

The Gift of Easter
Rev. Ken Read-Brown
First Parish in Hingham (Old Ship Church)
Unitarian Universalist
April 16, 2017
Easter Sunday

Readings

“i thank You God for most this amazing” by e.e. cummings:

i thank You God for most this amazing
day:for the leaping greenly spirits of trees
and a blue true dream of sky; and for everything
which is natural which is infinite which is yes

(i who have died am alive again today,
and this is the sun’s birthday; this is the birth
day of life and of love and wings: and of the gay
great happening illimitably earth)

how should tasting touching hearing seeing
breathing any—lifted from the no
of all nothing—human merely being
doubt unimaginable You?

(now the ears of my ears awake and
now the eyes of my eyes are opened)

John 15:13-14, 17

My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. Greater love has
no one than this: to lay down one’s life for one’s friends. You are my friends
if you do what I command.
This is my command: Love each other.

Sermon

If you were paying attention to the words of the offertory anthem we heard a short while ago, some of you may have embarked on an internal dialogue with the theology there expressed.

“The crucified sprung to life...”

“Death’s flood lost its chill since Jesus crossed the river...”

Faith dependent on “Christ arisen, arisen, arisen...”

After all, historically one of the key things that differentiated Unitarians and Universalists from other Christians had to do with their view of Jesus and the place of Jesus in our religious or spiritual lives. Over time – decades and centuries actually – there was an evolution of Unitarian and Universalist beliefs and affirmations about Jesus pretty much all in the direction of increasingly viewing Jesus more as a great teacher of ethics and wisdom... and less as savior, Son of God.

To put it another way, Unitarians and Universalists increasingly came to put more emphasis on Jesus’ teaching and the example of the way he lived, and less attention to the way he died and the story of his resurrection and the theological beliefs that grew from that.

All this means that, though we of course honor freedom of belief, it is nevertheless the case that these days most UUs view Jesus as one among a pantheon of great religious prophets and teachers – for some of us our primary teacher and exemplar, for others one among many – the Buddha, Lao Tzu, Mohammed, and so on.

What then might Easter mean to us in the midst of all our theological and philosophical diversity, our tradition which somehow manages to welcome all from theist to atheist and everything in between?

Well, of course spring – who doesn’t love spring, a season worth celebrating one way or another particularly in these northern climes at the end of the season of cold and snow and rain and slush? Spring as a reminder that new life emerges after a season of seeming death.

But I don’t want to let go of Jesus too quickly or easily in relation to Easter and to our lives, well, all the time.

Give me a moment, then, and I’ll get back to Jesus. First a little story.

Observed at the check-out in a little New York City grocery. Mother and two other adults... and little boy “attached” to his mother.

The clerk at the check-out has caught the eye of the little boy. One of the adults puts his card into the chip reader. Hits the buttons. Out comes the receipt.

To whom does the clerk hand the receipt? Well, she only has eyes for the little boy. The receipt goes straight to him, paired with a radiant smile.

Out the door, little boy clutching the receipt.

Well, the boy surely doesn't know what a receipt is.

But he just as surely knows – though could not express in words or concepts, not yet – knows what a smile is, knows what attention is, knows viscerally if not verbally what connection one person to another is.

There, to my mind, is a moment of what someone once called “Eastering” – waking someone up, bringing her or him to a fuller experience of aliveness.

The first time I heard that word “Eastering” it was in the context of a story shared years ago by one of my colleagues, and which I shared with the children just last year.

Once upon a time this colleague had a fish in a bowl that he kept in his kitchen. One morning he came down to the kitchen to find the fish appearing to be, shall we say, no more – completely still, just floating. But my colleague thought he would try something – he moved the bowl from the cool shady side of the table to a spot bathed in morning sunlight.

Then, as the sun warmed the water, the fish stirred back to life.

An “Eastering” he called it, paraphrasing the poet Gerard Manley Hopkins: “Let him easter in us, be a dayspring to the dimness of us.”

Okay, you can say that the fish wasn't really dead and brought back to life, and this is true.

But actually that is precisely the point.

Back, then, to Jesus. He was engaged in “Eastering” every day of his too brief ministry. All the gospel accounts suggest that there was something about his presence, something about the stories and parables he told, that woke people up, brought them to a fuller experience of aliveness. An experience he named the Kingdom of Heaven.

For he said, more than once, that this Kingdom of Heaven not somewhere other than here and now: within, he said, at hand, he said, spread before you already if you had the eyes to see, ears to hear, he said.

Along these lines the theologian Cynthia Bourgeault lifts up the insights of another writer, Jim Marion, who suggests “that the Kingdom of Heaven is really a metaphor for a *state of consciousness*; it is not a place you go to, but a place you *come from*. It is a whole new way of looking at the world, a transformed awareness that literally turns this world into a different place.” Further: “The hallmark of this awareness is that it sees no separation—not between God and humans, not between humans and other humans.”

And Bourgeault concludes by affirming that “*These are indeed Jesus’ two core teachings, underlying everything he says and does.*”

“Says *and does*.” The example of his life is at least as important as the words he spoke. His hanging out with those considered by the established authorities to be less than fully worthy, and his healing simply by his presence, through his simple kindness.

^All of which means that he was demonstrating a way of being and a “state of consciousness” available to *everyone* – not just for an elect few. And available at any time, any moment we are fully present to another, hand the receipt to the child instead of the adult, smile, connect – and maybe connect to someone a little or a lot different from us.

Pure and simple attention. Which actually isn’t so hard – we could offer it more often than we do.

And then... then we have entered the kingdom, having Eastered someone else or been Eastered by someone else. It works both ways, you see: the transaction, if you will, erasing difference... so at least for a moment we see separateness for the illusion that it is.

So then, this is what it means to me when we read, as we heard earlier, that Jesus said what greater love is there than for someone to lay down his life for his friends.

Usually of course this is understood to refer to Jesus’ impending crucifixion, his sacrifice on behalf of all humanity.

I prefer to hear these words as an invitation to each and all of us to give of our lives each moment to one another. For opportunities for this laying down of our lives for others, Eastering, this connecting, these moments of presence and caring.... opportunities abound without end, opportunities to enter the Kingdom of Heaven.... here, now, always.

Certainly not just for Christians who follow Jesus. But for everyone.

Who was the Buddha? The awakened one who offered a path of awakening for everyone.

Who was Lao Tzu? The wise old one who reminded us that there is a Way of nature, a Way of living that brings life more abundant.

The gift of Easter? A gift Jesus through his giving reminds us we can give and receive just about any moment of any day.

So that we can – now and then at least – share the ecstatic gratitude of the poet e.e. cummings in the words we heard earlier....

i thank You God for most this amazing
day...

...(now the ears of my ears awake and
now the eyes of my eyes are opened)

Two brief last thoughts:

First: I know we all have our times of trial, challenge, suffering, and grief. Believe me, I know it, have experienced it, have seen it; I see it every day one way or another

And none of what I've shared this morning is meant to deny this. After all, it is sometimes said that there is no Easter without Good Friday. Suffering comes with the territory of living.

But – a “but” for which we can be enduringly grateful – if we are present for one another in that territory of living, then the Eastering, the gift of Easter, that follows can be profound – again, it must be affirmed, on both sides of the exchange! – the experience of being alive more intense than ever as we move and live through even the hardest of times.

With each other.

That's “Christ arisen” in our hearts, in our lives, among us, in the midst of all life, the abundance of life we share.

And the last thought. Though just about all I've said this morning concerns our personal lives, everything I've said also applies to the larger life we share. Whatever we do in these tumultuous times to, shall we say, improve this old world – service, activism of whatever sort... if we do it from the same awakened, generous, kind heart, *Eastered* heart I've been talking about, then the effect – the gift of Easter – will multiply beyond our imagining, ripples beyond our small circles into “most this amazing” world.

“Christ arisen” not only in our hearts, but in our lives, among us all.

So may it be. Amen.