

Rise Again!

the Rev. Edmund Robinson
First Parish in Hingham/Old Ship
March 31, 2024 – Easter Sunday

Easter is here in Hingham! Let it wash over us, the abundance of flowers and green things budding and sunshiny days. It feels like a victory lap after the trials of the winter, and I want to lift up and celebrate this at the same time I am conscious of the fragility of the lives we live individually and in community in this congregation.

One Easter Sunday many years ago before I was a minister, I was working under the old house I used to own trying to drill a couple of holes through which I would run speaker wires to put stereo sound in my living room. I was using an old drill that my father-in-law had given me, and was lying in a crawl space on damp ground when the drill shorted out through my body and the current running through me made my hands clench so I could not let it go. I thrashed around and made some noise and finally using my free hand, knocked the drill out of my other hand, and then immediately I started smelling a peculiar smell and then I realized it was natural gas. Having a gas leak next to a shorted-out appliance did not strike me as safe and I got out of the crawl space as quickly as I could and

found the shut-off valve. That was one of my close encounters with my own death, and looking back I realize many of the close calls of my life seem to have happened on Easter.

It makes me realize how what we consider good luck hangs by a slender thread. We live our lives as if we are on the solidest of ground, but we get reminders from Fate that somewhere beneath the rock we are standing on is a pool of quicksand.

How do we handle adversity? I noted last week that we have now passed the fourth anniversary of the Covid pandemic, and while some of us are celebrating its end, others are looking warily at the wastewater statistics and holding onto our masks and our test kits. We all know people who have gotten the virus, and while many of them were not severely ill, the long-term effects are unknown. When does adversity strike? Whenever it pleases, on its schedule, not on ours. I'm here today talking to you because adversity just missed me on that Easter afternoon half a lifetime ago.

This morning I have a song to sing about adversity and resurrection, both of which are traditional themes of Easter. For as the

Easter story is told, after the public in Jerusalem had welcomed Jesus with palms and cheering on Palm Sunday, and listened to his teaching in the Temple on Monday through Thursday, Jesus and his disciples celebrated a seder on Thursday and after dinner, he was arrested by the Roman soldiers and charges were brought against him. His disciples, sick with fear, shunned him and the crowd shouted for his crucifixion.

Yet the story continues that after dying on the cross on Friday, Jesus miraculously escaped his tomb on Sunday and began a series of appearances to his followers which culminated in his ascension to heaven 40 days later. He had been resurrected. For almost two thousand years, a belief in the physical, bodily resurrection of Jesus at Easter has been the central core of Christianity. Yet we have a church which allows all people to make up their own mind about such things, and if you follow the rule that once dead means always dead, you are doing no more than following what your life experiences tell you.

The song I am about to sing this morning is not directly about Jesus, it's about a commercial ship of some kind. A ship goes down, the

owners get paid off by the insurance company and walk away from it, but the crew stays around and decides that they are going to raise the ship all by themselves. There is a provision in maritime law that allows that – if anyone salvages a sunken vessel, they own it unless the original owner comes and pays them for it. And this crew borrows a barge from a friend and some diving equipment and does some repairs to the boat while it's on the bottom and puts cables around and prepares to watch her rise out of the water once more.

I often sing this song at Easter because it is, in a sense, about resurrection. The ship is not living, and it doesn't come back to life. It is restored to use as a ship. And this year, something like what happens in the song has actually happened in real life in Baltimore Harbor, six people died and the damage to the Frances Scott Key Bridge Shuts down a major north-south highway artery and will take years to repair. I invite you to experience this song with whatever event in your own life your mind might bring up.

Here's the song: The Mary Ellen Carter, by the late Stan Rogers.

[Sing MEC]

Rise Again. The point of the song is not that ship or this week's out of control ship, but our lives. We have all felt like the Mary Ellen Carter, sunk to the bottom. We have all felt like this freighter in Baltimore, adrift in a busy harbor with no power to control it. Somehow, sometime, each of us founders on the shoals of life. It may be a divorce, a child gone astray, estrangement from our siblings. We may have lost a job, a parent, a friend, we may be in the grips of an addiction. The message of this song is that resurrection is possible with some effort on our part and a bit of help from our friends.

This song is actually credited with saving a life – not many songs can claim that. There is a video on You Tube in which a mariner tells his story: he was on a barge going from Newport News VA to Fall River MA and they ran into a storm and the vessel sank. This seaman was in the sea for a couple of hours before finding a swamped lifeboat. He managed to bail out enough to get it afloat, but the seas were very heavy and he was constantly getting drenched from the waves breaking over him. He was about to give up when the chorus of Stan Rogers' song came to him, and he started singing to himself out there in the frigid waters of the

Atlantic, "Rise Again, Rise Again, that your name not be lost to the knowledge of men." He sang that for hours until a rescue plane spotted him.

Rise Again! Love is stronger than death, and the words and deeds of love that you do, sometimes without knowing it, can help people more than you can imagine.

I have another resurrection story to tell you, about a friend named Dave, a Morris dancer. He was always a fixture at the annual May Day celebration which takes place at dawn on the banks of the Charles River in Cambridge. I played and danced with him on a couple of Morris dance teams and his candle always burned brightly at both ends.

I knew Dave for about six years before I learned that he had been diagnosed with advanced cancer. In March of 2007, I got a call from our mutual friend Lynn that Dave was in the hospital and might not make it through the night. I came down and sat an overnight watch with her, to support both of them. I described it afterwards in a piece I wrote in the church newsletter:

“Most of the night he was nonresponsive, heavily sedated and breathing and speaking with great difficulty. Around 4 AM, Lynn and I began singing songs across his bed from the Morris traditions, mostly English drinking songs, romantic ballads and some seasonal nature songs. As the sky was beginning to lighten, I launched into ‘Bright Morning Stars A-Rising,’ an Appalachian song of hope which is in our hymnal. At that, Dave suddenly sat bolt upright in bed, and held up his arms in the posture of a Morris dancer. Lynn said, ‘Dave are you saying you want to dance?’ He managed to say yes, so I got out my concertina and played him a Morris tune one time through. He didn’t get out of bed, he didn’t have his hankies or his bells, but for that moment, he was the finest Morris dancer I had ever seen. ... no matter what happens, I will always cherish the memory of his waking out of the long night’s battle against death, ready to dance.”

I concluded my column with a reference to May Pole dancing, which was the context in which I knew Dave the best:

“For in fact, none of us has more than temporary victories. Death will come to each of us in the end. In the meantime, we can dance right in the face of death, we can dance with death. May Day is a celebration of the continuation of life, of fertility (what do you think all those May poles represent?), but life is only meaningful in the context of the eternal dance of life and death, of order and disorder. What is eternal is not an individual’s life, but the whole cycle of resurrection and regeneration, the new leaves displacing the old.”

Two days after the newsletter column came out, I got an e-mail from a parishioner I will call Ellen who I had only met once or twice at the church.

Ellen, a wife and mother of two daughters who had come up in the youth group, said that she had gone to her doctor who had given her a death sentence; he told her that she had a cancer which was aggressively growing and there was little hope of curing. Ellen returned home under

the burden of this, wondering where she was going to get the strength to tell her husband and children. The church newsletter happened to be on the kitchen table, and her eye fell on my column. Sitting at the kitchen table, she was able to weep openly and copiously, and somehow found the courage to tell her family and look her situation squarely in the face.

Rise Again! Your words and your deeds may help others and help yourselves to rise again. Some people look for eternal life in a magic belief in Jesus' divinity. To me that is a distortion of what Jesus taught and the love that he practiced. I hold with Emerson that Jesus was divine, but so are all the rest of us. I'm not at all sure that life everlasting is a good idea. Dave the dancer has now died; Ellen has died by now. I don't pretend to know what parts of the conventional Easter story are true, but if I had to make a decision, I'd say that the victories of the spirit do not effect a physical victory over the processes of death.

And yet in the end, I want to affirm what I see as the central precept of Easter that love is stronger than death. The more love we make while we are on this mortal coil, the more there will be in the world. This is the meaning of Jesus's life, this is the meaning of yours.

Rise again! Resurrection is all around us, and we can practice it. We can look at the glass as half full instead of half empty. No matter what you've lost, be it a home, a love, a friend. You can recover! You, to whom adversity has dealt a mighty blow, Rise again! You, who were abandoned by that no-good husband all those years ago and left to raise three children on your own, Rise again! You, whose wife left you for another man, Rise again! You, whose teenager got into drugs and hasn't come out yet at age forty, Rise again! You, who never were able to get the degree you wanted or the job you thought you deserved, Rise again! You who were forced into early retirement by politics at your school or office, Rise again! You who have seen your retirement fund cut in half, Rise Again! You who are bearing the burden of caring for an incapacitated parent or spouse, Rise Again! You whose friends and loved ones have died too young, Rise Again! You whose loved ones live far away around the world and no one has time or money for a visit, Rise Again! You who are at the end of your rope and just hanging on for dear life, with smiling villains lying to you everywhere you go, put out all your strength of arm and heart and brain, and like the Mary Ellen Carter, Rise Again! Rise

above the bitterness, the anger, the hopelessness that is keeping you on the bottom of the sea. It's not easy. It takes effort, but you can do it. Find the forgiveness, the courage, the largeness of heart, the love. You can do it. You can do it for yourself and you can do it for others in this interconnected community we call a congregation. It works if we can all pull on the ropes together and at the same time.

In Ken Burns' documentary about Ben Franklin, one of the most memorable lessons that Franklin learned when he left Boston for Philadelphia is that people can do more good in community than they can individually.

Easter is the victory of love over death, but in this heretic's view, it is not a denial of death. At some point, each of us individually will die. That is not a bad thing. Maybe we go back to where we came from.

What do I mean by that? There was a moment in time, about 9 months before I was born, when my father and mother got together and made me, physically. About August of 1947. Where was I before that moment? I was not even a gleam in anyone's eye. If I go back to that nothingness as a form, what difference will my life have made? In his great

song "Everything Possible," which is in our teal hymnal, the Rev. Fred Small answered that question:

"The only measure of your words and your deeds,
Will be the love you leave behind when you're done."

The love you leave behind when you're done. The love stays when your physical presence does not.

Let me close with a beautiful poem by Ruth Treen, a parishioner and music director in one of my previous parishes, speculating about when she was going to die and where she would go after her death:

CONTINUUM

Perhaps on a day
very much like today

I shall die.

A pleasant July,
warm and kind.

It might be September
when summer is ending

and autumn begins.

If I die in winter

my ashes will mix with the snow

and melt into spring

as willows turn soft and green.

-- and then I'll return

to that time and space

that was my home

before my birth.

May we continue to rise again in spirit during our lifetimes that our love
may continue to enrich the world and the lives of all after our bodies are
gone. Rise Again! Amen.