

Yes to Life
Easter Sunday
April 1, 2018
Rev. Ken Read-Brown
First Parish in Hingham (Old Ship Church)
Unitarian Universalist

Readings

“In Time of Silver Rain” by Langston Hughes

In time of silver rain
The earth puts forth new life again,

Green grasses grow
And flowers lift their heads,

And over all the plain
The wonder spreads

Of life, Of life, Of life.

In time of silver rain
The butterflies lift silken wings
To catch a rainbow cry

And trees put forth
New leaves to sing
In joy beneath the sky.

When spring

And life
Are new.

Luke 24:1-5

On the first day of the week, very early in the morning, the women took the spices they had prepared and went to the tomb. ²They found the stone rolled away from the tomb, ³but when they entered, they did not find the body of the Lord Jesus. ⁴While they were wondering about this, suddenly two men in clothes that gleamed like lightning stood beside them. ⁵In their fright the women bowed down with their faces to the ground, but the men said to them, “Why do you look for the living among the dead?”

Sermon

Saying “yes to life” is sometimes, if not often, easier said than done.

At least for us human beings.

Other sorts of beings in what we call the natural world have *only* a “yes” to life. After a hard winter that seemed to many of us humans to last too long, the snowdrops and crocuses and daffodils still emerge, the trees bud anew, the birds sing. Indeed, whatever comes – from natural seasonal fluctuations to the insults of human pollution and climate change – the flora and fauna of our world say “yes” to life right up until the end of their lives... and even then, this “end” is only a transformation into yet more life, the death of one giving nourishment and life to another.

Ah, but us humans. We seem to be different from the other creatures of this world we share when it comes this question of “yes.” We certainly sometimes feel different, sometimes feel utterly unable to say that “yes.”

Among other things, this means that on Easter morning the alleluias we sing may or may not be the true song of our souls at this moment, this day – in fact for some today the alleluias might seem to mock the way we’re feeling:

Anyone who is grieving a loss, or facing a fresh serious diagnosis.

The families and friends of the Parkland victims.

The family and friends of Stephon Clark, the 22-year-old African American man shot and killed by Sacramento police.

Indeed, the list is long of those for whom “Alleluia” might stick in the throat this morning. Perhaps for some of us here it is so this morning.

Even so, there are those who do manage even in the face of unimaginable pain and suffering or loss... some manage the yes... or manage to imagine the “yes” that will come.

Stephon Clark’s uncle, Curtis Gordon, said the other day, even as from his pain he called for justice and reform, “We trust in a spiritual realm, in our Creator, to give us undiscovered strength. We will make it through this. And that’s the thing, ’cause it’s bigger than us and we have to accept that. We carry that torch for Stephon.”

In these words, I hear Curtis Gordon at least beginning to imagine that through his and his family’s faith a renewed “yes” to life awaits, is possible. Just as I heard affirmation in the words of Stephon’s brother, speaking at the service, naming all the ways in which Stephon would live on in good works inspired by his life.

So, I would affirm that if Curtis Gordon can imagine this “yes,” and that if the students from Margory Stoneman Douglas High School can lead and march and speak with such passion and clarity as we saw last week, all of which is saying “yes to life”... then we ought to be able at least, to imagine that we too, from the depths of whatever Good Friday despair we might find ourselves... that we too might once again find that “yes.”

The Christian story of Palm Sunday to Good Friday to Easter is, after all, precisely the same story as these that we've seen unfold in recent days and weeks. It is the story of deepest despair, even death, opening in the end to new life.

For whatever else the resurrection part of the story might mean, it surely means this: That even death, surely an end in many senses of the word, is not the end in every way.

The women who arrived at the burial tomb of Jesus on the morning of the third day after their beloved teacher's crucifixion were challenged: Why do you seek the living among the dead? The women were then told that the one they seek is not there, he has risen.

Now, I don't claim to know what that might or might not mean in any literal sense. But there is no question these two thousand years later that the teachings and example of the life of Jesus never died. His disciples realized this not long after Jesus's death. For it was as they walked on the road from Jerusalem to Emmaus sharing stories about their teacher, sharing what they had learned from him, sharing what he had meant to them... it was then that they felt his presence once again, it was then that they began to be able to say "yes" once again, a "yes" they soon made real by spreading those teachings and that example.

Most of us have had experiences quite similar to theirs. When a dear one dies – irreplaceable loss – we share the stories of her or his life, we reflect on the meaning of that life, on all we were given by that life, and we come to know that though we will always miss the living, breathing person, her spirit, his spirit indeed lives in our hearts, in our lives. And this realization, however slowly, enables us once again to say "yes" to our lives.

All of this is an ancient message that we find in one way or another in all the spiritual traditions of our human family. The Buddha taught that the way to a genuine, deep, sustained well-being (he called it nirvana) begins with acknowledging the suffering in our lives, the suffering that is an inevitable part of being alive. And that naming it, allowing ourselves to experience it, experience what is, is the first step to living through it to that more sustainable "yes."

Jesus said "take up your cross and follow me." I don't believe he was inviting us all to a literal crucifixion, martyrdom. He was, rather, inviting us to accept the full paradox of being a human being, joys and sorrows intertwined, and allowing the sorrows that break our hearts, to open our hearts to the suffering of others, and so to compassion, so to the "yes" of love.

To put all this another way, there is no Easter without Good Friday. If we skirt or deny the sorrows and suffering that come with living, we will also miss the joy, the alleluia, the deeper "yes" that comes with having lived through the sorrow to the other side, enabling us to open our hearts to one another with sympathy for all life, opening our lives to what could be named paradise right here and now on this earth as it is – talk about a more profound "yes"!

Indeed, Unitarian Universalist minister Rebecca Ann Parker and her co-author Rita Nakashima Brock in their book *Saving Paradise*, teach us that the early Christian church itself “taught that paradise was a place, a way of life, even an ecosystem” and that it was a way of living that “does not spring simply from the imagination of a better world but from a profound embrace of this world... does not begin with knowledge or hope... begins with love.”

Then, beautifully, they affirm that “Paradise is a place for the brokenhearted.... (that) can hold the sharp pieces of shattered lives.”

In this spirit they also remind us of the power of mourning in community, religious community providing “a container for grief” so that “held in the embrace of a community’s rituals and traditions, grief can find its depth, anger can voice its anguish and protest can fuel creative action that holds out the possibilities of restored and protected life even in the midst of or aftermath of injustice and tragedy.”

“Paradise *is* a place for the brokenhearted.”

Which means that all those who last week marched for our lives or who held the marchers in our hearts... were living in that paradise.

Which means that the mourning family of Stephon Clark and the protesters of racism and of police violence are living in that paradise. Just as are Palestinians protesting occupation this week, living in that paradise.

Not an easy paradise, but paradise nevertheless, because a community of love, what Dr. King named over and over again the beloved community.

Dr. King, who also still lives in our hearts and lives fifty years after his murder.

Well, finally this morning, I offer one more thought.

Sometimes the path to a renewed “yes” after whatever setback or loss or grief includes *saying* yes even before we are *feeling* yes.

I remember so clearly these almost sixty years later, as I’ve shared with some of you before, my father stopping the car as on a hot day he drove us home from Pine Lawn Cemetery on Long Island, where we had just buried his mother, my grandmother. Stopping at a roadside ice cream parlor and buying cones for all of us. I’m guessing that my father wasn’t fully – if at all – feeling a “yes” at that moment, but that he knew, or intuited, that he needed even so to *say* “yes” through this gesture, through this kindness, reminding us all without having to say anything that life goes on, that we should still seek to enjoy life even as we had enjoyed having Grandma in our lives.

Such moments represent the reclaimed alleluias, triumph songs, yeses of our lives. Whether that roadside ice cream as we still were so sad, or the march for our lives in the midst of unimaginable grief for so many, or the protests amidst the deepest mourning in Sacramento.

Or the first notes of that renewed triumph song of life might be a decision to forgive or allow ourselves to be forgiven, or a choice to send out yet another resume, or to seek out a long lost friend or estranged family member. We may not quite yet *feel* that full-throated triumph song, that yes, but perhaps we can detect the opening notes, the

“real but far off hymn” as the old Quaker song has it. And we can choose to join in the singing.

I remember sitting in the pews at the First Unitarian Society of San Francisco one Sunday during my seminary years in Berkeley. It was a sort of low time for me, and I can't for the life of me now remember why. But I do remember Rev. Stan Stefancic's quoting the poet C.P. Cavafy:

For some people the day comes
when they have to declare the great Yes
or the great No...

The poet goes on, as I now re-discover, to suggest that this moment comes but once and can determine the whole of our lives for good or ill. I happen to think this is exaggeration to make a point; for I do believe we get second and even third and fourth chances. But how we choose can make all the difference. The words of Deuteronomy echo: I set before you this day life and death... therefore choose life that you and your descendants might live.

In any case, I affirm today, all these years later, that Stan's lifting up those lines from the poet made a difference to me that day, that season, helped me to imagine the “yes” I couldn't quite yet say.

And I am ever grateful.

You see, we can do this sort of thing for one another.

So... *this* day I invite us all, wherever we are in our life's journey, whatever the blend of joy and sorrow, weal or woe, I invite us all to know that *here* we are held in community, the “paradise of the brokenhearted” and that *together* we can say “yes” even when some of us cannot get the word out, yet together holding one another, helping one another, healing one another... in this community we share with the community of *all* life.

Yes! This “yes” which opens us to partnership with Life, with the God of many names, the reality in which we live and move and have our being.... “when spring and life are new...” and always.

So may it be.