Jesus’s Ministry of Love
An Easter Sermon by Reverend Lynn Strauss

I begin with an Easter question posed by Unitarian Universalist poet Mary Oliver in her poem, “The Summer Day.” An excerpt:

I don’t know exactly what a prayer is
I do know how to pay attention, how to fall down
Into the grass, how to kneel down in the grass,
How to be idle and blessed,
How to stroll through the fields,
Which is what I have been doing all day.
Tell me, what else should I have done?
Doesn’t everything die at last and too soon?
Tell me, what is it you plan to do
With your one wild and precious life?

“Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?”

I imagine that Jesus of Nazareth prayed a version of this question most mornings of his adult life. What shall I do Lord? In the face of corruption in your Temple, what shall I do with this one precious day?

What shall I do, Lord, when so many are sick in body and spirit? How might I use my power to heal today?
What shall I do, Lord, when people have forgotten how to love their neighbor, when so many are cruel and without compassion for those who are different from themselves? What shall I do to call them to their best selves?

What shall I do with my one wild and precious life, Lord?

The myth and story of Jesus’ life poses this question over and over again. The parables attributed to his itinerant ministry pose this question again and again.

How shall the father welcome home the prodigal son who has squandered all his riches?

How shall the farmer pay fairly those who work long and those who work little?

How will we feed thousands with only a few fish and a few loaves of bread?

What shall I do when the Rabbi comes to visit and there is wine to be served and dishes to be washed?

What shall the disciples do at the foot of the cross, when they are filled with fear?

Whatever the religious or secular experiences of our youth, we all contemplate poet Mary Oliver’s deep question.
The same question that Jesus and the disciples, and the Roman soldiers and the Sanhedrin and Herod, faced on the day Jesus was sent to the cross for his crimes against the government, his crimes against Jewish law.

What shall I do? Today in this one precious moment – what shall I do?

Jesus’s life and death has become a story told across the ages, across cultures. In countless languages, this myth, this story, is told in music, in art, in poetry. It is explored in Ivy League towers, in pulpits and study groups, in kindergartens and around the kitchen table.

And no one can prove whether any of it is true. No one can prove that it is not true. Yet the search for the historical Jesus continues...and the hope that Jesus the Christ died for a better world, to save the world, to bring hope to the world. This hope of the orthodox interpretation of the Jesus story is still celebrated with elation and joy.

Drive almost anywhere in America today and you will see the evangelical testimony: He is Risen! He is Risen Indeed!

This doesn’t mean that all the people who attend those churches believe that Jesus’s body rose from the dead on the third day. It means they believe in a new beginning, they believe in hope and rebirth.
In liberal Christian services this morning, this alleluia moment, “He is Risen,” will surely be followed by a version of the question I pose to you this morning. “Now, what will you do with your one wild and precious Life.”

The answer I learned as a child was, “Say Yes!”

I learned that the bold message of Jesus’s ministry was to say “yes” to people on the margins; to say “Yes” to opportunities to challenge the status quo; to say “yes” to building coalitions that would counter oppressive institutions and practices; to say “yes” to the homeless, and hungry, and the mentally ill.

What shall we do with our one wild and precious life? “Say Yes!”

The message of a liberal Christian Easter is to say “Yes to hope.” The message of a liberal Jewish Seder is “Yes, next year in Jerusalem.” The message of a secular celebration of springtime is “Yes, the flowers have risen!” The message of young Pakistani activist Malala is to say “yes to education for all.”

The question for us as a Unitarian Universalist congregation on this day is, “What shall we do with our one wild and precious congregation?” What is calling for a “yes” from UUCR?

I fear that Unitarian Universalism has become a mainline religion; that we are no longer a radical faith.
What I like in Aslan’s interpretation of Jesus’s ministry is what I learned in Sunday School - that Jesus’ was a radical. He took action to make change from the inside out. He didn’t want things to be a little bit better for the untouchables of his day; he invited them to sit at the table with everyone else.

The reading describing the people Jesus loved at the Star Market ended with an image from a Biblical story in Mark Chapter 5.

There was a woman who had a flow of blood for 12 years and who had suffered much under many physicians, and had spent all she had, and was not better, but grew worse. She had heard of Jesus and came behind him in the crowd and touched his garment.

For she said, if I touch even his garment, I shall be made well. And immediately the hemorrhage ceased and she felt she was healed.

And Jesus, perceiving in himself that power had gone forth from him, immediately turned to the crowd and said, “Who touched my garments?”

And he looked around to see who had done it. And the woman came in fear and trembling and fell down before him, and told the whole truth. And he said, fear not, your faith has made you well.
Healing though faith - a most radical act.

What radical act might our faith bring forth? What power to bless will we reach for together? What is it we have faith in?

Here’s a true story of how one congregation made a radical choice with its one precious life.

If you have a chance, visit St. Albans Episcopal Church in Davidson, North Carolina, or Google “Homeless Jesus Statue.”

(This is from an NPR story by reporter John Burnett.)

The Episcopal church in Davidson, North Carolina, has a new religious statue unlike anything you have ever seen.

The statue depicts Jesus as a vagrant, a homeless person sleeping on a park bench. Jesus is full size and huddled under a blanket that is pulled over his head and looks like a shroud. His face and hands are not visible - only the crucifixion wounds on his uncovered feet give him away.

The reaction to the statue was immediate. Some loved it, some didn’t.

One neighborhood woman called the police...she thought it was an actual homeless person.
The church is located in a very upscale part of the city and she was concerned. There goes the neighborhood!

Another neighbor who lives close to the church wrote a letter of complaint because, “It creeps me out."

Some feel it is an insulting depiction of the son of God and that what appears to be a hobo curled up on a bench demeans the neighborhood.

The bronze statue was purchased for $22,000 as a memorial for a parishioner who loved public art.

The rector of this liberal, inclusive church seems to welcome the controversy and the discussion the statue has provoked.

The Canadian artist first offered the first casts to St. Michael’s Cathedral in Toronto and St. Patrick’s Cathedral in New York – both declined, but this small Episcopal congregation said, “yes.”

“It gives authenticity to our church,” Rev. David Buck says. “This is a relatively affluent church, to be honest, and we need to remind ourselves that our faith expresses itself in active concern for the marginalized of society.”

The sculpture is intended as a visual translation of the passage in the Book of Matthew in which Jesus tells his disciples, “As you did it to one of the least of my brothers, you did it to me.”
Sometimes I worry that we practice our faith one person at a time. If we want to do something, we must talk one-on-one to every person who has a question. If a new person joins us, they have to find their way into Beloved Community, one person at a time.

If we want to understand what our vision is, we have to make a list that can be added to one person at a time.

What is at the core of our faith? What is the source of our inspiration, of our commitment? What is it that we hold sacred together? What story do we share and tell again and again, rebirthing a new “yes” with each telling?

What shall we do, in community, with this one wild and precious life?

The radical ministry of Jesus risked everything to call people to see with new eyes and hear with new ears.

The Easter message calls us to a new “Yes,” a new way of being, a rebirth of commitment, a deeper, wider, more inclusive love.

There are some things that only a religious community can do. Imagine if the Homeless Jesus statue was in front of your home. It would be a very different statement from being in front of a church.
This week, I was offered a vision of something only a church can provide. I was invited, along with Reverend Kasey Kaseman, Iman Mohammed Abdullahi, and Professor Heidia Mirahmadi, to a meeting with the Montgomery County Chief of Fire and Rescue, the Assistant Chief was there as well.

We thought we might get 30 minutes of their time to talk about the interfaith work we are doing, and about the Clergy Response Team in particular. After a child died in a fire in Gaithersburg in January, Kasey offered our services of pastoral support to the firefighters as well as to the family.

Chief Lohr was very interested in how we might work together. He was inspired and energized. He spent an hour and a half with us. He understood how valuable interfaith religious presence could be during times of crisis in our very culturally and religiously diverse Montgomery County neighborhoods.

Toward the end of the meeting, he shared a moving story that had happened at the site of the collapsed World Trade Center in New York City on 9/11. It was particularly moving for him.

There was a fire chief who died in the fire, after going in to rescue others. Chief Lohr described how four fireman carried the fallen NY chief out of the wreckage and, without putting his body down, carried their chief down the block to the Catholic church and laid his body on the altar.
Firemen took shifts standing by the body through many hours until the family arrived.

Chief Lohr said that he would trust us, the Clergy Response Team representing different faiths, to provide sacred care for him, should the need arise.

We were moved by his words, and by the realization that what we had to offer as the people representing Montgomery County religious communities was something no one else could offer.

Sacred care/Beloved Community has holy power to offer. UUCR has holy power to offer.

Today is the day of possibility. Today is the beginning of a season of hope. Today is meant for saving grace and faith in action.

What are the unique and holy gifts that you, each of you and all of us together, can offer because we are a religious congregation?

What will be born anew in us in this season of hope?

What “yes” will be born in you this day?

Amen/Blessed Be