

Rolling Away the Stone

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Meditation: “Rolling Away the Stone” by Sarah York

In the tomb of the soul, we carry secret yearnings, pains, frustrations, loneliness, fears, regrets, worries.

In the tomb of the soul, we take refuge from the world and its heaviness.

In the tomb of the soul, we wrap ourselves in the security of darkness.

Sometimes this is a comfort. Sometimes it is an escape.

Sometimes it prepares us for experience. Sometimes it insulates us from life.

Sometimes this tomb-life gives us time to feel the pain of the world and reach out to heal others. Sometimes it numbs us and locks us up with our own concerns.

In this season where light and dark balance the day, we seek balance for ourselves.

Grateful for the darkness that has nourished us, we push away the stone and invite the light to awaken us to the possibilities within us and among us – possibilities for new life in ourselves and in our world.

Reading 1: by Patrick O’Neill

Easter is an impossible story written for everyone who has ever felt the sting of death and wishes for something more.

Easter is a story for anyone who loves life so much that they pray for more life to follow.

Easter is a story for people who can envision a loving divinity that will not be conquered by evil.

It’s a story of love that never dies; of immoveable objects that get tossed aside; of happy endings in a tragic world; of miracles; of faith rewarded and vision restored and hope justified.

That’s what Easter is.

Reading 2: by Andrew Kennedy

The importance, for us, of Jesus, lies not in the way Jesus was born, nor in the way he died or supposedly rose again from the dead, nor in any of the miracles he supposedly performed. The importance of Jesus, for us, lies preeminently in the way he lived. And, similarly, I think most of us look to Jesus not as a Savior, not as the one and only Messiah, not as the King of Kings, the Lord of Lords, but as an exemplar – as an example of how to live a good and holy life in a troubled and brutal world. We look to Jesus not to lead us up to salvation, but back to ourselves.

Reading 3: “The Promise of Easter” by Eugene Navias

Who is to say what Easter is that we should celebrate this day and sing for joy? Easter is promises remembered and fulfilled of death and life and all that lies therein. It is the promise of the planets in their turn, the infinite fidelity of stars and suns and seasons.

Easter is Winter promising to Spring that earth shall yield its death to life again. It is the growth promise of the dormant seed, the barren meadow and the naked bough. It is the birth promise of all creatures which have life and breath and being.

Easter is ancient sorrows stilled and hopes remembered. It is the memory of Jesus dying in Jerusalem. It is the promise that his life shall never die as long as we still seek to dwell within his ways. It is the promise that the heart shall be reborn as hatred dies and love is given birth. It is the promise that the mind shall be renewed as ignorance is lost to newfound truth.

Easter is the promise to everyone who journeys from the death of prejudice to the life of understanding. Easter is promises to everyone who casts away the errors of the darkness to dwell within the light.

Lo, Easter is of earthly promises and human hopes that make the human heart forever young. A song of life which springs from death, a joyous human song, forever Alleluia sung.

Reading 4: “We Are the Resurrection and the Life” by Max A. Coots

The resurrection stories of the New Testament need neither be taken as fact or reinterpreted to appear scientifically acceptable. They can be left as they are: myths of meaningfulness. They are the poetry of reverence. They are the stories of the reaffirmation of life that even death cannot end. They are the songs of the experience of a people, who having experienced grief and loss and disillusionment, felt a restoration of their hope.

Human death is real. It is not at all similar to the retreat of plant life to the root to wait for spring. Human death is the end of life here, now, and among us. While a spring festival can crudely hint at the revival of life with the coming of crocuses, trillium and bluets, our dead do not come back to life and show themselves to us, their disciples, except in the intangible ways in which we are the return of the lives that have ended. We are the bodies that give their spirits flesh again. We are the specific forms of the life-force in the world, a force that seems to die in us in our winters and come to life again in our spring-times regardless of the time of year.

In us are written, if they are written at all, the new versions of the old story of Easter, the empty tomb, the renewal. We are at least part of what the ancient myth can mean, for we are or can be the resurrection and the life.

Reading 5: “The Easter Nonsense” by Bruce M. Clary

Easter makes no rational, logical sense at all. The Resurrection, “Christ the Lord is Risen Today,” makes no sense. The concept of Eternal Life wins few converts from us moderns.

So why do we celebrate Easter? And why should Easter command the largest attendance of the year in our churches?

Let me suggest it is precisely because Easter does make no sense! And, because it makes no sense, we learn something.

We believe in Easter because we need it, deep down, for the good of our souls. Something in us urges us to believe that the sacrifices of love and works endure beyond the grave. Something in us urges us to hope our children will benefit from our worries and tears, our strivings and givings for them. Something in us urges that we and they shall be triumphant over our worldly fears.

Easter is a universal celebration because it is a natural response. My Dad says it’s like the crabgrass that bursts through the concrete of his driveway. Concrete cannot contain the

persistence of the fragile leaf of life. And it's like the lily which suddenly blooms out of a foot of snow. And it's like the soft word of comfort, no matter how clumsy, offered to one in deep grief. Suddenly there is the unexplained, irrational affirmation of life that wipes away all ugliness, gloom and despair. In whatever moment, it is known that life conquers death. It is always insistent and urgent.

Christ is risen in these moments because here is one life, which, illogically, shows us what all life can become – the inevitable conquest over death.

That is what all life is, really. Life well-received, well-lived, well-given, well-remembered, is life no death can destroy. And that, my friends, is the Life Eternal. It is Easter. And it makes sense after all.

Easter Reflections

Mark W. Harris writes that

The resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead is the central Easter message for Christians, but the idea of celebrating a risen savior makes most religious liberals ignore the concept of resurrection entirely. Historically, our Unitarian Universalist approach has been to talk about Jesus the great ethical teacher. A third way to look at the idea of resurrection neither affirms nor denies its reality, but asks us to celebrate the alternative ways we experience resurrection. A resurrection occurs in the wake of a startling life transformation. What will set us free?

We Unitarian Universalists can celebrate Easter by asking when resurrection is a reality for all of us. If we believe in a creative power which shatters the icy tomb of winter with the life-giving miracle of spring, we have seen a resurrection. If we believe in a creative power which moves tens and then tens of thousands of people to cry out against the injustices of society, enabling the downfall of hatred and prejudice, then we have fomented a resurrection. If we believe in a creative power lying within each human breast which enables us to break the bonds of personal pain and know the hope of new tomorrows, then we have experienced a resurrection.

My previous life in the world of science teaches me that there are certain patterns in nature, and one of those is that we die, as all life must die, and that our death is the end of the physical self. And my work as a minister has taught me as well that, as much as I might wish it, no exception will be made for me or for the people I love, and that the inevitability and finality of our ending gives shape and meaning to what it means to be human.

Episcopalian Bishop John Shelby Spong writes about his own struggle with church dogma in his book, *Why Christianity Must Change or Die*, in which he says that he frankly *does not believe it*. He does not believe that Jesus was born to a virgin. He does not believe that God is “the Almighty.” And he does not believe that Jesus was physically raised from the dead. This is not just any old heretic, mind you. This is a Bishop saying these things.

And Bishop Spong also agrees that more important than the possibility of physical resurrection and eternal life is the possibility of spiritual rebirth. To get to the message of Easter Sunday, we must first acknowledge Good Friday, the day of Jesus' suffering and death. Each of

us has suffered, and in our suffering lost touch with the joy in life, lost touch with friendship, with the delight of seeing the world with fully opened eyes. There have been times when our suffering has felt like the end of the world as we know it. In suffering, we are tempted to close ourselves to life, and it is this closing off that brings us to the spiritual focus of the Easter message, and to the need to find a way to roll away the stone from the tomb of our soul, and open ourselves up to new possibilities – to new life.

In an Easter sermon called “The Easter Exam,” the Rev. Greg Ward suggests that one good way to determine whether a would-be Unitarian Universalist minister really has “what it takes to cut the mustard in diverse religious communities like ours” would be to administer one simple test. He says:

Give them each a desk with a single sheet of paper turned face down. Hand them a pencil, tell them this is the only test they will be given to enter UU ministry. Then tell them they have as much time as they need. Ring a bell, have them turn over their papers and begin writing. And then watch their reaction as they read the lone test question at the top of the page: two words, in bold type: “**Explain Easter.**” And then, in italicized parentheses underneath (*...so that your UU congregation will understand*).

From there on, it is simply a matter of weeding out those applicants who run screaming from the room. Anyone who can condense centuries of religious writing, church and cultural tradition, contradictory interpretations – they’re in.

Later in his sermon, Ward claims that all of us Unitarian Universalists need to pass the Easter Exam of our times. “We need to be able to explain Easter in terms of love.” For our closing reading this morning, I’d like to share the conclusion of Greg Ward’s sermon, in which he elaborates on our Easter Exam, and on how we can pass it.

Reading 6: from “The Easter Exam” by Greg Ward

So here it is, this is your Easter Exam. Ready? Pencils up. Here’s your question: While waiting in the hospital for a friend to return from tests, you see an elderly man waiting in the corridor alone. He is crying. You go to him. You introduce yourself, sit, and listen to his story. He tells you he has AIDS. He tells you his tale, which is about betrayal, judgment, abandonment, rejection, isolation, loneliness, fear, and despair. He finishes and looks down and begins to cry again. You reach for a tissue and hand it to him. You let him cry for a few minutes and put your hand on his shoulder. After a while he stops. Then, he raises his head, looks into your face and asks you in a soft voice, “Does God love me?”

What do you say? This is your Easter Exam. If Unitarian Universalism states that all life has inherent worth, how do you respond? If we believe that atonement is found by love rather than violence, what is your answer? If we believe that God – or the power of love – is real in this world and comes without ransom, that Easter is more than eggs in a basket but a way to help the suffering find a way back to hope, how will you pass this test?

The answer is you already passed this test when you saw him crying and you went over to him. You already understood Easter when you handed him a tissue and sat with him while he cried. You already became a minister of your faith and an answer to the Easter conundrum by

being present for his suffering without being consumed by it. For in this you showed that love can live through hate; that hope will not be consumed by fear; and the world will not turn away from the brokenness of its people.

But if you feel compelled to say something more, remember in your response that it doesn't matter whether or not you, yourself, believe in God; whether or not you believe in the sacrifice; whether or not you believe in the resurrection. The power of the Easter message is larger than the small minds who have carried this conundrum forward. The power of the message is a faith in love as the salvific power of all life.

You say, "Yes! If what you mean by 'God's love' is to know you are not alone, then *yes*. If what you mean is to know that there are people who will understand, who will care about you, listen to you, then *yes*. If what you mean is to know that the love you seek is stronger than the fear and betrayal you have been shown, then *yes*. If what you mean is that this kind of love exists the world over and you are part of it, then *yes*."

This is the Easter Exam that needs passing – that needs passing on. For we live in a world with even more violence and betrayal and abandonment than was part of the original Easter scenario two thousand years ago. If the Easter message is to have any meaning it requires us to pass this test – not just every April, but every day.

When all is said and done, Easter is us. Living in a hard and hurting world. Showing that love is possible. Over and over again.