

First Parish UU, Bridgewater
Worship Service – Soul Matters Theme: “Wholeness”
Easter Sunday, April 21, 2019 10:30am

Thought for Contemplation: “Wholeness is not about restoring things to their original state; it’s about taking the broken pieces and making something new. New things emerge from what is broken. Brokenness is a source of rebirth.”
~Soul Matters

Homily “Easter Finery” Rev. Paul Sprecher

Easter is sometimes difficult for me to talk about – not to mention to preach about. Easter has many roots that we need to honor as well – so we pay heed to Passover and Spring and Earth Day in this service as well. Still this is one of the principle Christian Holidays – so there is a need to provide some specificity about Easter itself.

Tragically, Easter has long been an occasion for outbursts of Anti-Semitism – which is part of why it’s so important to remember that Jesus was a Jew who was celebrating Passover – no doubt quite different in the way he looked than so many of the beautiful paintings and representations of him as European. The Gospel of John quotes “the Jews” as saying, “His Blood be upon us and upon our children,” and countless generations of Christians have used that scripture as an excuse for wreaking revenge on Jews. Even now that language creates hatred – as in a recent high school basketball game in which students at a catholic parochial school jeered at their Jewish opponents as “Christ killers.”

The cross itself – to which I gave too little respect last year – was in fact widely used by the Romans as their preferred form of capital punishment to

terrify anyone who might dare to rebel against their imperial rule. Some 6,000 were crucified on the Appian Way after the revolt of Sparticus 100 years before Jesus' death, and so many Jews were crucified when Jerusalem fell 40 years after that the hills far around Jerusalem were denuded of trees. Nevertheless, this is the one that is remembered and celebrated year after year – and that means there is a particular power in this one specific crucifixion.

Finally, the resurrection seems like the kind of miracle that might be told of other Gods of the same era, and so leaves us in doubt about what such a violation of the natural order of life could mean to us in this era.

But the story has had enormous staying power; so I'm left puzzled.

What was new in this story? What set people afire? Why were so many martyrs willing to die to follow the example of Jesus for the sake of their belief in him? Why has this story lasted two millennia when so many other stories have been forgotten?

Peter Wehner in an op ed in the New York Times on Friday suggests that what was new and unique about this story was that the God who was being worshipped was crucified as a criminal – not some all-powerful, remote, superhuman being and not, like Julius Caesar, a deified ruler – but a simple person, human as we are, but also worshipped as a God.

In his article "What it means to worship a Man Crucified as a Sinner," Wehner proposed a possibility that intrigues me when he turns to the question of suffering. He offers some answers to such questions as these by citing

Scott Dudley, a Presbyterian minister. Dudley readily concedes that there's no good answer to the question, "Why is there suffering?" Jesus never answers that question, and even if we had the theological answer, it would not ease our burdens in any significant way. What God offers instead is the promise that [God] is with us in our suffering; that [God] can bring good out of it (life out of death, forgiveness out of sin); and that one day [God] will put a stop to it and redeem it. God, Revelation tells us, will make "all things new." For now, though, we are part of a drama unfolding in a broken world, one in which God chose to become a protagonist.

This to me begins to make sense of the story and its staying power, however we may understand God. For me, it suggests that in some undefinable way the Spirit of Life and Love is available to us in joy and also in deep sorrow, when we are among those we love and when we are utterly, desolately alone.

A few weeks ago we sang "Precious Lord, Take My Hand" and I mentioned that some folks objected to including it in the grey hymnal. The hymn speaks of deep suffering and of finding comfort – and we Unitarian Universalists aren't so comfortable talking or thinking about those parts of our lives or using "Lord" language. The story of the crucifixion, too, speaks of deep suffering and then the triumph of Easter. Maybe I'm a little *too* comfortable in my life, maybe I' too eager to maintain my optimism and put sorrow and suffering out of my mind. Worse than that, I find it too easy to forget deep suffering in the lives of those less privileged than I am. It's easy for me to forget the suffering of others who are enslaved (yes, even in this enlightened age of ours, whether by cruel masters

or by drugs) and those who are imprisoned or tortured or oppressed or outcast. I don't find it easy to put myself in the place the slaves whose liberation from bondage we remember at Passover, or the enslaved African Americans in our own country, or any of those who lack my privileges of so many kinds. If I could identify with their suffering, might I be better able to end it? I would be a better person if I did.

And there is also Mother Earth, which we – all of us – also torture just by living our lives in the particular political economy of this time in history. If we could identify with *that* suffering, might we all be better able to end it? I would be a stronger advocate if I could. It is in the light of the suffering of the cross the Easter brings joy and hope. It is in light of the enslavement in Egypt that Passover bespeaks the triumph of freedom. It is in light of the fact that spring follows the bleak midwinter that it brings such gladness with its bursting colors and birdsong.

It's difficult to talk about Easter, at least for me. I am not a believer, and yet I can't shake the feeling that there's something important here that we ignore at our peril, something about the reality of suffering and sorrow that comes to all of us. There is something here about how there can be hope in the midst of sorrow, how the dawn follows the dark as spring follows winter, and how love triumphs in the end.

As for the miracle of resurrection in the story, I can in my skepticism come up with alternate explanations, denials of the possibility of miracles, and dismissals – but it’s clear that something happened to set those disciples on fire – so perhaps this is a good place to let the mystery be.

As Mary Oliver puts it in her poem “Mysteries, Yes”:

Truly, we live with mysteries too marvelous
to be understood.

How grass can be nourishing in the
mouths of the lambs.

How rivers and stones are forever
in allegiance with gravity

while we ourselves dream of rising.

How two hands touch and the bonds
will never be broken.

How people come, from delight or the
scars of damage,

to the comfort of a poem.

Let me keep my distance, always, from those
who think they have the answers.

Let me keep company always with those who say
"Look!" and laugh in astonishment,

and bow their heads.

May our lives be blessed as we open our own eyes to new possibilities, as we explore and experience mysteries that confound and transcend our expectations, and as we live in hope as we do our part to help to heal the world.

AMEN, and may it be so.