

"Resurrections"

April 24, 2011 Easter

The Rev. Ms. Barbara J. Pescan

Meditation – for those for whom resurrection is difficult...

Dear Life, Dear whatever there is that hears ---
Our lives had become
 A tattered rag, a winter rag
We dragged across surfaces
Dusty with dry sins.

Now, we will wash it in the blue green lake
We will shake it against the blue, wide sky
We will lay it to dry on a budding branch, then
Pin it to the cuff of our sleeve so
Whatever we lift our arms to do ---
Working, praying, singing, reaching,
Lifting our arms above ourselves
Our sullied selves ---

This cloth, this life will wave
Flick through the dull air
 The bright air
 The holy, waiting air.
In praise.

It is spring. May we arise and love this life
And serve the good. And, praise. Amen. Blessed be.

Reading - "Who Are We at Easter?" B. J. Pescan

Who are these who sing Alleluia
and call risen, risen, indeed
one
dead long ago
whose words are so often amulets
against the necessary struggles

as if any words alone could:
 love against all odds
 sing with the lunatic
 reveal the nakedness of power
 deliver the dispossessed to choices again
 turn hope's prism for the blind to marvel

*smooth hard places into feather beds for the broken
wrest from nothing and no way
the chance for children to grow whole
stretch easy the backs that bear the work
bless all the world with our lives
lived forgiving, alert for love*

What fools, indeed,
who may never even discuss divinity
or agree on how much room there is anywhere
for angels, again, to dance
but who
in their ancient poetry
with its curious syntax and
in their reckless yearning insist
insist
love never dies
survives after the grave even here
and claims us yes, now
and will not ever let us go.

Message – “Resurrections”

from “Dr. Zhivago” by Boris Pasternak

You are anxious about whether you will rise from the dead or not, but you rose from the dead when you were born and you didn't notice it. . . .so what will happen to your consciousness...yours, not anyone else's.

Well, what are you? There's the point. Let's try to find out. What is it about you that you have always known as yourself? What are you conscious of in yourself? However far back you go in your memory it is always in some external, active manifestation of yourself that you come across your identity. . . . in the work of your hands, in your family, in other people.

And now listen carefully. You in others. . . .this is your soul. This is what you are. This is what your consciousness has breathed and lived on and enjoyed throughout your life --- your soul, your immortality, your life in others.

And what now? You have always been in others and you will remain in others. And what does it matter to you if later this is called your memory? This will be you --- the you that enters the future and becomes a part of it.

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Each Easter season challenges me to tell its truth in times that no longer believe, to a people who live with doubts about everything. This holiday is a tel, a religious archeology of traditions pre-dating Christianity, and fading from it into practices whose origins have been largely lost to us. Eggs and rabbits are invocations of fecundity from traditions earlier even than Judaism, of people who feared they would not have enough, so valued the meaning of eggs, and fertile animals. So, there is the need to resurrect the religious story, even its pagan antecedents, from its commercial status. But, there's more than that, too.

The Easter story and its metaphors place a burden on us clergy to get it right, to step into the tradition and get it right, even in these times, even for us. I concur with my colleague, Jane Rzepka, who writes: "I say this...there is no getting around it. Whatever else Easter may be based on, it's about Jesus. Whatever agricultural roots it has, it is also based on the memory, however distorted, of how the unexpected and cruel death of an ancient teacher named Yeschu turned the lives of his students upside down." (Quest, March, 2005) Easter is about Jesus.

And, my colleague and brother, Mark Belletini says: "Jesus' death was so unexpected, so devastating, that years later some of his friends could not stop talking about how difficult it had been for them to go on. Their shock and grief were terrible." (Quest, March, 2005)

Rev. Belletini goes on to say, "Eventually, they began to imagine that the death of their teacher was not a sign of divine displeasure, but just the opposite...that his spirit could not be destroyed just because he was killed. One author, who wrote a letter [included] in the New Testament attributed to Peter, put it this way: 'He was slain in the flesh, but rose up in the spirit.'" (Ibid) Easter, then, is also not only about Jesus, but also about us.

In his book, *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time*, theologian Marcus Borg addresses *what manner of man* was the pre-Easter Jesus.

According to Borg, Jesus was a spirit person, teacher of wisdom, and a social prophet.

Jesus was a *spirit person*, one of those figures in history to whom the sacred is an experiential reality, and whose experience transcends the boundaries of his personal experience to make him a mediator of the sacred. That is, Jesus served as a conduit for the power of sacred depths to enter into this world

Jesus had a vivid experience of the sacred. He spoke from the experience that in addition to the tangible, material world of our ordinary awareness, there is more: “. . . a non-material level of reality, actual even though non-material, and charged with energy and power.” (Borg, chapter 2) And, this reality is not ‘somewhere else’ but all around us and we are in it...separated from it “only by filmy screens of consciousness.” [William James, quoted] [Borg, p. 34] It is what poet Gerard Manley Hopkins called “the dearest freshness deep down things.” [“God’s Grandeur”]

He was a fantastic *storyteller*; he had a way with words. He would quote tradition, and just when you thought you knew he was going to say “an eye for an eye,” he’d tell you to “turn the other cheek,” or “love your neighbor as yourself,” (the word neighbor being not a neutral word, but often meaning someone troublesome, sometimes an enemy) or, he might even say, “love your enemies.”

Jesus was *compassionate*. He not only was able to deeply feel and understand the suffering of someone else, ‘way below the level of his head, but was moved by that suffering to do something. To feed the hungry, visit those in prison, break bread with the outcasts, touch the sick with kindness instead of revulsion and so bring healing to them. Challenged by the social and political realities of his time, he advocated what we might call a “politics of compassion.”

In ancient Jewish thought the sins of any one of a community could bring suffering down on the whole community. In our age of individualism, compassion has become a private virtue, rather than a communal one. So, in our age, it is possible for politicians to wax sentimental about ‘a thousand points of light’ and “a little town called Hope,” and wax religious about ‘faith based initiatives,’ while dismantling the public policies that lead us to care for the shape and health of our whole community.

In Jesus' time something similar prevailed. The piety of the ancient Jewish social world, the purity system, required the pious to be separate from everything unclean, anything showing lack of wholeness. The purity system designated as impure untouchables with disease, tax collectors, shepherds, women, eunuchs, and the poor. That system had created a world of sharp social margins between the righteous and the sinner, the pure and the impure, between men and women, the rich and the poor, Jews and Gentiles.

But, as a sage and teacher of wisdom, Jesus told stories with plot twists that turned back on conventional wisdom, and showed another way. These parabolic stories don't only point out to the tradition, but come right back in to the listener and what you would do if you were in the story. Because the stories were not about the rules, they were about the people themselves.

My literal mind wants to argue with resurrection --- even though I know his students and followers were so grief-stricken at first that they imagined they saw him everywhere but in the tomb --- Mary of Magdala saw the slave gardener at the tomb and thought, "Surely, this is he"; Jesus' two students met a stranger on the road and talked with him for hours, all the way to Emmaus, where they shared a meal with him as they used to eat with their teacher and then they also thought, "This must be Jesus." His loving spirit was so strong, it was as if, out of their sight, he had only gone into the next room, as if he were still hovering very near.

I know that the dead and buried do not reappear in flesh to speak to us again. But, I understand how, in their grief and bewilderment, his friends would have wished it to be true. I understand how, having heard his message of love for even the least of these they would have been devastated to admit to themselves that he and his message were gone forever. And, I understand how, in their grief and awe, they also felt the weight that now rested upon them to live what he had called them to be.

Easter is and is not the story of Jesus and his death and coming back to life, his resurrection. The rationalist argument against the physical resurrection takes issue with the least important part of this story, the impossible rising alive from the grave. Easter is *our* story – the almost equally improbable story of human suffering, rebirth, renewal, resurrection, return and response.

Here it is: It is a harsh and stony world we live in. Spring comes staggering in, and with it the news that people we know are in trouble, and ill unto death, and it will take decades for Japan to recover from earthquake and nuclear tragedy; and that workers who helped clean up the gulf after the oil spill are getting sick with the consequences of touching and breathing both oil and cleaning chemicals; and we, ourselves, have not yet healed from the hurts of our lives.

And, yet, in the face of all these stony truths, you have chosen to come to church on Easter. Being in relationship with each other is not a choice. You are here because that is true for you. What religion calls us to, what this day calls us to, is the understanding that our relationships can be guided by love, that we can use our touch to heal and not destroy; that we can put this loving relation before self-gain, fear, distrust or cynicism, in our small lives and out in the world. And, that when we forget to do these things, we can remember again.

Resurrection and the rolling away of stones are not supernatural events --- they are possible for any ordinary person like you and like me. Resurrection is not on an annual cycle --- its season is any season of the human spirit where grace and welcome meet, where we the paths of return. We can all practice resurrection at any time.

Maureen Killoran, a UU clergywoman, tells this story of a New England Resurrection, in a Universalist church, some 60 years ago:

It was Easter Sunday and the choir was processing down the center aisle, singing a hymn called "Up from the Grave He Arose." [In the grating of the hot air register in the middle of the long aisle] the last soprano got her heel caught. She kept singing, stepped out of her shoe and kept on walking. The [baritone] behind her bent down, lifted up the shoe --- and brought the whole grate with it.

Nobody missed a beat. The man walked on with the shoe --- and the grate --- in his hand, and still in tune and still in step, the tenor behind him fell into the open register and dropped out of sight. As the choir arrived at their seats in the choir loft and sang the final "Alleluia, Christ arose!" the congregation was (to say the least) distracted by the shout, "You'd better all be out of the way, because I'm coming up!"

Mr. Jones rose from the crawl space, from the netherworld of the tomb, as the choir again burst into song and the congregation cheered...the resurrection was a shared experience that year.

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The lesson we have to keep relearning from the Easter story is that Jesus experienced something true about the world, about people and how they are meant to be with each other; about the essence of life and how life is brief but precious, brief for every one of us, even him; precious for every one of us, the outcast, the leper, the criminal, the sad, the pious, the falsely pious, the humble and the arrogant, the poor and the rich --- every one of us.

Each of you has a thing to do in your life, a task, a calling, that only you can do. For, no one else sees what you see; no one but you can see and hear with your eyes and ears what the world means, its music, its sadness, its shining beauty, its unnameable magnificent intensity. And, no one can utter and act upon these meanings but you. If your voice is silent and entombed, all this music, all this sadness and beauty will be silent.

Jesus said to the people closest to him, *the kingdom of God is within you. The realm of the sacred is here among you.* [Meaning, raise it up and act like it.] He said, *The realm of the good is within you.* [Meaning, lift yourselves up and BE the realm of good.] This isn't politics he was talking about. This isn't pie in the sky. Forget about heaven. Shake off the dust of those promises of sitting on Jesus' right hand or his left hand. Leave behind that tin amulet of specialness, that *if only you were brighter, or more capable, or knew more, or if only you were extraordinary, like them, you'd do something great.*

Let go of the pieties about who followed the rules, and who's had an abortion, and who is an alcoholic. We have to drop the pretense that we actually believe that if we follow the rules we won't get cancer, we won't lose our memories, that we will be safe from heart disease, and that at the end of life, the one with the most stuff wins and will get to stay here, forever young. Because, no one gets to leave here alive, but, oh, my goodness...oh, my heart and beauty...oh, dearest freshness deep down things...oh, my dear friends, there is so much to be done here; there is so much we may still do to awaken to the sacred depths of our life right here, right now.

Resurrection is not all hosanna and alleluia. Like birth, it is a movement from one element to another; it calls for much nurture and support, needs muscles to grow, for practicing the movement between worlds and between worldviews.

When have you been locked in the tomb of your soul? What fear has locked you away in darkness? What disappointment or sorrow made you turn your face to the farthest wall? What shame kept you barricaded inside a space of continually decreasing room for anything but self-pity and the slim hope that someone would break in and save you? What grudge has piled tons of little stones across the opening of your soul? What habits of refusal have deadened you to the call of another?

And, what has lured you to life again? What was it that made you start to push against the weight of the stone; or begin, one by one, to cast the million pebbles of your imprisonment behind you into the darkened cave, until you found the light again?

The story of the crucifixion, burial and resurrection is not only the story of Jesus and the beloved disciples. If it were just that, it would have long ago become an artifact of ignorant superstitions and primitive belief and inconsolable grief. But it has not become that. Even here, even in this room, we long for the words and stories of hope and faith and possibility.

Even here, we long to hear the old stories; we need to hear and to tell new stories, not for their improbable miracles, but to take sustenance from the persistence of human compassion. We long for stories of the courage of love persisting even in the face of inevitable losses; and healing in the face of death. We insist upon renewal in times of destruction. And, we want stories that will call us to action in times of violence and bewilderment and indifference.

We get mired. We forget who we are. Individuals, and religious institutions, and nations, go through periods when we refuse to remember what we know about love and silence, about healing and the violence done to our souls by unconscious living. We all do this.

But, then, once more, resurrection comes when we subvert the process of our own submission to the unspeakable erosions of our spirits. Resurrection happens when we come to ourselves again, acknowledge who we are and what we are for, and of what we are

capable. Easter is an act of remembrance and of intention. Let Easter be a verb that means "to rise."

This story is *our* story. We listen in it for the assurance that "things of great value do not face [death] and die and end, but *blend* into the great continuum called God by some – by others left unnamed, lest naming limit and define the endless goals of love." (From *To Meet the Asking Years*, Gordon McKeeman, Editor; Skinner House Press; 'Dedicated to a Dear Friend in Her Nineties')

Easter is not a system. It is not found in an intellectual evolution of logic and learning. Easter is like a joke – you either get it or you don't. Ha-ha! You killed the messenger, but the truth still lives! The joke is on evil, once again, subverted into love.

And, if you didn't get it last year, it doesn't mean you won't get it this year. We forget what it means. And, we remember again. Easter is as small as when, in the middle of an argument, one of you stops arguing, looks at the other and says, I love you, you old fool! It is as large as the collective memory and longing of humanity for love, and healing, and forgiveness, and a persistent peace. Amen. Blessed be.

Closing words – Clarke Dewey Wells

God of Easter and infrequent Spring:
Announce the large covenant to deceitful lands,
Drive the sweet liquor through our parched veins,
Lure us to fresh schemes of life.
Rouse us from tiredness, self-pity,
Whet us for use,
Fire us with good passion.
Restore in us the love of living,
Bind us to fear and hope again.