

## ***Free at Last***

Rev. Mark Stringer  
First Unitarian Church of Des Moines  
4/11/09 & 4/12/09

"Let the black cloud break that's hanging over head. A kind word can calm you down but it's not enough to save you from your past and be free at last."—Rebecca Martin

### **Meditation**

Our meditation today begins with a passage written by our beloved long-time member Frances Craig who died last April. Frances spent a portion of her 88 years as a features writer for the *Des Moines Register*. I have shared this piece she wrote for the *Register* during many Easter services over the years, and it was also read at her memorial service.

Suppose that spring—this great awakening—came only once in your lifetime?

Suppose that just this time you'd feel the wind all sweet with pussy willow pollen.

That only once you'd find hepaticas and Dutchmen's breeches answering the sun through the woodland's leafless trees...

That only once you'd see the shedding of tree bark and dry husk sheltering the winter's buds...and watch the blunt red buds of maples turn to flowerets...then wild plum thickets toss their creamy petals on the air...and quince burst into flame...

Suppose this were the only time you'd see the rushing freshets filled with melted snow...or hear the creaking song of blackbirds down at the brimming pond...and then watch the little evolution of wriggling tadpoles turned to hopping things...

Suppose that just this once you could stand on the edge of the world to watch and listen as the sun comes up...

When the stream dances and the bud stirs and the bird sings...

And out of it bursts, like morning, the cry of human life.

Suppose that spring and all new birth happen only once—

And then be glad that it comes on and on, with timeless joy, as old as the earth and as new as your heart's awakening.

### **Readings**

Our **first reading** today is from UU minister Forrest Church. He writes:

If I were to come to church only once a year, I should choose Easter. Easter is a better choice than Christmas. Christmas doesn't have

death in it, not at its very center anyway, and if you are going to go to church only once a year, church should have death in it.

Christmas does have animals and presents and babies and stars. These are all splendid things. And Christmas has birth. But Easter has death and rebirth. Birth is essential, but for our spiritual journey death and rebirth are far more consequential. Easter also has flowers, of course, but flowers don't really have anything to do with Easter. They have to do with spring. I have nothing against flowers. They are almost as splendid as animals, presents, babies and stars. But Easter is not about flowers. Yes, flowers are beautiful for a brief season and then languish and die, just like we do. But then they cast their seeds to the wind, seeds which crack open, springing new life from the husk of death. It's a pretty metaphor. There is only one problem with it. We are not flowers. And Easter is about us.<sup>1</sup>

Our **second reading** is a poem by W.S. Merwin entitled "Just Now"

In the morning as the storm begins to blow away  
the clear sky appears for a moment and it seems to me  
that there has been something simpler than I could ever  
believe  
simpler than I could have begun to find words for  
not patient not even waiting no more hidden  
than the air itself that became part of me for a while  
with every breath and remained with me unnoticed  
something that was here unnamed unknown in the days  
and the nights not separate from them  
not separate from them as they came and were gone  
it must have been here neither early nor late then  
by what name can I address it now holding out my thanks<sup>2</sup>

**Recorded Music Meditation** *Free at Last* by Rebecca Martin, from the cd *The Growing Season*

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<sup>1</sup> Forrest Church, *Love & Death* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2008), p. 69.

<sup>2</sup> *Good Poems for Hard Times*, Selected and Introduced by Garrison Keillor (New York: Viking, 2005), p. 289.

## Sermon

Friday afternoon, I'm driving to meet my in-laws for lunch. My wife Susan is in the passenger seat and my five-year old daughter Leah is buckled into her booster seat in the back. Passing churches with signs listing their Holy Week service times, I think out loud, "I wonder why today is referred to as Good Friday?" Susan suggests that to call it "good" might be intentionally ironic. I respond that I've always assumed that, too. There's not much "good" about a man being crucified, particularly a wise rabbi named Jesus, who was by all accounts a man promoting compassion and forgiveness in a troubled world. Still, I wonder if this theory of "good" as ironic is in fact, true. Even though both of us were raised in Christian households and churches, neither of us knows the answer to the "Good Friday" question for sure. I make a mental note to look it up when we get home.

*I later learn, via an internet search, that there are lots of theories but no conclusive answer. Back to the car ride....*

Now that I've opened this "Good Friday" conversation, I continue by wondering aloud about the reason that, as the story goes, God sacrificed His son to save us from sin. It's such a provocative idea, this foundational concept of Christian theology, that a death would somehow save us—or relieve us, at least—from the burdens of things we have done in the past and may do in the future, particularly a death of someone who held such promise, who had devoted his life to love, who had inspired thousands and already reportedly saved lives with his unique way of being in the world. Susan and I spend the next few miles of our drive going back and forth, trading theories from our fuzzy Christian memories of the theological meanings of Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection. I just finish offering to our conversation that maybe, theologically speaking, God sacrificed His son so that the people would not be able to rely on Him directly, so that they would, in essence, learn to save themselves, which we all must eventually do anyway—such a Unitarian Universalist interpretation isn't it?—when Leah suddenly interjects from the backseat.

"Aaaand," she contributes in the dramatic way that suggests a gem of five-year-old wisdom is about to be uttered. "I can make my pinkie cross over my other three fingers."

Another Unitarian Universalist take on Easter, if I dare say so.

After all, UUs mostly tend to disregard the resurrection story. We don't even want to talk about it. Many of us don't know what the story means or could mean because we may think of it as an abstraction, as another piece of supernaturalism twisted into dogma, that, for various reasons, we may have left behind, moved beyond, or never wrestled with in the first place. Similarly, I don't think we UUs spend much time considering the crucifixion story either. A brutal death of an ethical leader sometimes is just that, we might say—a brutal death. The historical Jesus, an extraordinary man for sure, was no more the son of God than anyone else, we often claim. That he was forced to suffer on the cross is not an act of God. It is yet another example of how vicious we can be to one another, particularly when we are governed more by dogmatic convictions than by ethical considerations, and why it matters that we be willing to speak up for love, that we not make one individual or minority group the primary spokespeople for compassion and justice. After all, the story is that the Jerusalem crowd, the mob, the angry majority, demanded that Jesus be crucified and so he was. Mob rule creates mob-like results.

You know, now that I've wandered into the topic of mob rule, I can't resist breaking a bit from your regularly scheduled Easter sermon for a brief diversion into the marriage equality conversation currently taking place in our state. I'm breaking several rules of effective preaching by doing this, but I just have to tell you a story.

I was sitting in a barber's chair Thursday morning, in the same barbershop I have visited every six weeks or so since moving to Des Moines almost eight years ago. This barbershop features lots of dead animals on the walls, and framed drawings of burly men holding dead animals. It's a pretty butch place for men to be men, and I like it. Mostly because it is so different from the other places I frequent. Besides, the barbers are kind to me, always letting me know when they have seen me on TV or in the paper. I figure they don't necessarily agree with my positions on things, but, being good businessmen, they keep their opinions to themselves. So Thursday, my barber, after some brief small talk with me asks in his soft-spoken drawl, "You gettin' busy with weddings?"

"Oh, you bet," I tell him. "I've already got at least a dozen scheduled over the next two months, with more to come in August. Busy times. So," I ask now that the subject has been opened for discussion, "what's the vibe on all this marriage equality stuff around here?"

There's a brief moment of silence before I can feel my barber leaning

down to me from behind to say, "Well, not too many people for it."

Which pulls a belly laugh out of me. I mean, this whole over-reaction against marriage equality is absurd, is it not? I know this will sound harsh, and maybe I intend it to, but what in the world do these men who are "not for it" know about same-sex couples and their families and how dare they presume to be against something that the Iowa Supreme Court in a carefully considered and crafted decision has unanimously ruled is a constitutional right of their fellow citizens? I mean, come on! And then, that same morning, we had hundreds of people marching on the capitol, claiming that they were protecting marriage, begging the legislators to give them a chance to vote for discrimination so that they can impose their own theologically-based biases on their fellow citizens, without any indication that they have read the Supreme Court ruling that brought them out in the first place, a ruling that affirms, in print, their right to discriminate against same-sex couples within their faith communities' institution of religious marriage, just not in the broader community's institution of civil marriage.

You have to wonder how the marriage equality opponents, all of whom, it seems, were present at the capitol out of their religious convictions, squared their desire to restrict the rights of their fellow citizens with the Holy Week metaphors their congregations are honoring this week. But then again, we all may be a little metaphor deficient now and then.

For example, we UUs, as Forrest Church suggests, are perhaps too often satisfied to focus our Easter attention only on the resurrection of nature, skipping the more painful human details and metaphors all together. This critique was memorably expressed in a cartoon in which the wayside pulpits of an Episcopal church and a UU church are both visible on a street corner. It's Easter weekend. The title of the Easter sermon to be preached at the Episcopal church is "The Truth and Power of the Risen Christ" while across the street the Unitarian Universalist minister is offering a sermon entitled "Upsy-Daisy."<sup>3</sup>

For us to grapple with the Easter story in a broader, more human, way, I think it would be helpful for us to acknowledge that the Easter story like most stories of most religious traditions is a myth. Now, in its common usage today, the term "myth" indicates something has been fabricated, made-up. But classically speaking, "myth" has meant

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<sup>3</sup> Thanks to Bill Schulz for the description of this cartoon.

something much more complex, the truth beneath the truth—words “spoken with deep, unquestioned authority.”<sup>4</sup> Joseph Campbell, the 20<sup>th</sup> century guru of mythology, asserted that myths are essential to our lives because they plumb the inner depths of darkness and silence that lie at the heart of the human soul, and that they therefore tell us—through metaphor and symbol—enduring principles of how to *be* human. The power of myth, Campbell taught, goes far beyond its literal interpretations to connect us with fundamental aspects of our being that cannot be derived by logic and reason alone.<sup>5</sup>

So what, then, are the deep truths revealed by the Easter story, the truths that can speak to us today? To our modern sensibilities, the notion that someone would rise from the dead seems either absurd or something out of a horror movie. On the surface, it makes no sense. But myth is not about everything making sense. A myth exists to name an existential concern, to present it as a conflict of opposites, and then to offer a resolution that enables us to coexist with the concern.<sup>6</sup> The Easter myth and other resurrection stories, therefore, can be significant because, despite our efforts to convince ourselves that they didn’t or couldn’t happen, we need them. We need to know that even though the world can seem completely immersed in the forces of destruction, there is always the possibility of renewal, of new life that arises out of the ashes of despair. When faced with the trials that so often accompany our living, who among us has not wanted to believe that the confusion, or struggle, or pain was not only worth it, but could lead to a greater truth, and some form of salvation, earthly or otherwise? We need resurrection stories because they affirm our lives and encourage us to pursue better tomorrows. They tell us that the hardships we suffer, the sacrifices we make for our loved ones, and the tears and the trauma we experience when our lives get messy, as they inevitably do, are merely the ground from which some kind of redemption can sprout.

Still, to feel hope in the midst of death is not easy. Certainly Jesus’ death must have been a crushing blow to those who loved him. And yet, the story says that a transformation took place, something took root in the minds and hearts of Jesus’ disciples, the people who no doubt felt his loss the most. Somewhere out of the depths of their despair, they were able to get beyond their suffering and reconnect

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<sup>4</sup> Andrew Newberg, M.D., Eugene D’Aquili, Ph.D. and Vince Rause, *Why God Won’t Go Away* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2001), p. 56.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 62.

with a sense of responsibility and hope for their lives; they were able to fill the empty space left by his death with the feeling that his death could mean something greater. His death was not an end after all; it was a beginning. His death didn't hold them back. It set them free. Free to become more than they were before.

We don't have to look too far to see around us all kinds of people whose lives, in ways large and small, have been transformed by the discovery that transformation was possible after all, who have found a new existence sprouting up from the muddy ground of their lives. We know people who have lived through the loss of what was most precious to them in the world. We also know people who have battled addictions and people who have reached deep inside themselves to find resilience at a time when their lives seemed most tenuous. The Easter story of resurrection, then, could be one for all of us, no matter our faith perspectives, because it reminds us that hope can arise from despair. Life can emerge from death.

I have a specific resurrection story for you, from my own life, just this week. One that arrived via Facebook, of all places. Not long ago, a college friend, someone I did not know well but with whom I had visited a few times during my senior year, asked me to be her friend. We had not exchanged messages yet and had not communicated in nearly two decades, when, on Thursday, I received the following e-mail from her.

Dear Mark,

You know heavenly father puts people in our lives if ever so briefly for reasons unknown to us. A short while after graduating [from college] I was triggered into a depression that has never left me in these past 19 years. Medications have not helped me much and I have had hospitalizations as well as suicide attempts. It is a constant daily struggle and I just wanted you to know that I am often brought back to the day you sang the song about your mother to me. I am not a good cook or a good baker but it helps me realize that no matter what kind of pain I am in my kids need me. I even think your mother has helped me out occasionally in my darkest moments as I pray for help. I just wanted to say THANKS.

I read through her message several times as what she wrote sunk in. And I shed a few tears. You see, during my junior year of college, my mother gave up on her long battle with depression and completed suicide. At the time, in my struggle to make sense of my mother's

choice and my own grief, I began to play guitar, and even wrote a few songs. One of the first songs I wrote was a song to my mom. Though I didn't remember doing so, I must have played that song for my friend. Reading her Facebook message prompted me to pull out my guitar and play the song for the first time in years. While my theology may have changed some since I wrote it 20 years ago, the reality it describes is still as poignant to me now as it was then.

(sung)

*There'll be no cherry pie baked tonight  
There'll be no more sorrow, no more fright  
There'll be no more doing dishes while I dry  
There'll be no more tears falling from your eyes  
There'll be no more times to sit and dream  
There'll be no more times to yell and scream  
There'll be no more times to ask what could have been  
If you would have been your friend*

*It's strange; yes, it's strange  
When I think you've gone away  
I wish that you could be right back here with me  
And this time that you'd stay  
And I know, yes I know,  
If there's a God up in the sky  
That one day you will be here with me  
And we'll be baking cherry pie  
But for now...*

That my friend had held that song with her for all these years and that, in some amazing way, the memory of it had actually helped her through some very difficult times, was not about me and it wasn't about the song. It was about my mother. Her choice and my reaction to it had inspired someone else to make a different choice. And hallelujah for that!

I wrote back to my friend:

Thanks for sharing this story with me. I am moved by your remembrance of my song, and in turn, my mother's story. That my mother's suffering and my reaction to it has positively impacted your life is a truly remarkable thing. As you know, I am well aware of the kind of struggle you face as you continue to manage and live through the reality of depression. My heart goes out to you on your continued journey. I affirm your ability to make it through the dark days you have already endured, and trust that

there are brighter days ahead, even as we both know the clouds will return now and then.

I am particularly moved that you would share this story with me this week, as I am preparing my Easter weekend service (you may have seen that I am now a UU minister...). UUs are not necessarily Christian, though we do celebrate Easter for its powerful metaphors of new life emerging from death. That my mother's circumstances may have, in their own small way, brought some resilience, renewal or rebirth (or even just recommitment...) to your own life...well, it sounds like an Easter story to me.

Easter blessings to you and your family.

And, I add, Easter blessings to each of us. May we, in our own ways, *Let the black cloud break that's hanging over head*. Could it be our time to be *free at last*? Spring has returned, the earth is about to sing with abundant new life, and endless possibilities abound, no matter the deaths we have endured. Resurrection waits for us...it waits for us...as it always has.