

Signs of Renewal

Easter Sunday, April 4, 2021

Rev. Dr. Roger Jones, preaching

Unitarian Universalist Society of Sacramento

Reading: Joe Empson, *Rabbityness* (Child's Play Library, 2012).

Piano: George Frederic Handel, "Where'er You Walk" from Oratorio "Semele," G.F. Handel; "For the Beauty of the Earth," John Rutter; "Alleluia" by Ralph Manuel.

Cello: Bouree from 3rd suite for unaccompanied cello, J.S. Bach

Hymns: #1000, Morning Has Come; #269 [tune for #268], "Lo, the Earth Awakes Again," "Tomorrow," Kate and Justin Miner; video, UUA General Assembly Virtual Choir, June 2020.

Introduction

For this Easter Sunday service our theme is the possibility of renewal and signs of new life after loss or defeat, even in the midst of devastation. I will offer a homily reflecting on the meaning of Easter for the followers of Jesus of Nazareth after they lost him. But we also will see and hear a story book about a Rabbit and the lessons about beauty and creativity he shared and left as a legacy to his rabbit friends. We will hear our member Fred Best's reflection on seeds of renewal and possibility after loss and failure.

From Irina Tchantceva and Kenji Ota we will hear music. For many people music is a source of renewal, of course. Every new piece of music is an example of ongoing creativity and new possibility. Among the poetic hymn texts that are used with traditional Easter tunes, there is one in our gray hymnal entitled: "Lo, the Day of Days Is Here." These words are from Unitarian minister Frederick Lucian Hosmer. Born in 1840, Hosmer served congregations in Massachusetts, Ohio, Illinois, Missouri, and finally in Berkeley, California. Irina will play it now so we can sing along. Good morning, Irina!

Homily

After the service last Sunday, in our online Zoom breakout rooms for our Coffee Hub, the question suggested for discussion was: *How has UUSS changed you?* In the Zoom rooms I visited, I heard people say UUSS had given them courage, stirred their conscience, and boosted their self-confidence and self-esteem, among a variety of other things.

Two people who came from Christian upbringings told us that Unitarian Universalism had "saved Jesus" for them. They explained that they feel they are able to bring Jesus of Nazareth into Unitarian Universalism but are not expected to say things they don't believe about him. *Here* they can express their belief in the fully human Jesus. The Jesus who has meant so much to them is the human being who was a compassionate healer, ethical teacher, prophet of justice, and messenger of Divine Love. This was how UUism saved Jesus for them.

Nearly two thousand years ago, the disciples and friends of Jesus lost him in a grisly way--execution by the Roman Empire. Yet what saved Jesus for them was their belief in his resurrection. The sense that he was still among them restored their commitment to carry on his ministry of love, justice, compassion, and respect for human dignity. Yet in the shock of their desolation and failure, all they really wanted to do was grieve.

Professor Esau McCaulley is the author of a book *Reading While Black*, which about Biblical interpretation from an African American Christian perspective. Writing last week in the *New York Times*, McCaulley recounted how some of Jesus' disciples who were women went to the tomb of Jesus to anoint his body on the third morning. They discovered his tomb was empty. And that changed everything. McCaulley said: "They were searching for a place to grieve." They were not looking for hope; they were going there "to be left alone in despair."

"We know what to do with grief and despair," McCaulley said. "We have a place for it. We have rituals that surround it. I know how to look around at the anti-Black racism, the anti-Asian racism, the struggles of families at the border and feel despair. I know what it's like to watch the body count rise after a mass shooting, only to have the country collectively shrug because we are too addicted to our guns and our violence.

Grief is familiar, but "Hope is much harder to come by." The challenge of Easter, McCaulley said, "the terrifying prospect of Easter is that God called these women to *return* to the same world that [had] crucified Jesus." They and the other disciples would come to see they were called and charged to carry forward the lessons and legacy of Jesus. It was their burden and their gift.¹ In living out their legacy, they planted seeds of possibility and hope among the people they encountered. And by doing so, they experienced a renewal of life in themselves.

They invited others to join in their ministry. To newcomers they showed what they had learned to do from him, and such things were passed along from generation to generation. For example, they carried on traditions of table fellowship and communion, of praying and singing together, of healing and helping those on the margins of society. In fact, many of them were from the margins, though their movement embraced people from all stations in life, in Jesus' example of crossing boundaries. They believed that Jesus was with them still. For most of them, perhaps that was the literal truth. In any case, it was true spiritually, for the belief restored their spirits. It kept them going.

A few minutes ago we read the picture book entitled *Rabbityness*. Of course, many people think about bunny rabbits around Easter. While it is true in Western history that folklore about the Easter Bunny originated with German Lutherans more than four centuries ago, the Easter Bunny has nothing do with the Christian story of resurrection. In no way do I want to say Jesus is like the Easter Bunny, or like a rabbit of any kind. However, it seems to me that in that little picture book, the author (Jo Empson) provides a clear allegory about the relationship of Jesus to his disciples.

¹ "The Unsettling Power of Easter," by Esau McCaulley, *New York Times*, published and accessed on April 2, 2021. Note, it is my reading that, unlike more progressive Biblical interpreters, McCaulley does not include these women as among official disciples, as his essay says they told the disciples, not "the other disciples." I *do* refer to them as disciples. <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/04/02/opinion/easter-celebration.html?action=click&module=Opinion&pgtype=Homepage>

Consider the main character of *Rabbityness*. He is called Rabbit. Rabbit shows a way to live that most others of his kind are not used to. They did not even realize that it was possible for them to paint and add bright colors to the world or that it was possible to play instruments to bring joy through music. Things like art, music and creativity are called “unrabbity”—but are they *really* if Rabbit knows how to do them? He shows the others how, and they do! *They love it.*

Then, suddenly, Rabbit is gone. All his friends have is a dark empty hole in the ground. They are sad; they are grieving; the world has no color or music anymore. But eventually they realize what Rabbit left them—the ability to bring music and color to the world again. Even in their loss, they can go forward. As they share their talents with others, as they bring beauty to the world, they find renewal for themselves.

In the Gospel of Mark and other Gospels of the New Testament, we see that Jesus demonstrates a way to live that most of his followers are not used to. Before he calls them to serve, they may not have thought of crossing social boundaries of religion, class, gender, or ethnicity. They probably kept their heads down to avoid any trouble. Perhaps it’s a new thing for them to experience mercy, forgiveness and reconciliation. *What a beautiful revelation.* They see compassion and respect extended to those who usually get ignored—or worse. Their world is harsh. In that harsh world, compassion is not a normal thing that normal people do, but they learn to do it from Jesus. Then, suddenly Jesus is taken. All his friends have is a dark empty tomb in the side of a hill. They grieve the loss, but they also go forward, sharing his gifts and lessons, making his presence real in the world.

We still have a harsh world. We must grieve destruction and loss. And we must look for signs of renewal; we must cultivate seeds of possibility. This is what the Easter story says to our times. These are times of weeping at a pandemic’s massive casualties, *and* these are times to comfort the sick, the bereaved, and the lonely. These are times to lament the suffering of those who are left out and vulnerable, *and* these are times to dare to improve access to health care and economic wellbeing. We are in times of grieving the violence of racism, *and* we are in times of *confronting* the systems and habits that hold racism up. Easter is not about ignoring the losses, but it gives us an action orientation. It says to notice the signs of renewal around us and plant seeds of possibility.

Five centuries ago, Martin Luther (the Protestant reformer), said if he found out that the world would be coming to an end, he knew God would still want him to plant apple trees. Of course, things would have to look pretty bad in order to be called “the end of the world,” but maybe in the ashes of loss there can be seeds of possibility. Perhaps we can plant them. Luther would plant apple trees, because later on somebody might need apples—such as a remnant of human beings, maybe, or wildlife: squirrels, insects, worms or birds. He would literally plant seeds of possibility.

What signs of renewal do you perceive in the world? What seeds of possibility are you planting?

We have a choice to do this every day we are given to live. Here are a couple of examples that occur to me from ordinary life. I hope you can think of more, and share them later. My examples are human kindness and generosity.

In a time when we can feel so burdened by aggression, mistrust, and hostility in human life, it's good to pay attention to the practice of kindness we witness every day. We can appreciate all the occasions of care, patience, humility, and simple words of respect. And we can cultivate the seeds of kindness in our own lives.

In a time when scarcity, selfishness, and fear keep us anxious and apart, it's good to pay attention to actions of generosity and help. This is evident in the way people donate money, provide food, give of their time, and show hospitality to others. We can appreciate the gifts of service which keep us connected and which support our well-being. And we can cultivate the seeds of generosity in our own lives.

Deeds of generosity and kindness provide signs of renewal and hope. But these are not the only sources we can cultivate. Whatever might be *for you* a sign of renewal and possibility, please watch for it every day. Consider the seeds of possibility that we can plant and cultivate in this world, as individuals, as families, and especially in community.

On Easter or at any time, we dare not ignore or deny what's been destroyed or lost. Yet Easter has an action orientation. Let us watch for signs of renewal in this world and plant the seeds of possibility. This is how to cultivate hope. In so doing, may all of us find renewal.

May everyone, everywhere, experience renewal by the cultivation of hope. So may it be. Amen.