

## Hope and Love Await

**Rev. Jane Bennett Smith, Channing Memorial Church, UU, Ellicott City, MD April 17, 2022**

Each year, Easter is preceded by budding and blooming flowers from where was previously cracked and dried earth, by the faint chirping of insects long dormant, by brown trees slowly populated by green foliage marking new life after a winter too cold to sustain it. In the days and weeks leading up to Easter, we see an awakening: life arising from death. As Unitarian Universalists, who may see the natural world as some sort of sacred entity representing that which is greater than ourselves, how is the rebirth of spring not a perfect metaphor for the Christian understanding of the resurrection of their messiah, Jesus?

The appreciation of Easter can be universal, not because each of us believes Jesus to be the Son of God, but because of the powerful metaphor of love and hope that the story illuminates – of life and goodness emerging from hate, anger, and death. Of the love and compassion demonstrated by a single person so profound it inspires our actions and morals to this very day. It is a story of the impossible – of a life stripped of a beating heart and expanding lungs touched by a “divine mystery”<sup>1</sup> that revived and replenished.

The lessons and meaning found in the Easter story are pervasive throughout our lives. Each life is a tapestry of hate and death, of love and hope and life. In however we engage with the sacred, we can invite that “ultimate divine mystery”<sup>2</sup> into our lives – we can pray, we can meditate, we can hike. Our days are richer if we have some sort of connection with the divine – with all of that which is greater than us. And yet in the midst of pain, we may forget about beauty and the divine. In the midst of pain and grieving, Mary Magdalene anticipated the dead body of her king, and yet was met with a tomb populated by an angel, not a body, that represented profound hope as the man she searched for had arisen to new life. Hope amidst one of the most painful of deaths that I imagine she had ever experienced. This demonstrates a

---

<sup>1</sup> “Why I Celebrate Easter” By Paul Stephan Dodenhoff

<sup>2</sup> ibid

disconnect between expectations and what we can ultimately uncover when we live lives of faith and act with our own sacred guiding us in each of our days. Paul Stephan Dodenhoff reminds us that, "Every day offers us, yet again, the chance to experience our own Divinity and spiritual Transformation."<sup>3</sup> Every day in the New Testament, God was with Jesus. Each day we inhabit this earth we all call home, we are with our own sacred – our own understanding of divinity - God, Goddess, nature, Allah, Spirit of love, higher power. And every day we are open to this spiritual transformation reminiscent of a body brought back from death for new life – a body that traversed from cross to cave to earth to heaven. We have our own transformations. Grief after death awakens to tender memories as we hold dear the love and the stories of those we have lost. Despair turns to inspiration when met with the determination we hold inside. Anger transforms to forgiveness and compassion as we work to find understanding. Are not each of these resurrections touched by a hope that things can get better, and a love for all of those in our web of life? Are we not emulating the hope and love personified by Jesus? When despondency and melancholy fill us inside, may they be met with a goodness that seeks to transform and to heal.

To understand what was resurrected that day we need to understand what died – we need to understand what life was made new, what life was met with divine resurrection. Each Easter, we celebrate the legacy of a man who saw goodness in everyone, who saw the possibility for transformation, who loved so deeply he healed the incurable, a man to whom each soul was worthy, sacred, and beautiful, to whom life was far more important than money. This man is resurrected by our own attempts to bring this message to our lives and to the world – just as we keep alive each of our departed beloveds – incorporating the best of them into our daily lives. Let us love as the man in these stories loved. We each have the capacity within us to heal another through our unconditional compassion and understanding. If we practice and connect with our core, we can work to abandon all judgment, animosity, and jealousy for those in our midst and replace it with love – even if this love is simply the redemptive love of wishing good will towards all. We can use the life and story of this man Jesus to make the world a better

---

<sup>3</sup> "Why I Celebrate Easter" By Paul Stephan Dodenhoff

place. Joshua Mason Pawelek writes, “Let us remake the world with the hope of Easter.” What is this hope to Pawelek? It’s setting prisoners free, housing the unhoused, educating all children. It’s providing employment to all of those who are willing and able to work and saving our world by saving the environment.<sup>4</sup> This is Easter’s hope.

Hope is seeing the possibility to have a meaningful life, and it is seeing one’s ability to help create the best lives for each person in our midst – for each and every soul in our interdependent web – just as Jesus did. When we connect with hope, we realize that one individual – each one of us – can work to transform the world, one small act at a time. We are offered the perseverance to carry on. And love is the commitment to truly care, to truly connect to each soul we encounter. Together, through hope and love, our lives heal, and the world heals. In the story of Easter, hope and love prevailed when death awoke to new life.

We do not know what happened that day. We do not know why Mary Magdalene found an empty cave. We know nothing of the angel that spoke to her. We do not know where Jesus’ body was, or what sort of divine miracle, if any, happened. In Unitarian Universalism there was no rising of the dead body of the Son of God. But what we have in our own faith is perhaps even more powerful. We can grasp on to the belief and the faith and the life-saving conviction that goodness and love will ultimately prevail – even if not in each individual life. We can grasp on to that which is seemingly impossible, but which is made real through the power of love and hope and faith – finding some sort of good when we are immersed in pain or grief. We know that through Easter and the resurrection that we can engage with our own grief by emulating the goodness of our ancestors. We understand that bigotry is far less powerful than love. We know our sacred will help see us through. We know of a resurrection we are each capable of – not of the body, but of the soul. When our insides are aching and the world seems overrun with that which is mean, I invite us to acts of kindness. Kindness to ourselves – offering self-praise, self-forgiveness, gifting ourselves an opportunity to pause and simply be, to see the joy around us at every moment, to connect with our sacred. Or those acts of kindness to those in our

---

<sup>4</sup> “After ‘He Is Risen!’” by Joshua Mason Pawelek

midst – helping others heal by offering unceasing compassion, love, faith, and a propensity for hope.

I return to this idea of awakening. In the Christian understanding of this story, Jesus awakened from death to new life. In my understanding of this story, different forms of awakening occurred – hate awoke to love, despair awoke to hope. Tenderness and warmth were found in unexpected, sacred places. Mary Magdalene expected death but met an angel who promised new life – she was grieving and met a piece of something divine telling her not to give up and lose heart. In the Book of Luke, the angel asks, “Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here but has risen.”<sup>5</sup> In days and years before we are awoken, before we are met with something akin to a miracle, just as this woman did, we may traverse life expecting death. Perhaps after illness or injury or heartbreak our hearts harden. We may hunt – determined – for despair when surrounded by the beautiful. When we awaken, like Mary, we are prepared for the unexpected. We can enter life with an air of curiosity and open ourselves to the idea of finding good amidst the pain, of finding hope in unanticipated, unlooked for places.

Author Dale Brown writes that, “God is right here in the thick of our day-by-day lives,” that “[Faith is] the persistent presentiment that Something is trying to get through.”<sup>6</sup> On Easter, a day profound and yet also so common in its message – something got through. God – what was sacred to Mary at the tomb – offered a miracle.

I think awakening for any of us can take a miracle – but an ordinary miracle. A moment when we truly see a flower. When we feel our sacred with us – perhaps in prayer or meditation. When we realize we are in love. When a tear comes to our eyes because the sunset calls us back to the beauty all around us. These are our miracles. Can they help remind us to expect good when anticipating bad? Author Frederick Buechner writes, “Whenever you

---

<sup>5</sup> Luke 24:5 NRSV

<sup>6</sup> Dale Brown quote from *Soul Matters Worship Packet: Awakening, April 2022*

find tears in your eyes, especially unexpected tears, it is well to pay the closest attention.”<sup>7</sup> Easter and spring can remind us of these unexpected tears every year. For Mary, I imagine tears came when met with an angel instead of death. For me, the purple buds and emerging green shoots of the Easter season – life emerging from death – can bring those unexpected tears. For me, it is often nature. For you, it may be art or music or prayer or a hobby. These are those small but profound moments when we encounter our sacred and powerful divine love and a true appreciation for life and all it offers. Buechner continues, “God is speaking to you through ... the mystery of where you have come from and is summoning you to where you should go next.”<sup>8</sup> So where are we headed? What comes next when we are centered in hope and love and awoken to life’s mysteries, encased in curiosity, and expecting small miracles? We know to pay attention. We know we are in the presence of the sacred. “God is ... summoning you to where you should go next.”<sup>9</sup> Jesus began as a humble carpenter and yet through a life of love and hope and compassion and care became a messiah to be emulated millennia later. Mary Magdalene passed on her story to Jesus’ disciples and her memory and actions are held forever holy in the Christian sacred text. None of us are the next messiah. But each of us can live a life of love.

What are our roles in this Easter story? Are we Mary Magdalene at the empty tomb, looking for death and finding life, despair met with love and hope? Are we the disciples, believing the unimaginable, listening, and ultimately teaching this love to anyone who will receive it? Are we the angel who says, “Do not be afraid!”<sup>10</sup> knowing of miracles when meeting with the dejected? I believe we are all of these characters, a different one at different phases in our lives, but all sacred, necessary, and holy. We can pause and emulate all of the characters in this eternal tale. And we each have the power and the ability and the capacity to live as Jesus lived before this day that marks his ascension to heaven – to love unconditionally each soul which we know, at its core, is good and worthy.

---

<sup>7</sup> *Beyond Words* by Frederick Buechner

<sup>8</sup> *ibid*

<sup>9</sup> *ibid*

<sup>10</sup> Matthew 28:4 NRSV

In reflecting on living a life emulating the works of Jesus, I am reminded of the poem written by Persian poet Hafiz

This is the time  
For you to compute the impossibility  
That there is anything  
But Grace.  
Now is the season to know  
That everything you do  
Is Sacred.<sup>11</sup>

Easter teaches us of the power, persistence, and pervasiveness of Grace in our lives. And it is the reminder of acts that are sacred – each act we do that is held in love, that emulates Jesus, that stems from our own awakening, that comes with our own dedication to hope in the world, these acts are sacred, and we can do these sacred acts each day of our lives. We are called to love, and to heal, and to never give up. Even in the simplest of acts. In holding a door, in offering a smile, in planting a tulip, in introducing a couple to a relationship that fosters love – these are each sacred acts. And those harder acts – those acts of justice that heal an aching world. And this is what Easter calls us to do – to act in sacred ways in each of our days. To heal those around us, each day centered in hope, each moment centered in love.

What happens when love, hope, transformation and awakening overlap? When we know of prevailing goodness, of unceasing compassion, of the capacity for hardship to lead to beauty, of being prepared for the unexpected – this is when our lives and our actions become sacred. This is when we see the beauty of life in each of our days. Easter is a reminder to welcome life, to welcome each day, and to let the beauty of life unfold.

---

<sup>11</sup> “Now is the Time” by Hafiz

May it be so, and Amen