

Hope Rises: An Easter Story

By Reverend Jane Smith, Channing Memorial Church, UU, Ellicott City, MD April 4, 2021

Often on Easter as children my younger sister and I would each plant a rose in the garden at our father's house. Those beautiful bushes riddled with thorns, an intricate array of green leaves interspersed with buds about to burst with those fragrant petals – flowers forming, each bush a different color – red, yellow, pink. We would rush outdoors, barefoot as our feet met the dew-covered springtime grass and our noses filled with the smell of damp earth – eager to add our new flowers to my father's expansive garden. For in those early spring days, the whole garden was filled with potential, with possibility, with new life. On those Easter mornings as we began to plant our roses we were intimately met with hope – the hope of nature in spring. As buds peaked through the earth we were met with new life, and with returning life. Our previous roses which had flourished in springs prior now returning from a dormant winter – what was beautiful had been buried under layers of dirt, crusty ice, and snow, and yet in those spring days, those buds emerged again. In what had been buried, life returned.

Each Easter we are reminded of resurrection and the rebirth of hope simply by watching the once dormant buds blossom. New life gives promise as beauty re-emerges and we are reminded of the good and the beauty of the earth. After a cold and drafty winter in which this life could not be sustained now life reemerges as the air warms and ice melts. This offers a unique visual of the earth becoming – becoming alive after a period of death. Today we honor the story of Jesus's resurrection, a man Christians understand to be the Son of God. This is a man who lived a life of faith and love, only to be met with death, and yet who was resurrected, just as a garden is, as life and love prevailed.

This man – Jesus – provides a profound story of hope. Before his dormant winter – before his death – he flourished, living a life of love that to emulate would make us each nearly divine. He created beauty

wherever he went, dedicating his life to reviving that which was suffering through acts of love. In the Christian story, this man who embodied faith and love had such an enormous capacity for hope that not even through torture, not even through death, could this be deterred. Even after death hope was resurrected – transcending life, transcending this mortal world. As he rose from the dead and ascended to heaven so too was hope reborn, so too did promise rise.

To understand all that was resurrected we need to understand all that lived. In the Christian story, even at birth this man was a child of hope as new life began in but a simple manger – mother and father surrounded by wise men and camels the like – unable to give birth even at an inn. Through these humble beginnings, the start of new life amidst poverty, so began this life of hope.

In this story Jesus produced miracles. Throughout the Gospels are stories of miraculous healing performed by this man – giving new life to those living on the outskirts of society, the marginalized, the least of these. These are stories of love. There are several stories of Jesus healing those suffering from leprosy. There is a story of Jesus healing a woman who had been bleeding for twelve years. A story of healing a man with a withered hand. All of these suffering people who, because of their afflictions, had been cast aside by society. These suffering people were deemed the least of these and were forgotten. And in their solitary pain their afflictions continued. And yet – there was hope in the form of Jesus who came to these people and interacted with them as blessed beings deserving of love and through this acknowledgment of worth and life he healed them – healing, as I understand it – not through miracles, but through love. When these forgotten people were met with profound love their afflictions were healed – when they were able to believe they were worthy and whole they overcame that which had been distressing them. And as Jesus later died all that he was prevailed and transcended his body, stronger than death, as both the power of his actions and his life of love rippled out and are impacting lives to this very day – rippling out throughout our interdependent web of life, becoming much bigger

than any individual being. So, too, can our own hope prevail, becoming much bigger than our individual selves.

Hope allows us to become – love allows us to become. It is that spark that allows us to keep on going even when all seems lost – just like the dejected ones suffering from leprosy who found healing. When blanketed in doubt, when cloaked in pain, when drowning in grief or wallowing in misery, it is hope that gives us a reason to keep on going. Even in the midst of a pandemic, even as our 24-hour news cycle shows us death and anger and hatred, even as mass shootings continue, even as we struggle with our own internal demons it is promise that prevails, if only we let it. If we have faith. That renewed life we are reminded of each and every spring as the dormant buds poke through the soil. That love and potential Christians are reminded of every Easter as Jesus is resurrected, transcending human form and rising to heaven for eternity. Hope gives us the strength to become better people, to persevere through whatever hardships life presents us with. It gives us the courage to work for the world to become its better self. Hope is what allows us to become – to become better people in a better world.

On the early morning of that first Easter those women on their way to Jesus's tomb were not carrying with them hope but despair. On the days leading up to this sacred day their savior had been caught, tortured, crucified, and eventually he died. His body was taken by Joseph of Arimathea, wrapped in a linen cloth, and laid in a tomb "hewn out of rock." Joseph closed the tomb with a great stone as the two women watched in despair (Mark 17:46-47).

On that Easter morning, as was written in the book of Mark, three women, Mary Magdalene, Mary, mother of James, and Salome ventured to the tomb in despair, bringing with them spices to anoint the body. In a state of hopelessness, they traveled to the body to provide these acts and yet when they arrived at the tomb the large rock had been miraculously pushed to the side and the body was nowhere in sight. Instead, they were met by a young man in white robes who said to them, "Do not be alarmed;

you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here.” Jesus was resurrected – in the darkest hours they found hope! In the darkest hours they learned that violence and hate and death could not prevail. In the midst of their grief, they were met with a love larger than any human body could contain, a hope that transcended even torture and death – a love and promise that would always prevail. May we each carry this in our hearts. Let us bring with us this that transcends all that tries to contain it. When we are faced with a misery such as death may we remember this empty tomb.

Hope prevailed and ascended to heaven, through the form of Jesus. To Unitarian Universalists, what Christians understand as the divinity of Jesus may simply be the eternal essence of love and hope in the world, that we keep alive through our faith and our actions. After offering a blessing, in the Christian story, Jesus, this resurrected being rose to heaven, leaving great joy in his midst. He departed from a life that offered so much love his story would inspire for millennia. In the face of torture, death, and despair, hope prevailed. In the book of Matthew it is written that Jesus proclaimed, “And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.” (Matthew 28:20) Just as Jesus will not leave those of the Christian faith, so too may hope never leave our sides.

When Mary was searching in the cave for Jesus, in the story of Luke, a man in white asks her, “Why do you look for the living among the dead?” How can we find hope if practiced in sorrow? How can we find love if we are searching amidst pain? Let us take heed from this question posed to Mary Magdalene and use it to inspire our own search – may we lay aside a search of death and hardship and instead orient ourselves towards life, love, and, always, the promise of the future.

Hope helps us to become – to continue to better ourselves and the world around us. With all we are faced with – just as Jesus was faced with death – this prevails. It gives us what we need to keep going

when all seems lost, to become better selves and work for a better world. This man who overcame death dedicated his life to creating a better world, creating a space of profound healing for those who had been forgotten. This is what I imagine this prophetic teacher would want each of us to become – to work to spread love to all of those in our midst. Jesus' deeds not only touched those of whom he healed but have spanned thousands of years as others work to serve the least of these because of Jesus' message.

When we are in despair let us reflect on the empty cave. Let our minds traverse that imagery of the empty tomb, of that small cave hewn of rock, wide open as the stone that secures it is pushed to the side. As we reflect on that space that was meant to hold death and yet instead was a source of life, hope, and love transcending death and rising to the heavens, in whatever we are struggling with let this space be a reminder that hope and love prevail over all – even conquering hate and pain and death. Just as the flowers of my father's garden peaked their way through the thawing earth each and every spring.

So as we pause in this season of newness, the season of life emerging from the dormant winter, let us remember what comes enveloped in each unfolding bud, in each unraveling stem. Let us remember that hope always prevails, if only we have faith – if only we let it. Let this guide us in all of our days, let this transcend our bodies as this becomes something bigger than our individual selves. Let us persevere just as the suffering were met with love and healed by Jesus. Let us be renewed just as Mary Magdalene was when presented with that empty cave, expecting death and finding everlasting life. Let us be met with new life – with life emerging from the frost – just as each and every garden reminds us, blossoms of green and blue and pink embellishing that which was dormant. Let us never give up, and let us be guided by hope.

May it be so, and Amen

Rev. Jane Smith April 2021

