

“How Shall We Live? Part VIII: Response to Futility”
Easter Sunday, March 27, 2005
Quimper Unitarian Universalist Fellowship
Bruce A. Bode

Call of Worship

On January 1, 1918, near the end of World War I, the American poet e. e. cummings was released from a French prison after serving three months under suspicion as a spy. Reborn out of that prison darkness back into the light of the natural world, the poet later expressed his great joy in this way:

i thank You God for most this amazing
day:for the leaping greenly spirits of trees
and a blue true dream of sky;and for everything
which is natural which is infinite which is yes

(i who have died am alive again today,
and this is the sun’s birthday;this is the birth
day of life and of love and wings:and of the gay
great happening illimitably earth)

how should tasting touching hearing seeing
breathing any – lifted from the no
of all nothing – human merely being
doubt unimaginable You?

(now the ears of my ears awake and
now the eyes of my eyes are opened)

Lighting of Chalice

We come together on this Easter morning
To renew our faith in the holiness, goodness, and beauty of life;
To reaffirm the way of the open mind and the full heart;
To reclaim the vision of an earth more fair, with all her people one.

Responsive Reading

MINISTER: As for life, I’m humbled, I’m without words sufficient to say

CONGREGATION: how it has been hard as flint, and soft as a spring pond, both of these, and over and over

MINISTER: and long pale afternoons besides, and so many mysteries beautiful as eggs in a nest, still unhatched

CONGREGATION: though warm and watched over by something I have never seen – a tree angel, perhaps, or a ghost of holiness.

MINISTER: Every day I walk out into the world to be dazzled, then to be reflective. It suffices, it is all comfort – along with human love,

CONGREGATION: dog love, water love, little-serpent love, sunburst love, or love for that smallest of birds flying among the scarlet flowers. There is hardly time to think about

MINISTER: stopping, and lying down at last to the long afterlife, to the tenderness yet to come, when time will brim over the singular pond, and become forever,

CONGREGATION: and we will pretend to melt away into the leaves. As for death, I can't wait to be the hummingbird, can you?

(Mary Oliver, "Long Afternoon at the Edge of Little Sister Pond, from Owls and Other Fantasies)

Readings

I have two readings this Easter morning, the first the traditional Easter story that includes the legend of the empty tomb and the disappearance of the body of the crucified Jesus of Nazareth. This legend that plays so predominantly in the orthodox Christian tradition may not belong to the earliest strand of that tradition. The Apostle Paul, for example, whose letters are written before the Gospel writings (even though the Gospels come before his letters in the New Testament scriptures), does not appear to know about these elements of the story, or at least he does not mention them in his accounts of the resurrection of Jesus.

These legendary elements in the resurrection story, which are so insisted upon for their literalness in orthodoxy, often block persons of a modern world-view from hearing a deeper message in the story, namely, the essential note of spiritual triumph that has been experienced by those who have physically lost their leader and loved one.

But that is what I would call to your attention this morning as I read this familiar story: namely, the discovery by Jesus' followers that the life of his spirit, the message of his teaching, and the essence and quality of his presence and personality did not disappear with the death of his physical body.

I read from the King James Version of the Gospel of St. Mark, the 16th chapter:

And when the sabbath was past [the Jewish Sabbath], Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome, bought spices, that they might come and anoint him [anoint his body].

And very early on the first day of the week, they come to the tomb when the sun was risen.

And they were saying among themselves, Who shall roll us away the stone from the door of the tomb [the tomb being shaped like a cave]?

And looking up, they see that the stone is rolled back: for it was exceeding great.

And entering into the tomb, they saw a young man sitting on the right side, arrayed in a white robe; and they were amazed.

And he saith unto them, Be not amazed: ye seek Jesus, the Nazarene, who hath been crucified: he is risen; he is not here...

My second reading is a more contemporary reading from one of America's great 19th century poets, Walt Whitman, this from Chant 6 of "Song of Myself":

I wish I could translate the hints about the dead young men and women,

And the hints about the old men and mothers, and the offspring taken soon out of their laps.

What do you think has become of the young and old men?
And what do you think has become of the women and children?

They are alive and well somewhere,
The smallest sprout shows there is really no death,
And if ever there was it led forward life, and does not wait at the end to arrest it,
And ceased the moment life appear'd.

All goes onward and outward, nothing collapses,
And to die is different from what any one supposed, and luckier.

Prayer & Period of Silence

On this blessed Easter morning, let each of us, in our own way, reflect on the ties of love that bind us together, the ties of love with those who have gone before us and remain presences in our lives.

And let us reflect as well on the infinite power of Life and Being of which each of us is a manifestation, out of which each of us has come, and to which one day each of us returns.

Let us reflect on the miracle of life and on the miracle of life-renewed, and let us reflect as well on our *awareness* of the miracle of life, perhaps the most astounding miracle of all.

May our gratitude for the gift of life pour forth without restraint lighting up our world with Easter joy.

“HOW SHALL WE LIVE? PART VIII: RESPONSE TO FUTILITY”

What Easter is not

Since this is my first Easter Sunday with you, it might be well to try to clear a little ground here in the beginning by saying something about what Easter is *not* for me because I know that for many religious liberals, and particularly for those who have been raised with an orthodox, evangelical, or fundamentalist Christian heritage, there is often a rather large, literalistic boulder blocking the way to Easter, making of the Easter celebration more a deathly tomb than a creative womb.

So let me begin by saying that to me Easter has absolutely nothing to do with the literal, physical resurrection of the body – not that of Jesus or anyone else.

The doctrine of the literal, physical resurrection of the body, taken at face value and in all its concreteness, must surely be one of the strangest ideas and doctrines ever conceived in the human mind or promulgated by religious organizations.

Even to try to explain what the physical resurrection of the body could possibly mean is a problem, let alone to imagine how it could happen.

Do the molecules of the bodies of all previously existing human generations somehow miraculously re-constitute themselves? What is the age of these re-constituted bodies? Is one resurrected to a youthful physique, a middle-aged body, or an elderly one? (Theologian Thomas Aquinas thought that 33 years of age was the optimal age for the resurrected body. And I can't say I disagree with him on that point.)

A host of other such questions could be raised but it's almost embarrassing to do so – it's embarrassing to really make this doctrine concrete and literal, or to apply any kind of rational thought to it. The doctrine of bodily resurrection, literally understood, simply doesn't fit into any kind of modern cosmology or scientific world-view. The disconnect is immense.

Indeed, even certain of the early church fathers, who lived with a very different understanding of the universe than we do, recognized that this doctrine of the physical resurrection of the body is absurd at the rational, literal level. The early church father, Tertullian, for example, proposed that certain Christian doctrines were true and to be believed *because* they were absurd – *because* they flew in the face of all human knowledge, reason, and experience. “I believe these things,” he said, “*because* they are absurd.” It was a mark and test of his faith in a completely transcendent power.

Truly, this world and this universe is a strange place – “stranger than fiction,” we say, and getting even stranger the more we rationally and scientifically probe it.

If I understand what the string theorists, for example, are saying – no easy task – there may be whole other parallel universes existing next to or within our own – other kinds of universes between you and me right here in this sanctuary. String theorists currently speak of eleven different dimensions to reality – really quite impossible to even imagine.

Our world is a strange place – so say our modern physicists. Thus, someone might argue, “Well, given the strangeness and bizarreness of reality, is bodily resurrection so far-fetched? Might not it be possible?”

But this doctrine of the physical resurrection of the body does not arise out of this kind of strangeness. We’re not in the realm of religious mystery here, nor of spiritual paradox, nor of the wild hypotheses of modern physicists and mathematicians; rather, we’re in the realm of dreaming innocence, wishful thinking, and pre-scientific cosmologies.

I would suggest, therefore, that the doctrine of the physical resurrection of the body arises out of the understandable human desire to maintain our lives, our consciousness, and the lives and consciousness of those we love.

Simply put, we do not want love to end: not our love of our own life, not the love of those to whom we most closely belong, nor our love of this earth and the jeweled heavens of which it is a part.

We will grab at nearly anything to keep such love going. To me this is the origin and basis of the doctrine of the physical resurrection of the body: It is born out of a love of life and for life. It attempts to put material flesh on an immaterial spirit of love. It attempts to clothe our love in a suit of flesh.

So with my heart I understand the motivation for such an idea, if with my head I must be critical of the concrete result.

What Easter is

Permit me, thus, to leave behind the *de-construction* of Easter and to move speedily to its *re-construction*. What can Easter be for persons with a modern cosmology, for persons with a contemporary, scientific world-and-life view?

Let me mention three different possibilities for you on this Easter Sunday, three ways to bridge the gap between the life of the spirit and our modern understanding of reality:

1) First, Easter is, or can be, a symbol and celebration of spiritual and psychological rebirth, renewal, and transformation corresponding to the rebirth, renewal, and transformation that we see occurring all about us in nature in the springing of the year.

How I am enjoying the long, slow spring of Northwest Washington! I trust you are too. The pink and red and purple and white and yellow blossoming trees in the yards along the

side of the road. The irises, the crocuses, the daffodils, the tulips, and much more – all in bloom in the gardens.

Each day I check my own yard for new signs of growth. There I am witness to the germinating seeds pushing through the earth; and I see the buds, blossoms, and leaves where before there was no hint of any life or color.

How deeply I feel this life as one with my own! I feel it as the same energy – the energy that manifests in these various vegetative forms is the same energy that appreciates these forms. It's all part of one creative process – the blossoming *and* the delight in the blossoming.

In your Order of Service this morning there is a portion of a poem by Archibald MacLeish in which the poet is overcome at the fact of new life bursting forth from what appears to be dead or dormant. He is overcome by the *suddenness* with which that can occur.

Why, it was wonderful! Why, all at once there were leaves,
Leaves at the end of a dry stick, small, alive
Leaves out of wood. It was wonderful,
You can't imagine. They came by the wood path
And the earth loosened, the earth relaxed, there were flowers
Out of the earth! Think of it! And oak trees
Oozing new green at the tips of them and flowers
Squeezed out of clay, soft flowers, limp
Stalks flowering. Well, it was like a dream,
It happened so quickly, all of a sudden it happened –
(Excerpt from "The Sowing of the Dead Corn," Archibald MacLeish)

This re-birth of nature, then, which sometimes takes our breath away, can be a symbol for what also happens to nature within us. For whenever spirit sparks from what seems to be solid stone within us, and whenever new faith, hope, and love arise out of the ashes of despair and death, then there is Easter.

Easter is a symbol, a celebration, of our experience of rebirth and renewal, the transformation and triumph of the life of the spirit.

2) Secondly, Easter, as I said in my introduction to the readings, is also a recognition and celebration of the fact that love does not end with the physical death of the body.

The ties of love, the strings of spirit, that bind us together are stronger and more elastic than even the death and decay of the body.

One of my favorite poems, which I often read at memorial services, is titled, "Not Even Death."

There will be something here, some part of this

Left over past our final soft caress –
A breeze at twilight carrying a kiss,
The fragrance of a petaled loveliness
That we have known, some little shining edge
Of ecstasy on beauty's golden dart –
And we will stand beside the jasmine hedge
Again, and love will spring from heart to heart.

For memory will keep what it has heard
Forever etched upon the heart's own seed,
And time shall not erase one tender word
That love has written down for future need.
Oh dearest, hold this knowledge and be glad –
Not even death destroys what love has had.

(“Not Even Death,” Author unknown)

Easter is, or can be, a symbol and a celebration of the fact that physical death does not destroy or eliminate love. Easter has to do with the triumph of love.

Even the empty space left by the departed love one – an emptiness that needs to be recognized and grieved – can be an invitation to fill in the vacuum of that loss in the spirit of the one who has departed.

You see that happen all the time: After the devastating loss and out of the ashes, new qualities are called forth in those left behind. The disciples and followers of Jesus were an example of this; they were able to do things they didn't know they were capable of doing.

This can be the meaning of the symbol of the empty tomb: The tomb is empty. The essence of the departed loved one is not to be found here. “He is risen. She is not here.” The spirit of the departed loved one now lives on in you and in what you create out of that empty void in memory and in devotion to that loved one.

Easter has to do with the triumph of the spirit, the triumph of love, and creative renewal out of the empty void of the tomb.

3) Thirdly, Easter, has to do with our *awareness* of what can be called a “divine depth” or “vertical depth” to life and existence.

This is the awareness – and each person must find his or her own terms to name this awareness – of the miracle, the marvel, that is Life and Being, particularly as that Life and Being manifests itself in us and our consciousness.

I work with the symbols of Christmas and Easter – which in my mind are connected – in the following way:

At Christmas what I see being essentially celebrated is the *birth of our awareness* that the infinite, creative Power of all being and life – the same Power that jewels the starry heavens above – is also the essence and substance of our own individual being and life, and that we are incarnations of that.

This infinite, creative Power, then, of which we are a part, is symbolized and celebrated at Christmas in the birth of a child – the birth of the Divine or Eternal Child, which represents the Light in the world, the Light in each of us.

At Christmas, just as the sun's light is returning to the earth in the Northern Hemisphere, we bring to our awareness the knowledge that the Power of all Being is also present in us – and to this awareness we light a candle, the Christmas Candle of Christmas Eve.

At Easter, and in the spring of the year, that same Candle re-appears, as it has here this morning in this service, still lit – not being seen to be lit, as if without human agency – a power preceding us, a power creating us.

But now at Easter I perceive a change that has also occurred, because the Candle of Easter, though it is the same candle, is also different from the Candle of Christmas, for at Easter the flame of this candle burns, as it were, even more brightly.

And why is that? Because now this Life-force, which we first recognized at Christmas, has gone through the harsher realities of our existence. It has experienced and has come through the anguish and sorrow of death and destruction, symbolized in Crucifixion. It has come through the cold of winter, and see, it still burns, now with a purer and more refined light, this Eternal Flame of which we are a part.

So Easter may also be a celebration of our *renewed* awareness of the irrepressible Life-force that is our life. “It” bubbles up within us from we know not where – this eternal, unoriginated, forward-pushing, creative Urge for which we have no name; this Silence from which all speech arises; this Nothingness pregnant with all that is.

This to me is what is celebrated on Easter morning – this irrepressible Life-force that incarnates and now re-incarnates itself in matter. We, in our individual lives, are both manifestations of that incarnation and witnesses to it.

At Easter, we celebrate that awareness. Easter has to do with our *renewed* awareness of the Light that is our life.

Concluding the sermon series

With that thought I would end this sermon series that has asked the question, “How shall we live?” And the most *essential* answer I would give is that we live in and with the awareness of this irrepressible Life-force that is forever moving forward even in the midst of difficulty, anxiety, distress, and confusion.

It is this forward-pushing urge that imagines worlds beyond our present world. It dreams dreams and hopes hopes that sometimes depress us because of our distance from them. Yet it also provides the fuel for us to move forward.

Finally this: While we dream of grander worlds, of worlds more just and fair than this one, let us also take time to appreciate this world that is already here and this one “wild and precious life” that is given to us.

We aren't going to be able to save the whole world or bring our dreams for it to anything near complete fulfillment, though we can do some things to move it along toward our vision for it.

But in the meantime let us love this world we have. And let us point out to others what there is in our world to love about it.

Let us not to be afraid to speak of that love – to point here and to point there to the things of this world that are already like a dream. For who could have imagined this world, particularly in the spring of the year, particularly at Easter, and particularly in this lovely place where we already live!

Benediction

I conclude this Easter service and this sermon series with a benediction composed of statements from the sermon of a mentor of mine who died just a little over a year ago, Dr. Duncan Littlefair. I think of him now on this Easter Sunday, and I think of these words from his sermon titled, “Response to Futility”:

We can't live each other's lives, but we can give each other a chance for life.

We can't solve another's problems, but we can support each other in their efforts to solve their problems.

We can't stop wars, but we can promote peaceful attitudes and loving relationships wherever we are.

We can't eliminate hate, but we can live so that "in the time of our life there will be no ugliness or death for ourselves or for any life that our life touches."

It is not given to us to finish the job, but neither are we free to leave it off.

So: let us accept our limitations – not merely accept them, but glory and delight in them.

Glory and delight in the privilege and joy of participating in the complexity and wonder and tragedy of this world.

And in the privilege of expressing the wonder and miracle of our bodies and minds in the unbelievable delight in touching someone in love and affection.

Extinguishing of Chalice

We extinguish this chalice,

but not the light of truth,
the warmth of love,
or the fire of commitment.
These we carry in our hearts
until we are together again. Amen.

(NOTE: This is a manuscript version of the sermon preached by The Reverend Bruce A. Bode at the Quimper Unitarian Universalist Fellowship on Easter Sunday, March 27, 2005. The spoken sermon, available on audio cassette at the Fellowship, may differ slightly in phrasing and detail from this manuscript version.)