

PRACTICE RESURRECTION!!

**The Rev. Sue Spencer
UU Congregation of Danbury
Easter Sunday – April 12, 2009**

© 2009 by Suzanne R. Spencer

Mark 16.1-8

When the sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices, so that they might go and anoint him. And very early on the first day of the week, when the sun had risen, they went to the tomb. They had been saying to one another, “Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?” When they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had already been rolled back. As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man, dressed in a white robe, sitting on the right side; and they were alarmed. But he 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. Look, there is the place they laid him. But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you.” So they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.

* * * * *

Sermon:

So! It was settled.

The Pharaoh – that is, the king – had finally put a stop to those Israelites! For years, he’d been looking for an opportunity to get rid of those upstart immigrants. Generations ago, some liberal king had let them in, back when border enforcement was lax. They’d been nothing but trouble ever since.

Complaints against the Israelites were legion. They were arrogant, it was said, and standoffish. They refused to assimilate. They just didn’t fit in. Worse than that, they were multiplying at a rapid rate. They kept insisting on having more and more children. As a result, they were becoming much too powerful. And their loyalty to the king was questionable, at best.

And so Pharaoh called his advisors together, to hatch a plan. He would teach those people a lesson, by making them slaves of the government! There was plenty of work to be done – building the infrastructure, working in the fields. Why not force the Israelites to do it? Just to make sure they didn’t escape, he found the cruelest, most brutal men in the region, and set them as guardians and taskmasters.

That was it! It was settled! The children of Israel wouldn’t cause any more trouble.

* * * * *

Some thousand years later, it was settled again. Same general part of the world, different superpower. The Roman authorities had finally caught up with that Galilean subversive, Jesus of

Nazareth. A man who roamed around the countryside, stirring people up with crazy talk about the “kingdom of God.” Well, the Romans knew what the kingdom of God was – and it didn’t have anything to do with this scruffy peasant with his ragtag band of followers. No – the Kingdom of God was the Empire, and the Son of God was Caesar Augustus.

Finally, the Romans’ opportunity came. One of his own had turned on Jesus, and turned him in. They’d caught up with him, and arrested him, and handed him over for trial.

It was a quick trial, too. No pre-trial discovery. No lawyers. No jury. It was a show trial in Pilate’s palace, with a hand-picked crowd screaming for the death penalty. It took Pilate only a few minutes to interrogate, convict, and condemn. As an enemy of the state, Jesus was sentenced to death by crucifixion – an especially cruel punishment designed to discourage other rebels.

They stole his clothes, and tortured him. Then they led him outside the city walls, and nailed him up on one of their wooden crosses. After a few hours, he died, crying for the God who had forsaken him. Later, they took him down and laid him in a tomb.

It was over. It was settled. One less rabble rouser to threaten national security. Just to be sure, a huge boulder was rolled in front of the tomb.

* * * * *

But of course, it wasn’t over, and it wasn’t settled. What happened at Passover? We’ll never know for sure. All we have is the heroic story of the Exodus.

And what really happened at Easter? Again, we’ll never know for sure. All we have is a story, with variations. The earliest version, from Mark, tells us simply that the women came to Jesus’ tomb, and found it empty.

Native American storytellers sometimes end their stories by saying, “I don’t know if it really happened this way or not. But I know this story is true.” We don’t have to take Biblical stories literally, in order to find truth in them. Passover and Easter carry the same extravagant message: It’s never over. It’s never settled.

Even in the midst of the most horrendous suffering, all is not lost. Even when everything seems hopeless, a turnaround is possible. Even in the midst of utter defeat, the seeds of hope are planted and ready to sprout.

There are so many ways to be enslaved, or entombed. In our own lives, how many times have we been faced with devastating loss? How many times have we found ourselves feeling abandoned? How many times have we experienced the “dark night”? And as we look at the world around us, how many times have we said, “Oh, it’s hopeless. There’s no point in trying to do anything about it. There’s so much suffering in the world, the evil is overwhelming”?

In the midst of overwhelming tragedy, it occurs to me that we have three basic choices. We can become what a colleague of mine called “bluebirds.” That is, we can pretend everything’s okay.

We can shut the world out, denying the existence of suffering. We can retreat into a cocoon of our own making.

A second choice is to let the negative take us over. We can give in to bitterness and resignation, and become cynical and hardened. We can wrap an invisible shield around our heart. In the most extreme cases, we can *become* the despair, or *become* the evil. The suffering inflicted on us, we can inflict on others.

But there's a third way – the way of Passover and Easter. We can face life squarely and honestly, but with an open heart. We can acknowledge the suffering and evil in the world. We can embrace life in all its tragedy and pain. And we can do this, knowing a deep truth: That evil never has the last word, unless we allow it.

Wendell Berry encourages us to “Practice Resurrection.” What does this mean? The possibilities are infinite, I think – limited only by our imaginations.

One person I know who practiced resurrection was Heather Mellis. For years, Heather was the receptionist at the Unitarian Church of Vancouver. She was a boundless extrovert. Joy cascaded out of her as she greeted callers and visitors. For many, she *was* the Vancouver church.

Then, one day, Heather started having back problems. Soon she learned that an especially nasty form of cancer had settled into her spine. Over the next few months, through various treatments, her face became bloated and disfigured. She lost several inches in height. She walked with extreme difficulty. And yet, her walking itself was a triumph, because her doctors had told her she'd never walk again. And up to the day of her death, her radiant personality shone through.

Another person who practiced resurrection was my friend and colleague, Mark DeWolfe. Mark was one of the first openly gay men in our UU ministry. His warmth and wry humor won over everyone he met. American-born, he settled in a congregation outside Toronto, at that time one of the few churches in our movement who would accept an openly gay minister. Soon, he became a Canadian citizen, an enthusiastic partisan of his newfound land.

A year after I met Mark, he was diagnosed with AIDS. This was 1986, before treatments allowed people with AIDS to live a long time after diagnosis. Mark lived two years, during which he continued to minister in his congregation, and wrote and spoke about things that mattered. When he died, at 36, he was surrounded by people who loved him - his partner Jim, his parents, and a few close friends. They said he cracked jokes up to the end.

Among the writings that Mark left behind was this: “And know that love is indeed stronger than death, for people who love are like stones tossed into a pool: the circles radiate out and echo back long after the stone has come to rest at the bottom.”

A third person who practiced resurrection was El Salvador's Catholic archbishop Oscar Romero. In 1977, when Romero was named Archbishop of San Salvador, many people in the Latin American church were worried. He had always been quite conservative, and they feared that his appointment might mean that the church might support El Salvador's government, and its notorious death squads, and turn its back on the poor.

But once Romero took office, there was a turnaround. He saw his priests and his people falling before the death squads, and he was so moved that he began to speak out. He must have known that this would eventually cost him his life. But before he was assassinated, he said, "If they kill me, I will be resurrected in the Salvadoran people." They did kill him, shortly before Easter in 1980, but the struggle for justice continued in his name.

To practice resurrection – this is a choice we have. It's a day-by-day choice, sometimes even minute-by-minute.

Practicing resurrection means keeping our hearts open, choosing to live out of love, when bitterness and resentment might seem more logical.

It means taking a stand for love and justice, even when conventional wisdom tells us there's no point.

If we find ourselves in the midst of depression, a sense of hopelessness, it may mean keeping the thread of an inner voice alive, something to remind us: "This is not forever."

But there's one important thing practicing resurrection is not. It has nothing to do with *denying* death. It doesn't mean pretending everything's okay when it really isn't. It doesn't mean ignoring the evil and oppression of this world.

One of the enduring mysteries is this: Good Friday always comes before Easter. Practicing resurrection means facing the pain, the conflict, the tears, the despair. It means acknowledging them, giving them their full due – and then finding within them the seeds of hope.

PRACTICE RESURRECTION!!