

RISING TO THE LIFE THAT IS

SERMON BY
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FIRST PARISH IN FRAMINGHAM UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST
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READING

By Stephen Spender

I think continually of those who
were truly great.

Who, from the womb,
remember the soul's history
through corridors of light
where the hours are suns,
endless and singing.

Whose lovely ambition
was that their lips, still touched
with fire,
should tell of the spirit clothed
from head to foot in song

And who hoarded from the spring branches
the desires falling across
their bodies like blossoms.

What is precious is never to forget
the essential delight of the blood
drawn from ageless springs
breaking through rocks in worlds
before our earth;

Never to deny its pleasure in
the simple morning light,
nor its grave evening demand
for love;

Never to allow gradually the traffic
to smother
with noise and fog the flowering of the
spirit.

Near the snow, near the sun
in the highest fields
see how these names are feted
by the waving grass

And by the streamers of white
cloud
And whispers of wind in the
listening sky;
The names of those who in their lives
fought for life,
Who wore their hearts at the fire's
center.
Born of the sun they traveled
a short while towards the sun
and left the vivid air signed
with their honor.

SERMON

The swelling ranks of the faithful in UU pews on Easter tells us that this holiday is important to us! While it can be slightly confusing for newer Unitarian Universalists to decipher the meaning that we affirm, they are not as confused as the kids from Mrs. Roger's first grade class: She asked her eager young students about the meaning of Easter, and the hand of a little Episcopalian boy shot up. "I know," he said confidently, "Easter is when we put up a pine tree and decorate it with lights, wrap presents for each other and sing lullabies to Baby Jesus." "No," said the teacher, "You've got Easter confused with Christmas. Does anybody else know?" With that, a little Roman Catholic girl's hand shot up. "Easter is when you fill the house with the smell of turkey, watch football all day, and give thanks for all of your relatives who come to dinner." "No," said Mrs. Rogers, "Someone must understand the meaning of Easter." A little Jewish boy in the class thought he might know. "Is Easter when we decorate the front of the house with American flags, go to a big parade, and shoot off fireworks at night?" "No, no, no," cried the exasperated teacher, "Doesn't anyone know?" Finally, the Unitarian Universalist child in the class raised her hand. "Easter is when we remember how after a 3-year ministry in Galilee Jesus rode into Jerusalem on a donkey, was put on trial for being a troublemaker, was crucified on a hill with two thieves, and finally buried in a cave." "Yes! That's right Suzie," interrupted the relieved teacher, but then Suzie finished, "And then after a couple of days the rock gets rolled away. Jesus comes out, and if he sees his shadow, there'll be six more weeks of winter."

There are many ways to make meaning!

Unitarian Universalism is rooted in the Judeo-Christian tradition. We draw inspiration from the stories of both religions. Wednesday night here was a wonderful Passover Seder...and everyone there, regardless of our religious background, regardless of how we labeled ourselves theologically, could resonate with the Passover story: of being in bondage, of suffering, of making the decision to risk the wilderness for freedom.

We all know this story in our own story.

Today we celebrate resurrection in the mystery of the Christian Easter story. Easter is about transformation, about change. Easter is about something dying and becoming something new.

We all know this story in our own story.

Today is our Easter service and everyone here, regardless of our religious background, regardless of how we label ourselves theologically, can resonate with the Easter story: of being in a tomb of non-living and then being born into new life...of moments, experiences, people who have brought us to a sense of life and love that is stronger than death...the life that has no end.

From the Gospel of John: In the vicinity where he was crucified, there was a garden. In that garden, there was a new rock-cut tomb never before used. There they laid him. So on Sunday morning, Mary of Magdala comes to the tomb in the half-light. She notices that the stone has been rolled back from the mouth of the tomb...She stoops and looks down into the tomb, and then stands there, weeping. Then, when she turns around, she catches sight of Jesus, standing there, but she has no idea it's him. So Jesus says to her, "Lady, why are you crying so? Are you looking for someone?" Thinking him to be the gardener, she says to him, "Look, mister, if you are the one who has taken him away, tell me, and I will bring him back myself." And then he said to her, "Mary!" And she cried out, "O my Teacher!"

And he said to her, "Do not cling so to me, for I am still rising up..."

Each year at this time, in some way, I say that the four Gospel accounts of the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus are literary accounts of the death of a gifted teacher. Each of the Gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, offer s a different accounting each was written at least fifty years after the crucifixion. One writes of a moving breakfast on the beach. One tells of a long walk and conversation in the countryside. John tells of Mary's interaction with Jesus who describes himself as "still rising".

Modern historians only claim for certain that a Galilean named Jesus was crucified by the Roman occupation forces some time during the reign of Roman governor Pilatus. That he was crucified died and that the body disappeared is what historians would claim with some cautious certainty.

But I believe that we can safely say that whatever actually happened to the physical body of Jesus, the resurrection of his wisdom and courage is still rising. My Easter faith is that Jesus is still rising in us. My Easter faith is that there was something so transformative in the life and teachings of this simple rabbi who could not read or write...that after his death, those whose hearts had been changed forever began to tell the stories of his ministry. They kept telling the story and then, this life (that is still rising) was written down years later in a way that these kinds of stories were told then...the eternal truth (that is still rising) was embedded in the spiritual worldview of the Ancient Near East.

Here we are at Easter. We, too, can speak of the life that is still rising from the man of Galilee. I, a Unitarian Universalist, a non-Trinitarian, who reads the Bible as literary (with my spiritual imagination)... and not literally (with an eye to fact)... am born again as I once again ponder this story in my heart .

Here is what I mean: “The story of the man Jesus is a story of a free man....a remarkably free human being. “The powers of the world, according to the story, decided that the very human and remarkably free person, Jesus, was not to be Jesus anymore. He was to be as they wanted him to be. Under their thumb. Controlled by their unquestioned custom. Controlled by the systems of a violent society. Controlled by fear. Controlled by terror. Controlled by power and might. Controlled by shame. Controlled by threats to his identity, threats to his security and peace. So when he continued to be himself even after all the warnings, they killed him, the story goes. But the point of Easter is this: they did not control him, even then. Easter calls for a life that transcends such cruel nonsense, a life, an Easter life, in fact, that nature demonstrates with almost embarrassing extravagance each and every April.” (Rev. Mark Belletini)

This man’s life is deeply relevant to the lives we live. How do we remain free when we are lured toward seeing life’s purpose as the hoarding of power and profit and prestige? How do we remain unattached from the temptation to understand consumption as a spiritual practice? How do we develop the courage to go another way, to raise our voices, to speak the deeper truths of what it means to be human? How do we slow down in the face of the radical competition that is post modern life and remember who we are? How do we continue to be ourselves in this world of crass and harsh dialog, in this world where fear trumps love so often?

Any time we disallow ourselves to be controlled by that which does not bring more abundant life to all...Easter is present and the rabbi’s spirit is still rising in us.

In Aramaic Jesus said, “Bar enasha. I am a human being. I am one such as I am”. Jesus said that the kingdom of heaven is spread before us upon the earth. Each time we realize this...each time we know that what we do now.... and now.... and now.... will destroy or create heaven on earth ... he is still rising in us.

What matters is that we Easter...that we know ourselves to be increasingly free to love ourselves and others....that we increasingly wear our own hearts at the “center of the fire”.

Don’t believe everything you think. This is the Easter story. Don’t believe everything that you think you are. This is the Easter story. Spiritually we are called to rise up out of the tomb of dead habit and worn expectation, and experience the present moment in anticipation of some new awareness. Now, we let go. Here, we put our thoughts aside. There now, see how light you feel? It is as if we have wings. It is as if the hard earth of who you were trying to be has given away to the green of who you most deeply are....connected to all life with nothing but compassion filling your heart.

Here we are. You say you are angry with someone? Here, leave it in the tomb like the shroud of darkness it is...practice the resurrection of forgiveness. You say you are worried about tomorrow? Here, come down from that cross of anxiety about that which is not now. Can you feel the freedom? Breathe into the heaven of now. Now you are practicing the rebirth beyond anxiety. Today lay your burden down. Rise to the life that is. Step out beyond the right theological or political stance ...the wrong stance...beyond the truth of myth even...beyond the mystery of mere facts. Out here in the light of now, remembering the "demand to love", be born again. Let the husk of your patterns and rutted defenses fall to the ground for compost. Now you are here, naked and newborn. Here is Easter.

A story of a rising in me on a beastly hot day at Disney World, April 2003:

Standing in a long and weary line at Disney World that spring, I am crabby and sweaty and steeped to illness with the commercialism that calls itself the "Magic Kingdom". My kids are fighting. I doubt my sanity in bringing them and two other children here. I am, in a word, miserable and counting the hours until we can leave. Then I see a man wheel his son chair up to a "Flying Dumbo" car. The boy is obviously severely disabled, unable to hold his head up, eyes closed and limbs rigid. The father lifts him into the car and then gets in beside him. As the ride begins the father shakes his son gently. He shakes him again and I can see that waking him up...getting him to open his eyes... is not easy. But, then, just as they circle out of my vision the boys eyes open and in them is the light of love's recognition...the light that makes the impossible bearable. They circle away and I am changed, my vision of the day is not the same.

I have risen to a better present awareness, a truth, a vision of the true nature of things. I have had to let go of how I had been perceiving the world and myself and I was born again with new eyes. I begin to see the human parade at Disney in a new way...everyone was me, not separate from me:

- I am the yuppie family with creased khaki's and Izod shirts, but with no apparent joy in their togetherness.
- I am the orca whale who swims in the bloody waters of profit.
- I am Dopey and Popeye and Olive Oil and Cinderella and Goofy.
- I am the huge man whose ankles roll in folds and who must sit down every few minutes to rest. -I am the gleeful children cooling themselves in the water that spouts up from the hot concrete. -I am the leathery- faced attendant who has pulled the lever to start the ride at least a thousand times.
- I am the lost child wailing and full of terror that he will never be found.

In the wink of an eye, I have risen to the life that is with truer eyes: We are all in this together. There is no separation in this life that lives us. "Do not cling to me. I am still rising." Do not cling to the literal concept of the bodily resurrection that insures a life after this one. Realize that the resurrection has to happen in each heart now beating.

We all know these risings, the kingdom of love and justice in the here and in the now, when we see them:

- Someone learns to live without fear even though she is brutally abused.
- Another leaves the corporate race and creates schools for girls in Afghanistan.
- Someone rises to a life of service after the death of a child.

- That person stops drinking after 25 years and the world of love opens like a garden for them.

Our minds are changed. It happens in us, this Easter. We are resurrected to the living of the life that has no end.

There is a legend, a fairy tale, from the fourth century, about a woman named Veronica. It is not Biblical, but is aligned with the Christian story. Veronica was a woman from Jerusalem who, the story goes, in witnessing the suffering and pain of Jesus as he walked toward Golgotha, pushes through the crowd, removes her veil and wipes the sweat and blood from the face of Jesus. Later, as she prepares to wash the veil, she discovers a perfect picture of that same face on the scarf. The legend goes on to say that the Roman Emperor of the time, Tiberius sent for the scarf so he could be healed of his illness.

The Shroud of Turin conversation in our time is, perhaps, the modern equivalent. Scientists carbon date it and try to find out if it could actually be the likeness of Jesus as he lay in the tomb.

I think Jesus would be puzzled by this obsession. “Do not cling to me, I am still rising”. He would have us not cling to the hope that finding his face-print on a piece of cloth would mean anything about resurrection or salvation or Easter. Rather, he would have us go forth into the life that is with hearts on fire with love.

The name “Veronica” means “True Image”. Vero means true, and icon means picture or image: Vero Icon, Veronica, a true picture. And what is this true image? Simply, it is the moment that this woman removed her veil, stepped forward to comfort a suffering human being. It does not matter if the fabric has the likeness of Jesus on it. It does not matter if we know of the whereabouts of the Galilean’s physical body.

It matters that we, too, are still rising to the lives we live in hope and service, in love and courage.

In that moment when one reaches out beyond all convention, beyond all politics, beyond all scientific carbon dating strategies, beyond the various ways anyone interprets old texts, beyond the worries of today or the consequences of tomorrow, beyond all fear

When the truth of our compassionate hearts is causing our hands to reach out to the suffering...who are us.....when we speak about “the spirit clothed from head to foot in song”....when we rise to “the grave evening demand to love”....

then, is the rising of Easter.