

## Our Resurrection Hymn

A Sermon by Reverend Lynn Thomas Strauss

The Easter story of the Christian faith is an amazing story.

One I pondered over frequently as an active Methodist youth, one I've pondered over each spring as a UU minister. How do we preach Easter? What does Easter mean to us as UU's and why do we mark it on our not-so-Christian liturgical calendars?

For the past few weeks, the words of an old Christian hymn have been playing in my head. I couldn't remember all the words, but on Friday, Deborah and I googled it...and sang along with the invisible on-line pianist. Some of you may have sung it in your past life...

"Up from the Grave He arose; with a mighty triumph o'er his foes; he arose a victor from the dark domain, and he lives forever, with his saints to reign. He arose! He arose! Hallelujah! Christ arose!"

With its' strong images and anthem-like chords...this hymn brought the Easter story home...like all good music is supposed to.

Sometimes I miss the unquestioning certainty, the dramatic artistry, the promised redemption of the traditional Easter story.

But, this morning I rejoice in the saving message of our liberal Unitarian Universalist faith.

Oh, yes, we also have a saving message.

A message of hope and salvation...out of the dark hours of our lives, out of the various tombs in which our spirits watch and wait, we humanists, agnostics, liberal theists and secular community builders...we also rise. We also live.

All religion, all faith traditions develop in response to human fear. And the most encompassing, most profound fear, is the fear of death. The suffering of grief, the anxiety of knowing we will die and not knowing what may follow...and suffering the doubt of meaninglessness.

So the human mind invents gods and goddesses...and tells stories that give life ...and death meaning. These stories often hold out the hope that life will be everlasting...that somehow a part of us ...body, soul or spirit will live on.

Both the Passover story and the Easter story promise a continuation of life. Both offer images of overcoming suffering...of emerging from slavery, of walking again with friends on the Emmanus road. Both are resurrection stories.

I believe that Unitarian Universalism teaches us, urges us, reminds us to trust that resurrection moments will come into our lives. That tomorrow might be the day...or maybe even today, Easter Sunday might be the moment...when a door will open in your heart, when a part of you, a voice in you, will die - that you will finally let go, what you need to let go ( your envy, your hate, your anger, your addiction, your denial, your old story)...and you will affirm your sacred self, your divine light, your inner beauty, your saving grace. You will then know you are part of creation, thus, you will be lifted up.

It happens all the time. It happens here at UUCR all the time. We UUs' just tend to keep our resurrection stories quiet.

There is an AA group that has been meeting here at the Rockville Church for a very, very long time. It happens to be a gay/lesbian AA group...mostly gay. Thursday, I was walking out our parking lot and I saw a cluster of men comparing the food they had brought for their potluck supper and meeting...it turns out the AA group was having a celebration of their 20<sup>th</sup> year of meetings.

Usually they meet in building 2, and I don't see them...but this party was in Founders Hall and they had signs around directing participants to building 1....there was much excitement and joy in their greeting of one another.

I was touched by their happiness in being together. I can only imagine what their personal struggles might have been over the past 20 years and beyond, I can only imagine what it means to them to be and to stay sober...to let go of their past stories, and write in each meeting, in each new circle, a story for a future that is different from their past. I can only imagine how they are making new life possible for one another. I imagine that their AA group saved their lives, and that UUCR was the sacred place where their resurrection found words and wings.

In the Biblical translation of the pre-Easter story by Stephen Mitchell ...Jesus and the disciples are in the garden of Gethsemane and Jesus goes off alone to pray.

"And he prayed, "Abba, (Father) all things are possible for you. Take this cup from me. Nevertheless, not what I want, but what you want."

I can only imagine how alone Jesus must have felt. How desperately he prayed...how he hoped he would be delivered from suffering...take this cup from me, he asked...why must I drink this medicine, take this path alone?...

Nevertheless...it's not what I want, but what you, Abba, what you Father wants...he questioned, he pleaded, but then he submitted, he trusted, he gave up illusion and control, he entered a new way, a new story,

The Aramaic word, Abba, is not only an intimate word for father...but also contains within it, the meaning "door" or "the way"...Jesus walked through a symbolic door- into a different future...one he did not fully choose or understand...a future yet to be revealed.

The question asked by Rev. Lynn Unger, how do we remain faithful to all the impossible necessary resurrections?

How do we approach a new door, a new life, a rebirth with faith and trust, even when the future is unknown? How do we let die the voices and practices and stories that no longer serve us well?

We do it all the time. When an adult returns to school. When we take a new job, or move across the country. When we travel to experience life in a foreign land. When we marry or divorce or become parents, when we give up an addiction, when we embrace a religion different from our parents. When we volunteer for hospice, or serve at a homeless shelter. When we seek counseling. Once you start paying attention, when we are full of faith, there is evidence of resurrection everywhere.

I've spoken of my niece before, her name is Laura. On May 5<sup>th</sup>, she is going to walk out of the women's prison in Fond Du Lac, Wisconsin where she has spent the last three years. Laura is 39 years old and has three children. The walk out of that door may be among the scariest steps she has ever taken.

She has had three years of parenting classes, anger management, detox programs, and isolation. She has earned her GED, and she has learned some office skills. She's divorced her abusive husband. She has also learned to crochet and has made blankets for each of my grandchildren. But when Laura walks out that prison door, she will have no place to live, no job to go to-she'll take a bus alone back to LaCross- her children will not be returned to her until she meets certain requirements.

She might well pray that God take this cup from her. But the next chapter of her story can be the resurrection part. She has the opportunity to begin her life anew. She doesn't need to suffer or to sacrifice any longer. Her biggest challenge is in letting go of her old life. Giving up her old longings. Letting go into an unknown future. Saying to herself...all things are possible.

And she will need a community of support to do that...to take that step through the door of a new self...she will need people who will see her anew, love her in all her humanity, model for her a new way of being in the world. She will need a sacred place, a circle of faith-filled people who will rejoice in her resurrection. Who will stay present to her...who will not abandon her.

That she find such people, such a community is my prayer for her...is my hope for each of us. Our faith is anchored in such communities...whether AA groups, or UU congregations, or communal social networks, our faith is in the human capacity to begin again, to lift themselves up...and realize the glory of human potential...to create and sustain communities where Love is the Spirit...where the emphasis is not on sacrifice, but on resurrection.

I encourage each of you to stay awake, to be alert to the impossible, necessary resurrection moments in your life.

Being part of a religious community is a blessing, because hope and resurrection abound.

The light of our beautiful sanctuary was recently made even brighter by a memorial service for the brother of someone in one of the rental groups that meets here regularly. Loving friends and family created a meaningful memorial on their own (without benefit of clergy)...I only saw the program which had a photo and a eulogy, statements of remembrance and a poem written for the person who had died.

In just reading those words, I was amazed once again- so many people know how to love well. And this sacred space is blessed again and again by such loving people, such holy services, such beauty and such profound hope.

In the memorial program, it was written;

"He loved well and was well loved. It seemed to always had a smile to offer up. He was truly a treasured being. He left an amazing signature on you and he will never truly be gone as long as you carry that signature with you."

Because we don't insist on creeds and doctrines, because we truly welcome all people, and embrace all beliefs...because the larger community knows who we are and what we stand for...because you built and sustain this liberal religious home...

People come, resurrection stories are shared, and lives are changed. Share your stories, that's part of my message today.

I think our UU faithfulness is something Jesus might understand. Our commitment to inclusion. Our tendency to create outside of laws and strict doctrines...Our dedication to community and shared meals. Our concern for those oppressed and in need of healing love and justice. Our sincere intention to be kind.

I don't believe that Jesus arose from the grave, but the historical, human Jesus did challenge Roman authority, did experience injustice, did lose his life, and yes he walked through the door that was before him. He walked though in prayer, in doubt, in supplication and finally in faith.

I believe that all of us have times in which we too walk through doors that lead to resurrection...to new life.

Let us stay awake to those opportunities...let us celebrate the moments that affirm and lift us up. Let us keep all of our doors open, the ones in our heart, and the physical doors of our church. So, May all who enter here be held in loving fellowship.

So May it Be/Amen

## EASTER READING

From translation by Stephen Mitchell

And the day before the Passover and the festival of Unleavened bread, in the evening, he came into the city with the Twelve, and they ate supper. And after they had sung a psalm, they went out to the Mount of Olives, across the Kidron valley to a garden called Gethsemane.

And Jesus said, "Sit here while I pray". And going off by himself, he prostrated himself on the ground and prayed.

And he said, "Abba, all things are possible for you. Take this cup from me. Nevertheless, not what I want, but what you want."

And when he got up from his prayer and went to the disciples, he found them asleep. And he said to them, "Why are you sleeping? Couldn't you stay awake for even one hour?" And they didn't know what to answer.

And suddenly Judas came, one of the Twelve, with a battalion of Roman soldiers and some officers from the chief priests, carrying swords and clubs and lanterns and torches. And he went up to Jesus and said, "Rabbi!" and kissed him. And they seized Jesus and bound him, and took him away.

And all the disciples abandoned him, and fled.