Christian scripture doesn’t tell us when or how this spiritual enlightenment occurred in his life. But we know that by the time he began his ministry, around the age of 30, it was fully present in his preaching and his encounters with everyone he met.

He was able to experience God in himself, though he didn’t interpret his experience as personal or even unique. He saw God in everyone he met. This is the fullest expression of the UU covenant to affirm the inherent worth and dignity of every person—to see God in everyone. Jesus also believed that every human being had the capacity to know God in herself and himself.

For those of us for whom the word God has lost much of its meaning, theologian Stephen Mitchell helps us to understand God in a broader way:

“If we compare God to sunlight,” he says, “we can say that the heart is like a window. Cravings, aversions, fixed judgments, concepts, beliefs – all forms of selfishness or self-protection – are, when we cling to them, like dirt on the windowpane. When there is no dirt, the window [of the heart] is by its own nature perfectly transparent and the [sun] light can stream through it without hindrance.”

This is what it was like to be with Jesus. Like sitting next to a clear, clean window through which pure light shone through. Nothing got in the way of that light. In other words, people who were near Jesus felt love pouring into them. They felt seen, perhaps for the first time, exactly as they were. They felt fully forgiven for anything they had done or said, and they felt loved without condition, without reservation.

His followers and disciples could see God in him. But they could not yet see God in themselves. Jesus could see that those around him had no or very little consciousness of the presence of this universal spirit within themselves. And this, he knew, was a source of great suffering among his people.

In his Maundy Thursday Sermon, Preston told us that life for Jesus was an inherently communal experience. Accordingly, his ministry was not a personal self-improvement program, but rather, a communal process of spiritual awakening. Stephen Mitchell describes this dynamic this way:

“Jesus ... [was] a man who has emptied himself of desires, doctrines, rules – all the mental claptrap and spiritual baggage that separate us from true life – and has been filled with the vivid reality of the Unnamable. Because he has let go of the merely personal, he is no one, he is everyone. Because he allows God through the personal, his personality is like a magnetic field. Those who are drawn to him have a hunger for the real; the closer they approach, the more they can feel the purity of his heart.”

Big crowds came-- not only to hear his words, but just to be in his presence, to feel the purity of his heart.

To the people who held political and economic power, to those who needed to keep order and control over the masses, Jesus was a huge problem. Their social order depended on people knowing their place and staying there, yet Jesus kept crossing boundaries, keeping company with the wrong kinds of people. They had to do away with Jesus.

On Thursday, Jesus draws those closest to him around the table. He's trying to get them to see that he's not some kind of magician, He wants them to realize that every person is a child of God; every person is endowed with the divine light. The same spirit that enlivens him lives in them, and does not depend on his physical presence.

The disciples are straining to understand what Jesus is saying when he says the “Kingdom is within you.” To them, it’s still all about Jesus. And yet, the whole point of his ministry was to make himself, as a personal ingredient in this process, irrelevant. From the beginning, his ministry pointed toward the day when he would no longer be with them.

When Jesus dies on Friday, his followers feel like the magic has died with him. On Sunday, they see the empty tomb, and yet, they are so overcome by their own fear that they do not sense the presence of Jesus.

Everyone, except for Mary. The men have gone back to their homes. Mary Magdalene remains and peers into the tomb, her eyes adjusting to darkness. She hears someone. She feels someone there standing with her.

You who have lost your beloved, you know what it’s like to wish for that person’s presence so much that you can almost feel him or her. There’s a sense of a real connection being made.

Mary wants to reach out and find him there. But she hears him saying, “No. Do not touch me. Do not cling to me.”

I think Mary understood what this meant—if not immediately, then soon after.

There is always a temptation to use religion as a comfortable shelter from sorrow rather than a stimulus to change the heart, to wipe the dust and dirt from the windows. That’s how Jesus becomes an object of devotion and an object of worship rather than the subject of our faith.

I think Mary understood this. She felt his strong presence, that same radiance of light, even though he was gone. After all this time, believing that he was the source, I think she finally experienced that divine source of light within herself.

The others began to feel that same radiance as they stopped clinging to him.

Now, after all that has happened, the followers of Jesus are able hear his words as they never heard them while he was alive. The kingdom is within you. And wherever two or more of you are gathered in my name, I am there. They can feel this because even though he is physically absent, dead and gone, the wonderful sense of spiritual presence they felt while he was with them is persisting.

Together, they find the source of their own light by clearing away the delusions, selfishness, and fear; by letting the sunlight flow. Writers have described the early communities of Jesus followers as places of “Joy unspeakable and full of glory.”

This is the good news of Easter: that every person can experience a new life if he wants it deeply. Every person can share in this universal spiritual value no matter what her family background, social or economic class or religious temperament might be.

Having the experience of sunlight pouring through the clear window of the heart is not limited to people who believe in God.

It is a universal human experience, a capacity that allows one to have an experience of life that is both full of joy and boundless love and is free from the mind's cravings that separate us from true life.

And so, at Easter, we sing Alleluia for we are offered these gifts of new life over and over again.

May today be yet another celebration of love and awakening, a feast of the spirit!

Amen
May it Be So

Resources used: Jesus and the Disinherited by Howard Thurman and The Gospel According to Jesus by Stephen Mitchell,