

“Hope, Love, and Faith Transformed”

By Rev. Jane Smith, Channing Memorial Church, UU, Ellicott City, MD March 31, 2024

In this moment of spring, seeds buried within the ground are transforming to shoots to stems to petals whose colors mimic a sunset. Snow becomes rain, dark transitions to light, the chilly air slowly warms. Together, we enter into new life – greens, purples, yellows – transformed from the cold, brown death of winter. Together, let us enter into a parallel tale of Easter. To those of the Christian faith, a savior was put to death. To those who proclaim the divinity of Jesus, death transitioned to eternal life, just as the cold, dark earth unveils the greenery of spring. The Christian story of tragedy, of death, of resurrection. A narrative – even more profoundly – of hope, love, and faith, of rebirth and transformation.

Christians follow the narrative of a savior condemned to death, buried deep within a tomb. The story dictates that three days later, three women came to anoint the body of Jesus. And yet, when they arrived, the tomb was open – a great boulder rolled back from the cave entrance, body gone and angel present. Matthew 28: 5-6 offers that the angel proclaimed, “Do not be afraid; I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. He is not here; for he has been raised.” This is what we focus on today – grieving women finding an empty cave, met with the words “do not be afraid.”

Why do we celebrate Easter as Unitarian Universalists? Because, I believe, of the metaphors. The death of Jesus becomes a loss of hope, love, and faith. The cave becomes a dwelling in our own hearts and bodies and minds where we feel hopeless, sorrowful, lost. The woman carrying spices and herbs become us bravely facing our own fears. The risen Jesus becomes hope, love, and faith restored – resurrected. There is a pervasive hope for the unimaginable. There is a love so strong it overcomes death. There is a faith so deep that it provides healing from devastation. I think we celebrate Easter as a way to echo our own faith – that of spring and beauty and awe and wonder and mystery and the transcendent.

Rev. Jane Bennett Smith March 2024

What is hope? Hope is looking for a miracle, yes. And yet I offer that hope cannot alter the course of life but adjust our response – to change what we, personally, hold deep within – that is the miracle. It cannot cure what cannot be healed, but it can give us strength as we try. It can offer new life within our very hearts. Hope is believing that whatever hardships we face, we and those in our midst will ultimately be ok. Hope is knowing that life can be beautiful again. That ultimately, a pervasive goodness prevails over the detrimental. Is this not what the women met when they found that empty cave? When a great boulder was miraculously rolled back? When they heard the angel proclaim, “do not be afraid”? The women, with spices in hand, expected to tend to the dead and instead found life. Let us return to our metaphor. Christians relate to a tangible tomb. We, instead, find one within. How can we roll this inner boulder away? How can we cultivate hope? Let us speak to our own hearts, as we face anguish, loss, or detriment. Let us enter a narrative. If we face a despair of our own fate – perhaps we are faced with our own death or illness – may this become beauty as we whisper to ourselves, beloved, look at the beautiful time I have left in this realm. May personal mourning edge, slowly, towards reminiscent joy as we tell ourselves, beloved, look at the memories I have been bestowed within. May personal anguish transform to a purposeful life, as we intuit, beloved, look what I have learned. Look how I can now change the world. Hope turns calamity, slowly, to beauty, gratitude, and meaning. Hope tells us this: Love is stronger than hate. Joy is stronger than sorrow. Perseverance is stronger than despair. Life is stronger than death. The sun will always rise. Winter will always lead to spring. Trees will always succumb to death which will bud as life yet again. So, too, is it with our own lives. No matter what we face, there is a sunrise. Hope is with us among the returning light. Just as caterpillar turns to chrysalis turns to butterfly, so, too, may we be transformed, as hope offers us a chance to persevere through whatever we are presented with. It allows us the strength to rebuild a beautiful life. As hope whispers, “do not be afraid.”¹

¹ Matthew 28: 5 NRSV

What of love? In this story, we see that love cannot be killed nor held in a tomb. It perseveres above all else. I believe that in this narrative we are presented with three forms of love: that of companionship, that of justice, and that of the divine.

Think of the power of love between friends or partners or families. We see this love of companionship in the Easter story as life tends to death – in the women who came to Jesus' tomb to care for his broken body. How can our love serve to transform? True love grounds us and those around us in compassion. In forgiveness. In strength. In joy. In acceptance. In hope. Love whispers, “do not be afraid.”² Love and all that it entails can transform us in powerful ways or in subtle ways. We are called to welcome it and accept it from another; to cherish it. In such a way it becomes a gauze to heal wounds of the mind, body, and soul. And, even in times of great difficulty, it can serve to mend in other simple, subtle ways, if profound change seems unachievable. Simply by that knowledge that love is present, anxiety or sorrow or loneliness can be lessened. This love remains amidst the harshness of life. Furthermore, I believe that this love is stronger than death as it is held in memories of those who have left this realm. It is held in their legacy, in their spirit within us that will never die, in their favorite music, their favorite poem. In this way love leads to eternal life.

There is love, too, for all of humanity - unconditionally. That is what Jesus proclaimed when he told his followers to care for the least of these. We are called to nurture relationships with those on the fringes of society; to make their plight our own. We are called to offer a profound, unconditional compassion and acceptance for those on the margins that heals the mind and the soul. We are called towards tending to our web of life; one broken body breaking all bodies, one healed body healing others in turn. We are called to welcome the unwelcomed, to touch the untouchable. To live lives of justice. Unconditional love ripples out to the world. It heals us just as it heals another. This is what rose from the tomb on that hallowed day.

What about the love of the divine? The story of Easter narrates that a God of love became

² Matthew 28: 5 NRSV

incarnate and lived among the people. What a metaphor for our own faith tradition! How does our God, our mystery, our source of all that is, our Goddess, enter the world? As a tree, a sunset, the first flowers of spring. As the smile on a newborn, a moment of beauty, awe, or wonder, a feeling of sacred companionship. We can hold this with us always, just as we hold hope. How does our God become one of love? I offer, our God can only be one of love. Is that not universal salvation? Is that not the Unitarian idea of innate goodness in the world? The sacred held as an essence of love or an entity of love or the love held within our very beings. Love cannot be destroyed or contained. It arises even in the harshest of circumstances – as a rainbow after a tsunami, as life after death.

What is faith? Faith is a belief in something far greater than ourselves. It is an openness to a great unknowable mystery, it is an invitation to awe, wonder, and beauty. It can be an acknowledgment that there is a pervasive goodness always available to us. This metaphor of Easter shows a faith that revives– it is found in the women rejoicing with the angel after anticipating great loss. Faith, in this way, offers a resurrection. Think again of that metaphor – the cave within us about to be met with resurrected hope and love. That cave within which we enter in moments of grief, despair, loneliness, desperation, or isolation, only to engage with a great mystery that transforms us. We enter that space despondent, and we leave revived. It is isolation met with awe, fear met with wonder, grief met with mystery. It is our very being met with faith. We, in our despair, touched by an all-encompassing wonder and goodness.

I wonder if, as in this risen Christian messiah, maintaining faith while buried in a cave can bring us closer to all it is we hold sacred – God; Spirit of life – transforming us through presence. Faith grows when we believe we have not been abandoned, even though in that cave we may feel so utterly alone. May we bravely nurture sacred companionship there, releasing ourselves of isolation. May we note that faith is most powerful during times of great grief; for it is those moments when we are closest to our own hearts, our own souls, to the great mystery held within. It is those times of sorrow when we ask those great questions – why? How? And it is during this time of detriment when we hear divine whispers in response.

When we come closest to that cave, we are met with all that is good and sacred and holy. “Do not be afraid.” Hope is possible. Love is promised.

So may we engage with the world around us. May we delight in the green grass emerging from the cold, dark earth, in the scent of daffodils filling the air, in the rainbow of petals breaking through their buds. For this is life emerging from death. This is our Easter tale. This is our narrative of change. May we emerge from the cave of despondence held within us knowing that hope, love, and faith are always present, always within our grasp, just as are the first tulips of spring. That these three can offer us profound transformation. May we connect with hope. May we know that even when life is hidden under the veil of despair, it can be made beautiful once again. May we connect with love. Love of our companions, a gauze of care and compassion. Love of justice, calling us to tend to our broken world, healing ourselves by healing others. Love of the divine, among us and between us and transcendent in all that is. And faith. May we connect with faith. A great mystery and loving essence. Faith – an invitation to awe, beauty, and wonder. We are transformed – we are healed. May we hear, this day and every day, “Do not be afraid.” “Do not be afraid.”³

May it be so, and Amen.

³ Matthew 28: 5 NRSV