

**Easter 2009?**  
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**Meditation**

Beautiful morning... inspiring music... Easter... renewed life and spirits...

Yet we may or may not feel renewed or uplifted.

Sorrow rests heavily in the hearts of many... hardship is at the door of many...  
Uncertainty is the air we all breathe...

May we, then, remember that we walk the journey together...  
May we remember to offer the helping hand... or the kind word...  
And to take the offered hand... be open to the word as balm for our spirits...

May we continue to walk the journey together...  
So that none are left behind, all know they are welcome...  
That all may know, soon or late, the ever-renewing spirit of life.

**Readings**

Luke 23:55 - 24:5

The women who had come with him from Galilee followed, and they saw the tomb and how his body was laid. Then they returned, and prepared spices and ointments. On the sabbath they rested according to the commandment. But on the first day of the week, at early dawn, they came to the tomb, taking the spices that they had prepared. They found the stone rolled away from the tomb, but when they went in, they did not find the body. While they were perplexed about this, suddenly two men in dazzling clothes stood beside them. The women were terrified and bowed their faces to the ground, but the men said to them, "Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen."

from "Finding the Living Among the Dead" by Rev. Robert Hardies

I think it's no accident that Easter is the most crowded Sunday of the year at church. People always joke about coming to church on Easter. They'll say, "I'm just here because my mother-in-law made me come." Or because they want a place to go before Easter brunch. Or they didn't want to break their six-year streak of attending church *only* on Christmas Eve and Easter. But the real reason we come to church on Easter may be because we know what the message is going to be. It's the same every year. And we know it's the most important message of our lives. The message that life can emerge from death. The assurance that hope can be squeezed out of despair. The good news that joy will rise up again like the morning sun over the horizon of our sorrow. We need to be reminded that we *can* find the living among the dead. *That's* why we come to church on Easter.

## Sermon

I've had this comic strip in my files for years. The setting is the old west. The deputy comes walking over to the corral and is greeted by a cowboy: "Happy Easter, Deputy!"

The Deputy holds out a big sock and says "I didn't find a single Easter egg in m' stockin' this morning!" The Sheriff, standing nearby, replies: "You nincompoop! *Christmas* is for hanging stockings. Easter is for *Easter Baskets!* You celebrate Easter by hunting for Easter eggs to put in your *Easter Basket!*

Then, as the Deputy leaves, the Sheriff says, "Gad, that boy's grasp of theology is pathetic!"

Well, some might accuse Unitarian Universalists of having an equally poor grasp of theology. And indeed, when it comes to Easter, many of us do shy away from the Christian story of crucifixion and resurrection in favor of the pleasanter celebration of spring, flowers blooming, trees leafing after a long, hard winter... with Easter eggs, chocolate bunnies, and jelly beans thrown in for good measure.

My own earliest Easter memories are mostly of such things.

And though I also do recall the Christian Easter story as taught in my Presbyterian Sunday School; and though I can still see in my mind's eye pictures of the Last Supper, the Crucifixion, and post-Resurrection appearances of Jesus... we joined a Unitarian Universalist Church when I was ten or eleven... and then didn't think much more about the resurrection story, easily dismissed as fanciful, wishful thinking, and of course contrary to the laws of nature.

And indeed as Unitarian Universalists we are free to take the story or leave it. Our choice. Christian theology is not the only theology. But we lose a lot if we toss the story out altogether, if we think that it must be either literally true or not, with no possibility of meaning in between.

What do we lose?

We lose whatever might come from simply allowing ourselves to encounter the story, allow it to seep into our bones as we would any spiritually rich story, legend, or myth.

There is, after all, more than one kind of theology, more than one kind of truth.

So... what truths of the spirit might there be as we encounter...

Jesus courageously entering Jerusalem, confronting the authorities, knowing he was putting his life on the line.

Jesus gathered around the table one last time with his disciples, that table representing the radical welcome of his life and ministry, everyone welcome at that table, no distinctions of class or rank.

Jesus alone in the garden as his disciples slept, Jesus alone confronting the magnitude of what he faced, confronting his own doubts about the wisdom of the course he had chosen.

Jesus on the cross. The agonizing suffering, again doubts.

The profound grief of Jesus' followers, their certainty that all was lost, that the great adventure of the spirit had come crashing down.

And then... the resurrection. The hope. The message and teaching and spirit still alive.

The resurrection?

Perhaps it was simply like this. That as they walked together, as they shared another meal, as they talked about their beloved teacher, they had the experience that so many who have grieved have known. It was as if Jesus was among them again. Whatever else we might say about what may or may not have happened – they experienced the reality that the teaching, the message, the spirit lived still.

There *is* more than one kind of truth as we allow ourselves to encounter again this ancient story.

And we are free to weave all the spiritual truths of the season into our lives: resilience, renewal, even resurrection, all mirrored in nature's renewal and the renewal of our spirits that more easily comes with warmer days and the flowering of spring.

Yes, all of this can speak to our lives, whatever our lives have brought us this season. All of it can remind us of the one Easter message, repeated every year, as my colleague Robert Hardies affirmed in the reading, the message that we can (in his words) “find the living among the dead, that life can emerge from death, that hope can be squeezed from despair, that joy can rise up again like the morning sun over the horizon of our sorrow.”

And we don't have to look far to *see* this message incarnated in the lives of our friends and neighbors, perhaps even in our own.

We see a friend slowly at first and then perhaps with great and surprising energy shaping a new life without someone he had loved so dearly.

We see a neighbor thrown into despair when she has lost her job. Then, perhaps not right away, but eventually realizing that now is the time to try that new direction, that new career, and so begins to step forward with fresh enthusiasm.

Or we awake one morning ourselves after a bleak season... and discover that the morning sun is once again brighter, the sky a more vibrant blue. We're not sure why or how. But new life has somehow infiltrated our bones.

So – Easter 2009? Even in this year of job losses, of depleted retirement accounts, of uncertainty on just about every front?

Easter 2009?

Yes... actually more than ever... Easter. For we hardly need Easter (or at least may not think we need Easter) when everything is going fine, the wind at our backs.

Yet we surely do need Easter when times are tough, when after every hill to climb, there's another yet steeper, when the wind seems to be in our face no matter which way we turn.

We surely then need the reminder of life's resilience, of our resilience, of our capacity for renewal.

And whatever else Easter is about, Easter can remind us of that capacity, woven into our bones, our hearts, our DNA.

And when we recover, renew, resurrect our spirits, will we still have the marks of our wounds? You bet. They too are woven into the miracle of our ever-renewing life, reminders that we have kept on whatever came our way, at least kept on, however many times we may have been knocked down, however many scars we carry, at least kept on and sometimes, maybe even often, triumphed.

To tell you the truth, I don't know how we do it, except that we do and we can. Our capacity to keep on, to renew, to resurrect our spirits does indeed seem woven into our lives from the beginning.

I came across a true story recently that in at least an indirect way speaks to our capacity for renewal, and which is suggestive to me of one way that we can renew our spirits, can re-awaken to the miracle and possibilities of life.

The story is in Rachel Naomi Remen's wonderful book, *Kitchen Table Wisdom*, a collection of anecdotes and reflections from her life as a physician and therapist.

She tells of an emergency room doctor who had been notified that a woman had just arrived in the E.R. well into labor, probably about to give birth.

Indeed, quite soon the baby was born. The doctor cradled the new-born along his left arm as he routinely suctioned mucous from the baby's mouth. At that moment, Remen writes, "...the baby opened her eyes and looked directly at him." He had delivered hundreds of babies. But for the first time he realized "a very simple thing: that he was the first human being this baby girl had ever seen. He felt his heart go out to her in welcome from all people everywhere and tears came to his eyes."

The baby awakened. The physician awakened too. And resolved not to miss such connections again... for he wondered "how many other such moments of connection he (had) missed."

Perhaps the followers of Jesus wondered too, as they walked along the road to Emmaus a few days after the crucifixion of their beloved teacher, and later as they sat around the table again... looking into one another's eyes, perhaps seeing one another as if for the first time... and reawakening to their lives, to life itself, to the holiness of every moment, and every person.

An old priest in Ann Patchett's novel *Run*, ruminates near the end of his life that maybe after all God was not somewhere else, not in an afterlife, not in someplace called heaven, but rather...

God may well have been life itself... How wrongheaded it seemed now to think that the thrill of heartbeat and breath were just a stepping stone to something greater. What could be greater than the armchair, the window, the snow? Life itself had been holy. We had been brought forth from nothing to see the face of God and in his life Father Sullivan had seen it miraculously for eighty-eight years."

In short, as he put it to himself, he now "hoped to elevate the present to a state of the divine."

Though I would put it this way, not that we need to elevate the present to a state of the divine; rather, we need to notice that the present is already saturated, soaked through with the divine.

As scripture puts it, had we but eyes to see.

Further, as I would hope, not only for a doctor and a newborn or for the disciples around the table or for us, here, among friends and neighbors. But also Israeli and Palestinian looking into one another's eyes, welcoming...; Muslim and Hindu in India looking into one another's eyes, welcoming; Iranian and American; black and white; rich and poor; from Roxbury and from Hingham... all welcoming one another into the family

of life. So that we might all awaken in this uncertain, even dark time, awaken to the holiness of every day and every moment therein, awaken to the divinity of every soul.

For as the poet Theodore Roethke has written, “In a dark time the eye begins to see.” This may, after all, be precisely what happened in the depths of the disciples’ grief. In that dark time for them, their eyes began to see... the kingdom of heaven here and now, spread before them already.

And yes, for us too in this year of uncertainty and even darkness for many, perhaps the eye begins adjust and to see more clearly again what matters most – surely not the quick buck and blind ambition... but kindness and love, the divine within each moment, the look of joy or despair or seeking in one another’s eyes.

And so we can and do awaken again; we can and do help to awaken one another with our searching and loving glance. Soon or late, slow or sometimes with the flair of miracle all at once.

Like the experience of Jesus’ followers. Like the repeated miracle of spring. All woven together, in an Easter theology that is good enough for me. Perhaps also for you.

In this spirit I conclude by sharing with you my favorite spring poem of awakening and renewal. Many of you have heard it before. And you may hear that it is not only about spring. It is about us, too, and the seasons of our spirits.

“Why it was wonderful” – by Archibald MacLeish

Why it was wonderful: Why, all at  
once there were leaves,  
Leaves at the end of a dry sick,  
small, alive  
Leaves out of wood. It was  
wonderful,  
You can’t imagine. They came by the  
wood path  
And the earth loosened, the earth  
relaxed, there were flowers  
Out of the earth! Think of it! And  
oak trees  
Oozing new green at the tips of them  
and flowers  
Squeezed out of clay, soft flowers,  
limp  
Stalks flowering. Well, it was like a  
dream.  
It happened so quickly, all of a  
sudden  
It happened.

May it be so for us and our wintering spirits.  
Every day may it be so.