

Not Dead Yet

A Sermon Offered by Rev. Kathleen C. Rolenz©

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Unitarian Universalist Church of Annapolis

Hasn't that happened to you? You're driving down the road fiddling with the radio dial - minding your own business and out of the static of the dial or the fog of the day - a piece of music grabs you by the shorthairs, and takes your spirit to another place. There you are - like poet Billy Collins and you stumble across a piece of music like the Singing Nightingales, and they are singing about the garden of suffering, the beads of blood on the forehead and the stone before the hillside tomb—and something in the way they sing that song makes your heart stir. You feel yourself lifted into the air by those unseen nightingales, with a message that gives you Hope at that moment in time—not for all time, perhaps, but, for that moment, you feel something shift inside of you.

We don't know if poet Billy Collins *believes* in the message that the Singing Nightingales are so smoothly delivering over the airwaves, *or not*, or whether it matters. What I find meaningful about this poem is that it expresses my hopes for what an Easter Sunday sermon might mean for all of you, whether the story of Easter is yours or not, whether a relationship with Jesus means anything to you or not.

I know that this holiday is difficult for some Unitarian Universalists because so much emphasis is placed in traditional churches on believing in the literal, bodily resurrection of Jesus as the litmus test of faith. We tend to test our faith against facts and Easter is not about literal facts. It can be—a challenge—to talk about Easter in a meaningful way in a Unitarian Universalist church, because we don't know exactly WHAT happened as the story tells us - those women who came there hoping against hope that something would happen - and if or when it did - they wanted to be - ***in the tomb when it happened - the tomb when I happened!*** I'm claiming today not that Jesus has Risen, as our Christian neighbors preach, but that Jesus is not dead, yet - and there's a big difference.

Before we can enter our version of Jesus' empty tomb, however, we first must look at the many ways in which people have conspired to keep Jesus *in* the tomb. The first time we encounter this is in the book of Matthew 27: 62-66: "...The chief priests and Pharisees went to Pilate and said "Sir, we remember what that imposter said while he was still alive, "after three days I will rise again. Therefore, command that the tomb to be made secure until the third day; otherwise, his disciples may go and steal him away and tell the people, "he has been raised from the dead," and the last deception would be worse than the first." So, Pilate said "you have a guard of soldiers, go make it as secure as you can. So they went with the guard and made the tomb secure by sealing the stone."

We must fully grapple with this bizarre truth - that this one man, of questionable parentage, from an inconsequential town, with a rag tag band of followers who had no systemic power or privilege would be so dangerous as to require a guard and a secure tomb. Think about that for a minute. Jesus was not a Roman citizen. He was fortunate to have a tomb at all, because most of the bodies of those executed on the cross were left to hang so that animals would feed on them. It was the ultimate humiliation and desecration of the body.

For his disciples, this was a further insult, because they wanted the body. They wanted to be with him - *one last time*. Not to prove a point any longer, not to put on display as a martyr, but to grapple with something much harder - much more awful - that he was gone. That's why the body in resurrection theology is so important; because there is nothing else like sitting with the body of a loved one to make you realize that you are facing something much bigger than you ever imagined possible - the finality of death. It's an awful thing; and in some ways it's a beautiful thing too - because you get to hold your beloved one last time. The disciples were denied that - and with it, they were now not only without a leader, but without hope.

There were so many things the disciples believed that Jesus and they were going to do. Some of them thought they were going to build an army...they were going to overthrow Rome. Some of them thought they were going to follow their Messiah to a different kind of Judaism into a new Promised Land. They were fervent in their belief that this was their man – their savior from occupation, oppression, falsehood, and humiliation. And now, no man – no message – not even a body. They were no-body. But, they were not dead – yet...so what were they to do now?

For the earliest disciples of Jesus, the fact that he was dead, and they weren't meant that they had to do something. In the Road to Emmaus story, some of the disciples are walking down the road and Jesus appears to them, but they don't see who it is. Jesus talks with them, but they don't recognize his voice; Jesus breaks bread with them, and only then, with the physical reality of eating and drinking does something come alive in them again. They want to cling to him and say "Hey you're back-- *Like before, we will fight the fight and win the war!*" But the truth of the matter is, after a devastating event, you can't just pick up where you left off. Everything has changed, and the most important change that has happened – is in you. In this story, I'm less interested in how Jesus was resurrected than in how the disciples were resurrected from their despair – to take a moment in history and build a movement that we are still talking about in 2019.

If the resurrection story of the Bible were written today, it would surely be considered science fiction. I saw a similar science fiction story recently in an episode of the Netflix series called "Black Mirror." In that story, a young woman is very much in love with her husband, when he is killed in a car accident.

She discovers a service that will assemble all his Facebook postings, his emails, his video's, his tweets – all of his social media into a voice that will actually respond back to her. She does this – and it's satisfies her for a time, and then, it's not enough – she wants his body.

And so, through the power of modern technology and genetic engineering, he arrives one day, in a box, and she assembles a life-like simile of

her husband. He walks and talks and sounds like him.

And for a while, this satisfies her. But then, she realizes that one, essential thing is missing. The writers are too clever to name this directly, but I saw it immediately – it's his soul. There is no soul there. Without the soul he is still alive, but very much dead. She can't go back to loving this substitute. She had to move on, because she realized, like the women at the tomb who sought the living among the dead, that she was alive and he was not and she had to rebuild her own life again.

Isn't that the truth for us too? When something devastating happens to us –our first instinct is to want to return to the way things were – we want to codify the past because it's what we knew and presumably loved. The disciples of Jesus didn't know what to do so they did what they always did when they were with him. They met in small house churches and told stories about him – just as we do at wakes and memorial services; funny stories – truth telling stories – teaching stories. And they realized something else, that it wasn't enough just to tell the stories, they had to live it. They had to live his message. "I want to kill me some Romans," I can hear one of them saying. "Those who live by the sword, die by the sword," they would hear in their minds ear. Or, "maybe we shouldn't let women into our church club" and then, they would remember what he said about that woman who washed his feet before all hell broke loose: *Truly I tell you, wherever this gospel is preached throughout the world, what she has done will also be told, in memory of her.* And when they'd get discouraged and hopeless, they'd hear him saying "Behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

What became apparent to them was that they had a new charge, they had their own resurrection, which was a commitment to a new way of living – a way to counter the nihilism and to live in hope in the face of utter oppression and despair ; to say to the Romans and their persecutors, we're still here – and we're not dead yet either. Although they believed they were living in the end-times, they realized they still had a lot of work to do.

And don't we desperately need that message too? I came across a Facebook post from a

colleague that both disturbed and alarmed me because I've had the same feelings myself. She was thinking out loud about climate change and said:

"it's about time to panic, in my humble opinion. Like run to the hills and prepare to survive as society collapses...we are aware that wide spread panic like pull money out of banks and stock up on guns isn't likely to make us safer, but one of the ways that urgency spreads is when we sense urgency from the people around us. When all our neighbors are putting up the storm shutters, we think maybe we should too. What would helpful levels of panic look like in a way that would spread locally?"

I had to re-read her post a second time because at first, I thought she was saying "how can we hide from the coming apocalypse?" How can we prevent the next fire like the one that decimated the community of Paradise California, or the next flood like the one that submerged Hamburg, Iowa? What about the mudslides of Santa Barbara, or the cyclone of Mozambique?

This Sunday also happens to fall the day before Earth Day. Every year— seems like almost every month – another environmental and ecological disaster disrupts and destroys the lives of thousands of people and it feels now, as it did even 2000 years ago, that we are living in the end times. For the occupied Jews of 1st century Palestine, living under occupation, life was nasty, brutish and short. For Christians living under Roman rule, life was precarious and fraught with dangers. For people living in Paradise or Hamburg or Beira their loss was so complete it looked as if the apocalypse had already occurred, and they were living in the ashes of a world which had not yet come alive. There were many who lost their lives – but there were also many who survived, and despite everything, who affirmed that they were not dead yet. Many of us watched the Cathedral of Notre Dame burn earlier this week and the first response was "we will rebuild." Just as the people of Paradise

- they vowed to rebuild – sometimes in the ruins of their former homes; and sometimes in someplace new.

Call it tenacity of the human spirit. Call it God's divine intervention in human will. I call it resurrection, because resurrection is not understood as only the resuscitation of a body – it is the beginning of the transfiguration of the world.¹

So this is why I always am willing to preach resurrection to a largely humanistically oriented congregation and faith instead of just Easter bunnies and spring. While I believe in Spring, it takes no effort from me to make it happen. Spring and resurrection are not the same thing. The trees, the plants, even the animals in hibernation are not dead and they will come back without my willing them.

Instead, I literally have to wake myself up from a sometimes gloomy preoccupation with the world's wrongs to be able to say "come on old girl – you are not dead yet, because we are part of that transfiguration; every single one of us here and those who aren't here and those who will be here are part of a grand drama of hope. We are – we must be – have to rise up from the former devastations – just as the disciples did – *just as Jesus did* and say "death will not have the last say -- -today." And how – just how do we do that? How do we go from the grief of Good Friday to the jubilation of Easter morning?

It takes time. As you heard in the Easter reading, the women who received the news that the tomb was empty didn't jump up and down in joy; they ran away to tell others and they weren't believed. Peter came to the tomb and just kept shaking his head – not fully realizing that the very ground under his feet had forever shifted – and because of this he would never be the same. Just like us, grief takes time. Rebuilding a life takes time. Putting ourselves back together after loss may feel like a forever, but trust me, Easter morning will come for you too. It will come for all of us.

It takes commitment. The church I served in Cleveland, as with many other UU churches,

¹. " (Don't Explain It" by Jim Friedrich, April 3, 2019, The

volunteered to support the people of New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina hit. Our crews went to New Orleans for several years and the first year the devastation was overwhelming.

We saw X's on homes marked where a body had been found; other markings indicated the structure was beyond repair and was to be removed. But each time we returned could not believe the work that had been done to repair, restore, and rebuild. We had a hard time understanding how the blues could sound so joyous in the mouths of people who had been through so much. And as a result of that relationship, we came to know resurrection in a new way.

It takes others. It's interesting that in Orthodox iconography of the Resurrection, Jesus is never by himself. He is always depicting taking the dead by the hand and pulling them out of their own tombs. Sometimes the things that are killing us exert a powerful gravity. We sag under the weight of despair and we may resist the reach of another's hand, pulling us upward and outward - out of the graves of ours or other's makings. But we limit this idea of resurrection if it's only about one individual body. Jon Levenson, a professor of Jewish Studies at Harvard connects the belief in resurrection with classic Jewish and Christian teachers *which refer to a collective resurrection of people and the renewal of all creation at the end of time...in other words, ...Resurrection was linked to the expectation of judgment and a final triumph of justice.*² Resurrection was never a just me thing – it's a WE thing

It's a mystery. Yep. It's a mystery. Intellectually, I can't say I believe in resurrection in the way it's typically depicted, but I believe in it nevertheless and

I am willing to suspend my rational mind because – as I so often say during this interim time 'I may be wrong...' I was wrong recently about a gift I received.

Three years ago, as I was leaving Ohio, a colleague mine pressed this little packet of Saran Wrap in my hands to take with me. I didn't even know what was in the packet. Somehow, this little packet survived two moves, blazing hot and freezing cold temperatures and nearly getting tossed in the garbage until, out of curiosity, I opened it up. It was seeds. Old, dried up, worn out seeds. What was this? I thought? Why would he give this to me? I should have thrown them out, but I didn't. I threw them in a pot.. You already know where this is going. By all rights and means those seeds should have been dead – devoid of any potential for life whatsoever. A day went by; a couple days; a week. And then sprouts. A lot of them. Coming out of the earth without my willing it be so.

I know there's science behind that – it's not resurrection, but the sight of it did something in me – this simple thing, not like someone I love coming back to life, but a symbol of the possibility of a new life. Those seeds represented a life I had known and loved for sixteen years; a home, a community, a church, relatives, a place – all gone to me now – can't ever go back to what was – but those stubby, stubborn seeds have given me something that we all need – a sprout of hope – a word of good news – the ability to say on this Easter Sunday “ He is Risen, and I am Risen, and We are Risen” and to remind myself that wherever Jesus teachings are made real, wherever our kindnesses land solid, whenever our hearts leap with possibility, then death has not had the last word. And we can sing a song of hope and praise for the fact, that we are not dead – yet.

² Resurrection is Often Misunderstood by Christians and Jews, by Peter Steinfels, March 15, 2008, The New York Times.