

Even – or Especially – This Year
Rev. Ken Read-Brown
First Parish in Hingham (Old Ship Church)
Unitarian Universalist
Easter Sunday
April 17, 2022

Readings

God of Easter and infrequent Spring:
Announce the large covenant to deceitful lands,
Drive the sweet liquor through our parched veins,
Lure us to fresh schemes of life.
Rouse us from self-pity,
Whet us for use,
Fire us with good passion.
Restore in us the love of living,
Bind us to fear and hope again.

--Rev. Clark Dewey Wells

from Mark 16 and Luke 24

When the Sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices so that they might go to anoint Jesus' body. They came to the tomb, saying: Who will roll away the stone from the entrance to the tomb? They looked up and saw that the stone had already been rolled back, and on the right they saw a young man. They were alarmed. But the man said to them: Why do you seek the living among the dead? He has been raised; he is not here. So they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them. And they said nothing, for they were afraid.

Sermon

Easter, like spring itself, arrives whatever else might be going on in our lives or in the world.

This year the world is pretty troubled, to say the very least:

The war in Ukraine overshadows all; the death and destruction of Putin's criminal war are beyond imagining... and all for no reasonable purpose whatsoever.

Elsewhere on the planet are other wars; elsewhere on the planet people suffer under the fist of oppressive regimes.

The climate crisis accelerates with no regard for whatever else might be going on.

In our own nation, divisions persist and harden.

More personally and close to home, some here in our community carry deep personal sorrow or are facing serious challenges of one sort or another.

Yet... Easter arrives on the calendar regardless of anything else.

How are we meant to celebrate Easter in times such as these?

Well, here's the thing: Easter is *meant* for times such as these. Easy times when all is well? Who needs Easter then? Hard times? Times of grief, of fear, of worry? That's when we need Easter more than ever, that's when we need the message of hope in the midst of fear, the

message of love rising in the midst of grief and hardship, the message of hope and love even or especially in the wake of death.

After all, as I put it in the newsletter this week, however else we might understand the Christian message of Easter, there is this: You can kill a man... but love rises... and love rises again... and yet again.

Though not necessarily all by itself. We can help, as poet May Sarton put it, by being as best we can “faithful gardeners of the spirit.”

In this spirit, I shared earlier the little story of “Eastering” told years ago by a colleague, how he revived his little fish, who had appeared to be dead, floating on the surface of the fishbowl’s water... revived his fish simply by moving the bowl into the warmth of the sunlight. He had, as he chose to describe it, “Eastered” the fish.

Well, we’ve all been “Eastered” at one time or another. And we’ve all “Eastered” someone else at one time or another.

It often happens here in our Old Ship community, often right here in our Meeting House on an ordinary Sunday morning as we respond to someone’s heartfelt sorrow or challenge expressed during our time of sharing joys and sorrows. And it surely happens in the midst of a memorial service right here in this ancient house of love.

One January a little over nine years ago I was Eastered by you on the occasion of my mother’s memorial service. Your presence, your love and kindness and care, your spread of my mom’s favorite chocolate treats at the reception, all were Easterings, lifting my spirits and the spirits of all our family – Easterings in the midst, as it happened, of winter (for Easter is not just a date on the calendar).

Oh, grief doesn’t go away with the snap of fingers or a chocolate chip cookie – but when we are held with love... Eastered... well, then we discover that we can go on, that we can learn to live with our dear one in our hearts, though no longer by our sides.

This is, I believe, what happened to a few of Jesus’s disciples as they walked from Jerusalem to Emmaus. Their beloved teacher had just been executed. They were in deep grief. But they had each other’s company. And as they talked about Jesus, reflected on his teachings and the message of how he had lived his life, they felt as though he was again walking among them. The Gospel story says he actually appeared among them. But I choose to understand this as metaphor, representing an experience most of us have had, the experience of a dear one’s felt presence after they have died, risen in a real sense in our hearts and memories.

You see, as you’ve often heard me say, life is short, but love is long. Love (not incidentally God’s other name) endures and rises again and again, even from the ashes and sadness of death and despair.

Especially if we help it to rise and rise again.

All this suggests to me why I have long appreciated that line from the Gospel of Luke that we heard earlier: “Why do you seek the living among the dead?”

Now, most in Ukraine will mark Easter next Sunday, April 24, which is the date of Easter on the Orthodox calendar this year. I can only imagine – no, actually I can’t imagine – what Easter will be like for Ukrainians this year, when they may well be feeling caught in a never-

ending Good Friday of death and destruction. Further, as Old Ship member Caryn Schneider reminded me after our Easter service, we also must have in our hearts Ukrainian Jews in the midst of Passover... and we also must have in our hearts Ukrainian Muslims in the midst of the holy month of Ramadan.

Yet... even so... we have been seeing that love has risen again and again *in* Ukraine and *for* Ukraine. Fred Rogers (Mr. Rogers) used to quote his mother, who, when he had seen scary things in the news, would tell him, "Look for the helpers. You will always find people who are helping."

Well, you don't need to look far among the living for the helpers in and around Ukraine, as millions and millions of dollars of aid have been raised by a wide variety of organizations to help refugees, as nations have opened their borders and families have opened their doors to refugees. Not to mention the first responders and other helpers we see in Ukraine itself. Yes, we don't need to look far for the helpers among the living. To put it another way, to see love rising in the wake of death and destruction... and in the midst of fear.

Both readings this morning referenced fear. The women at the tomb were afraid – goodness, who wouldn't be afraid upon discovering that empty tomb and a strange fellow saying strange and mysterious things?

And the first reading ended with these lines:

Restore in us the love of living,
Bind us to fear and hope again.

What in the world can all this mean? Here's how I begin to understand it. If nothing else, fear wakes us up. The women ran away from the tomb, afraid, yet with a message, the message that they had been looking in the wrong place for life; in this way the strange man's words were a sort of wake-up call... so though eliciting fear, we might imagine that his words also elicited hope. "Bind us to fear and hope again."

Perhaps, you see, the women had been oddly comfortable in their grieving; they knew, according to custom, what they were meant to do in the midst of their grief – to anoint the body with spices. So they went about their task as they knew they should. Then, suddenly... empty tomb and no body... fear... what now? Well, awakened from the comfort of doing the proper thing they had to look elsewhere for... well, who knows... I suppose for life, for love? And suddenly did they have reason for hope in the midst of their fear? Perhaps restored to a "love of living" in the spirit of the teachings of their beloved rabbi, Jesus? Maybe ready to realize that Jesus wouldn't have wanted them to mourn without end, but rather would want them to live in the spirit of his teachings... to be among the healers and helpers in this world of need, to follow the commandment to love your neighbor.

Now... what about Easter apart from the Christian story, Easter as a festival of spring? We know that the name "Easter" is derived from the name of a goddess of spring, Eostre, and that spring festivals in the northern climes are more or less universal and extend back in time well before the life of Jesus.

And festivals and holy days aside, who fails to awaken... at least a bit more... to awaken to life as the breezes blow warmer, the forsythia blooms, daffodils appear, the grass greens and the trees bud? Who fails to awaken (indeed literally) to the choir of birdsong on a spring morning?

Oh, sometimes it takes a little effort. Sometimes we may have to remind ourselves to open the window to that newly warm breeze or better yet to get out of house or office to enjoy that breeze that can reawaken us to life. And sometimes we may have to remind ourselves to stop and really notice the daffodils or tulips, remind ourselves to really listen to the birdsong. Waking us to life.

Which is also about waking us to love... love of this world, of this dear Earth our home. It is not so hard. As climate activist Bill McKibben once pointed out:

To be in love with the world is particularly lucky, as it's everywhere: city, country, and suburb. And luckiest of all is that it's never too late to fall into this particular thrall. All you need to do is to begin to look around.

Well that's actually the beginning of next week's sermon, which will fall a couple of days after Earth Day.

For today, I'll draw to a conclusion by circling back closer to the Christian understanding of Easter, by going back in time a few centuries to Dante's "Inferno":

The opening finds the fictional Dante, midway in his life's journey, lost in a dark wood. It is Maundy Thursday, the day before Good Friday, which of course means a few days before Easter. Dante sees the top of a mountain ahead on the path – representing we might say the joy of Easter – but three beasts block his way. At that moment Dante meets the Roman poet Virgil who proceeds to guide him through Inferno, then Purgatory, and finally into Paradise. Arriving on Easter morning, hundreds of pages later.

The message? Sometimes (maybe more often than we would like) the only way to Easter is through Good Friday, eyes open, awake, through whatever suffering or grief life has thrown our way. No shortcuts, fear and hope often bound together, but seeking new life, seeking love, being love, with eyes wide open. We are, after all, in this thing called life together. And it seems to me that we humans require Easter – or something like Easter – to remind us how to move through the whole of life, joy and woe woven fine, awake to all that life is, awake to one another, awake to the beauty and miracle of a spring morning, to the beauty and miracle of someone helping and healing in the midst of death and destruction, awake to the beauty and miracle of life... and love.

Maybe simple as that.

I wish for each of you, wherever you are in your life's journey, whether a dark wood, a high peak, or somewhere in between... I wish you many blessings of life and love on this Easter Sunday, this Spring, and always.

Even as we all share Easter prayers for peace and blessings for the people of Ukraine, the people of Russia, for people and life everywhere.

So may it be. Blessed be. Amen.