

The Only Way Through
Rev. Ken Read-Brown
First Parish in Hingham (Old Ship Church)
Unitarian Universalist
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Readings

“Passover” – from Beth El Congregation, Sudbury, Massachusetts

What sacrifice would we make for freedom today? What would we leave? How far would we go? How deeply would we look within ourselves? Our ancestors had no time to await the rising of the bread. Yet we, who have that time, what do we do to be worthy of our precious inheritance? We were slaves in Egypt... but now we are free. How easy it is for us to relive the days of our bondage as we sit in the warmth and comfort of our seder. How much harder to relieve the pain of those who live in the bitterness of slavery today.

Mark 11:1-10

As they approached Jerusalem and came to Bethphage and Bethany at the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two of his disciples,² saying to them, “Go to the village ahead of you, and just as you enter it, you will find a colt tied there, which no one has ever ridden. Untie it and bring it here.”³ If anyone asks you, “Why are you doing this?” say, “The Lord needs it and will send it back here shortly.”

⁴They went and found a colt outside in the street, tied at a doorway. As they untied it,⁵ some people standing there asked, “What are you doing, untying that colt?”

⁶They answered as Jesus had told them to, and the people let them go.⁷ When they brought the colt to Jesus and threw their cloaks over it, he sat on it.⁸ Many people spread their cloaks on the road, while others spread branches they had cut in the fields.⁹ Those who went ahead and those who followed shouted,

“Hosanna!

“Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!”

¹⁰“Blessed is the coming kingdom of our father David!”

Sermon

We are told in the gospel accounts that one spring a little less than 2,000 years ago, as Passover approached, Jesus and his small group of disciples and other followers approached Jerusalem.

It had been a journey of many days from the north of Israel to Jerusalem; plenty of time to reconsider this trip to a city that Jesus knew would include great danger. But as the story comes down to us, he never hesitated.

For him, apparently, there was only one way through the completion of his ministry, his mission – and that way was named Jerusalem.

He entered the city, as we heard in the reading from Mark, to the hosannas of crowds lining the streets, the event we now celebrate as Palm Sunday.

Was he afraid? Did he reconsider even then? Doesn't seem so. He went right to the Temple, turned over the tables of the money-changers, railed against the corruption he saw there.

Fully divine we are told; but also fully human. So as a human being I imagine he *must* have had moments of fear and hesitation... yet he kept on. He spoke the truth as he saw it. He risked arrest – seemed to expect arrest, as well as all that followed. But he kept on. For him, the only way through was... through.

So it is with our lives too, isn't it? With matters small and large.

Here's a very small example to begin wit:

Susan and I were living in the San Francisco Bay Area, in Oakland, during my years in seminary at Starr King School for the Ministry; one morning I went for a long run. I found myself on an asphalt trail in one of the beautiful parks in the Berkeley hills, new territory for me. Well, I knew I'd been out longer than I'd told Susan, and I didn't want her to worry. So when I saw across a field and a small patch of woods the road that I knew would take me back – I thought it would be a great shortcut.

Crossing the field was easy enough. Into the woods seemed easy enough... at first – but then, remarkably in what seemed to be a very small patch of woods indeed, I became utterly lost. Trail disappeared, no apparent way out. I tried one way, and then another; yet kept returning to the same spot somewhere in the middle of these (evil as it now seemed) woods. Finally, spotting what looked like it might be a trail in the direction I needed to go, and quite panicked by now, I just ran, ran through whatever was in my path... and out I came on the other side.

No helicopter rescue had been possible; no cell phone in my pocket in 1980. So the only way through that miasma of woods was... through.

Relief!

Ah, but relief was relatively short lived. Within a day a rash began to appear, and before long I had case of poison oak the likes of which I don't want to begin to describe to you. I was miserable.

No helicopter rescue or escape hatch from that either – though medication and warm baths helped.

Then, finally out the other side, on the first day I felt well enough to be outside, I still recall the exhilarating feeling of gratitude, the heightened sense of aliveness, my eyes freshly opened to the beauties of San Francisco Bay spread before me as I walked the neighborhood near Starr King. Feeling *more* alive than I had before being lost, before the poison oak. It was as if the words of E.E. Cummings' poem had come to life in my very being:

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)

The poet's last two lines you may recognize as an echo of Jesus' frequently repeated words: "He who has ears to hear, let him hear!"

To put my little story in the context of this season on the Christian calendar, my modest Easter re-birth into awakened hearing, seeing, tasting, touching... came *after* my journey from the Palm Sunday of a beautiful run... through the (quite small scale) Good Friday suffering of being lost in the woods and then acquiring that poison oak rash....

As this message is sometimes expressed: You can't have Easter without Good Friday. No magical leaping from Palm Sunday to Easter.

Some of you are familiar with the beginning of Dante's *Inferno*, which vividly conveys this same message.

Dante sets the scene on Easter morning, placing himself as in a dark wood mid-way through his life's passage. He sees the Easter sunrise beckoning at the top of a hill. But then his way is blocked by beasts. He must turn and go another way. He has begun to discover that the only way through to Easter awakening, salvation... is through a journey through the sufferings of the inferno and purgatory.

No easy Easter rising. The way through... is through.

As it is with experiences much more serious than being lost in the woods or living through a poison oak rash, experiences of the deeper sufferings of our lives: grief, life-threatening illness, loss of a job... it is a long list.

And the journey is by no means always back to life as it was before – before whatever life has brought.

This morning I heard a portion of an interview on Krista Tippet's program "On Being" with a man who had ALS, and who in fact died not long after the interview. He was quite clear that he knew he was not going to "get better" as we usually think of "better." He said, too, that sometimes he was angry with his situation, angry that someone had to do almost everything for him, angry that his life was being changed and cut short in this way. But he also said that "accepting what is" as he put it enabled him to find not a cure, but healing, and deeper love, and gratitude... as he journeyed the only way through.

When it comes to grieving the loss of a dear one, by a certain point in our lives we learn – or at least begin to learn – that the only way through grief towards a reclaimed life is... through. There is no helicopter rescue from the feelings of disorientation, anger, numbness, simple and pure loss. We can – and must, if we would go on – only live *through* all of such feelings towards at least a measure of renewal, re-awakening to the joys of life that still are there even in the midst of the sorrows. Life won't ever be as it was *before* – but healing and renewal and deeper love is possible.

I began to learn this personally when, in my twenties, a close friend died; the lesson continued when a dozen years later my father died; and I learned it all over again

two years ago when my mother died; and am still learning the lesson of the only way through.

No magical rescue. This is what's happening and the only way through *is* through. You do what needs to be done; you cry; you allow all your feelings; you hold hands with a friend.

Whether grief, illness, broken relationships, hardship or trial of any kind.

And the holding hands part is critical. Though we need alone times to "process" our feelings as we put it these days, we also need each other. When Jesus was crucified the disciples at first scattered. It was when they came back together that they began to move through their grief, experience Jesus' presence among them once again, experience their own awakening, as we could also put it, awakening to life once again.

Passover has many meanings and messages, but "the only way through" is part of that story as well. The only way to escape from slavery. The only way to get out of Egypt, to cross the Red Sea. The only way to the promised land. Was through. Keep going. No turning back. No way around the obstacles. And keep going *together*. The Passover story is not about an individual heroic journey; it is about a *community* finding its way to a new life of freedom.

We would refuse the hardships of various kinds that come with living... but we can't. Such things come to us; it is simply the way life is, joy and woe woven fine.

And so the alternative: The way through is through... and if we keep on with our eyes open... an Easter of the spirit may arise where and when we might least expect it.

A little caveat here – lest it all seem unrelievedly dark and difficult and hard. We can and must take a break if we are able from whatever sorrow or hardship we are enduring – get outside, see a movie (a comedy!), coffee with a friend talking about anything and everything except what you are going through – and all of this will in fact help us continue the journey from our Good Friday towards our Easter.

This said, this done, the journey must continue.

I want to draw towards a conclusion with a few lines from poet May Sarton. Here is the opening stanza of May Sarton's "Santos: New Mexico":

Return to the most human, nothing less
Will nourish the torn spirit, the bewildered heart,
The angry mind: and from the ultimate duress,
Pierced with the breath of anguish, speak for love.

Then Sarton moves from these powerful yet abstract lines to vividly describe a beautiful wooden carved Christ on the cross:

To those who breathed their faith into the wood
It was no image, but the very living source,
The savior of their own humanity by blood
That flows terribly like a river in its course.

They did not fear the strangeness, nor while gazing
Keep from this death their very precious life.
They looked until their hands and hearts were blazing
And the reality of pain pierced like a knife.

Finally the poet concludes, *almost* as she had begun with this:

We must go down into the dungeons of the heart,
To the dark places...

Return to the most human, nothing less
Will teach the angry spirit, the bewildered heart,
The torn mind, to accept the whole of its duress,
And pierced with anguish, at last act for love.

I hear her saying that it is when we are willing to go *through* whatever life has presented us... that we are then better able not only to speak, as she affirmed in the opening stanza, but also to *act* from the deepest love. We may be able to do this because, after all, as we sometimes say, a broken heart is also an open heart.

Now, I don't present today's message as some sort of easy recipe for joy, bliss, awakening. Because it surely isn't that. Life is far too complicated and messy for that. I look around this room and I know for a fact that you've learned this too, are learning it still, in the midst of your personal life journeys – grief... cancer... heartbreak... all manner of trials.

All the more reason, it seems to me, to name forthrightly the nature of life and the realities of our paths through the challenges of life.

All the more reason for kindness and love.

All the more reason to hold hands.

All the more reason to be together, here, now, always, that we might all, soon or late, as we journey *through*, probably again and again... increasingly awaken to life in its fullness... seeing, hearing, tasting touching... and at last speak... *and* act for love.

So may it be.