

Resurrection, Come Again?

April 12, 2009

Rev. Jim Sherblom

First Parish in Brookline

“Darkness prevailed early that spring morning in Jerusalem. It was the middle of the Jewish month of Nisan, just at the start of the feast of Passover, perhaps around the year 30 CE. Shortly after Jesus of Nazareth’s grisly execution by crucifixion, his friends and followers gathered, in fidelity to long practice and prescription of the Torah, or “the Law,” to observe the Sabbath. We can only imagine their feelings; presumably they were crushed with shock and despair. Within a day or so of Jesus’ death, several of his female followers, including those who had witnessed his death and burial, walked to his tomb. Perhaps they went to anoint his body, perhaps merely to view his place of burial. Arriving at the sepulcher, they were startled at what they saw: a stone slab covering the entryway had somehow been moved from the tomb. They went in. To their astonishment, the dead prophet’s body, the body of their lord and leader—“their king”—was gone and his tomb was empty. They became convinced that he who had died had been restored to life. He had been “raised.” The saga that had begun with Jesus’ humiliating death and his languishing, lifeless, in a criminal’s tomb concludes, amazingly—miraculously—with his victorious exodus from the grave. “He is risen!” These three words are, needless to say, familiar to Christians. Hardly any sentence in the Bible, or any acclamation in the history of Christian worship, is better known or more precious to Christian believers. Proclaimed with jubilation annually at Easter, this affirmation expresses the Christian conviction that in raising Jesus, God has forever broken the power of death itself; in so doing, he had, [many] Christians believe, consummated the drama of divine salvation.”

Kevin Madigan and Jon Levenson, a Christian and a Jew, theological professors at Harvard Divinity School, begin their book called “Resurrection, the power of God for Christians and Jews” with this passage. Their message is that something really big happened, and we don’t need to believe in the supernatural, or any Christian creeds, in order to be able to understand and participate in the mystery and the celebration that comes Easter morning. “Lo, the earth awakes again —Alleluia... Once again the word comes true, Alleluia! All the world shall be made new. Alleluia!” We have already felt the greening of this season, as winter turns grudgingly into spring, the return of flowers, and birds, sunshine, and early morning light. This is the most natural aspect of this Easter holiday, this great holiday of death and renewal, named after a pagan goddess, and remembered with Easter bunnies and eggs. Yet here in its midst is a story of death and resurrection. What are we to make of this story? Where do we find ourselves in relation to this great and old story of faith? Such a question was put to me by Steve Sweet, about the time he and Phyllis signed the membership book, “If Jesus is not God for you, what does resurrection mean?” How does a rational humanist make sense of this totally unnatural report from a time of

superstitions and belief? As I began to ponder this question, Paul McLean gave me the title for this sermon: “Resurrection, Come Again?” Are we simply retelling a story which may have held real significance for some of our parents, and their parents, or can this old, old story still hold meaning for us today?

In my personal spiritual journey, I now focus on aspects of this story which I may not have noticed in my youth. In the Gospel of John, the most mysterious of the four gospels, women play the central roles, both abiding with Jesus in his dying and recognizing his resurrection. As Jesus is finally dying on the cross, the gospel tells us: “Meanwhile standing near the cross of Jesus were his mother, and his mother’s sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene. When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing beside her, he said to his mother, ‘Woman, here is your son.’ Then he said to the disciple, ‘Here is your mother.’” But wait a minute, Peter had already denied Jesus at this point, and all the male disciples have run away, only his female disciples are with him in his dying. When I was growing up, no one told me Jesus had female disciples, or that they were the most faithful. It wasn’t until 2003, when I first read the Gospel of Mary Magdalene, that I came to understand the early Christian church knew *her* as the disciple whom Jesus loved, and this whole story in John shifted for me.

The Gospel of John tells us that “Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw the stone had been removed from the tomb.” She ran and told Peter, and he entered the tomb to confirm what she said, and then returned home broken hearted. “But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb; and [we are told] she saw two angels dressed in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet. They said, ‘Woman, why are you weeping?’ She said, ‘They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him.’ [We are told that] when she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to her, ‘Woman, why are you weeping? Who are looking for?’ Supposing 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 said to her, ‘Mary!’ She turned [startled] and said to him in Aramaic, ‘Rabbouni!’ (which means Teacher). Jesus said to her, ‘Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.’” Mary Magdalene was Jesus’ chosen beloved disciple, and Jesus talked to her in terms of our being children of God, just as he was, and offered his relationship with God to us also. Jesus loves me, and tells me I am a son of God.

This was not how they told this story when I was growing up American Baptist in Rhode Island! Yet one doesn’t need to accept a gospel’s supernatural explanations to begin to notice something really big does seem to have happened. “He is risen, yes he is risen indeed!” Jesus transformed relationships between people, between people and God. Hierarchical relationships were cast

aside in favor of relationships based solely upon covenantal love. Wow!

We know from the letters of Paul that the early Christian churches focused primarily upon recreating beloved community, as Jesus himself seems to have done. The radical teachings of Jesus did not survive Christianity's adoption by the Roman Empire, or its rapid promulgation among people disconnected from the Judeo traditions concerning the inherent worth and dignity of every person, or the transformative nature of love which permeates all of our being. The teachings are still there, preserved within these gospel stories and teachings from the earliest church, for us once again to newly discover. So we are called each spring to remember the cycles of life: birth, adolescence, maturity, death and resurrection. We are each part of the cycle of life on this planet. Each human's life holds essentially the same experiences, but rearranged in each of our lives in singular ways, so that we reach across the singularity of our own particularity, to connect with one another and all that is life itself. When we truly connect, when we touch one another, we notice the person who has died, and the person who has been resurrected from the ashes of the one gone before. The seed has died, its shell is decaying, yet bursting forth from that seed is new life that is beyond belief! This is our seasonal call to resurrection, for he is risen indeed!

Because UU congregations are made up of humanists, Christians, Jews, and all manner of human beings, knit together in an inclusive yet diverse community of faith, our UU ministers have a particularly interesting task in preaching on Easter morning. Greg Ward, minister at the UU Church of Monterey, California suggests that we could do away with the entire UU ministerial fellowship process, and replace it with a simple exam. He envisions an exam with just one question: "Explain Easter," with the proviso, "so that your congregation will understand." He suggests that some of our UU ministerial candidates may run from the room screaming, or else seek another line of work. But he says this is a core question: "We need to be able to explain Easter in terms of love... [and] when all is said and done, Easter is us, living in a hard and hurting world; showing love is possible, over and over again." Greg's notion that the Easter sermon is a core task of UU ministry, led me to look at what other UU ministers have said about Easter. My minister since 1988, Gary Smith, began his 2001 sermon by announcing, "This is the First Parish in Concord. If your worship plans this Easter morning do not include Unitarian Universalism, this would be a good time to push your call button." Gary went on to show that Easter is about our most fervent hope to be loved. As Gary says, "We want to be loved. We want to know we are of worth. We want to be fully alive. We want to know we are not alone. We want to be part of a history and a heritage that is of value. We want to know we can make a difference. We want to leave this world better than we found it. We want to find joy in this life. We want to be spiritually aware. We want to be open to whatever those sources of life are that have created us and heal and uphold us still." We are open to the new.

Last week I was with two friends, Earl Holt and Tom Wintle, who happen to be ministers at our two largest UU Christian congregations in the UUA Massachusetts Bay District. Earl serves

King's Chapel, and Tom serves First Parish in Weston as well as serving as Editor of the UU Christian magazine. So I asked what they would preach about this Easter, and Tom said he probably would focus his sermon on this same moment in the gospel of John, when Mary thinks Jesus is the gardener until he calls her by name. Tom said he thought the two most important lessons for UU Christians from this story are that 1) Jesus is the gardener continuing to tend the world as we experience it; and 2) that you will know it is so when he calls you by name. I am a Universalist Christian mystic because I have had that experience of the living presence of Jesus in my life.

As Victoria Weinstein told First Parish UU in Norwell, Massachusetts three years ago in her intergenerational Easter sermon, "We've heard... the story of the original Easter morning, when Jesus' dear friend Mary of Magdala, and another woman friend named Mary, went to his tomb where they had the sad task of burying him. That was woman's work back in the ancient times. But, as you know, they found the tomb empty, and an angel announcing that Jesus was alive. The best way to describe their reaction in today's language, children, would be to say that they 'totally freaked out' and ran to tell the other followers of Jesus.... The other disciples thought that the women... were absolutely crazy. They didn't believe them at all. I suppose they figured that the women were over-tired and they had cried so much their eyes were playing tricks on them. They brushed the women off...it wasn't until other disciples experienced the living presence of Jesus themselves that they were able to enter into this miracle and believe. That's how miracles work." We need never believe until we receive.

And that is why Danica chose "In the Garden" for our Anthem this morning, because we can't explain this sense of experiencing the living presence of Jesus in the cold light of day, but we can sense the earnestness of the words, "I come to the garden alone, while the dew is still on the roses, and the voice I hear falling on my ear, the son of God discloses, and he walks with me, and he talks with me, and he tells me I am his own, and the joy we share as we tarry there, none other, has ever, known." We are talking here about a transformative experience that helps to return us to our sense of our rightful place in this world. This is the Easter experience for many.

Lynn Ungar, UU Minister of Lifelong Learning at the CLF, and deeply involved with UUs for Jewish Awareness, asks in her piece *Salvation*: "By what are you saved? And how? Saved like a bit of string, tucked away in a drawer? Saved like a child rushed from a burning building, already singed and coughing smoke? Or are you salvaged like a car part—the one good door when the rest is wrecked? Do you believe me when I say that you are neither salvaged nor saved, but salved, anointed by gentle hands where you are most tender?" So I believe that our task at Easter, whether we come to this story as Christian, Jew, agnostic, atheist, or some other; whether we find comfort in Biblical stories or mere myth; our task, for our own wellbeing, is to find our own place in this story; and therein to find each Easter our own particular salvation, in our own unique way as UUs.

So let me end this Easter morning with a poem by UU minister Richard Gilbert called *A tomb is no place to stay*:

“A tomb is no place to stay, be it a cave in the Judean hills or the dark cavern of the spirit. A tomb is no place to stay when fresh grass rolls away the stone of winter cold and valiant flowers burst their way to warmth and light. A tomb is no place to stay when each morning announces our reprieve, and we know we are granted another day of living. A tomb is no place to stay when life laughs a welcome to hearts that have been away too long.”

Amen and Blessed Be.