

“Easter People,”
a sermon given by the Rev. Frank Clarkson
at the Universalist Unitarian Church of Haverhill
on Easter Sunday, April 4, 2010

When I was in college, I played on the rugby team. Rugby is that game that was invented when a soccer player in England got frustrated with only being able to use his feet, and picked up the ball with his hands and ran with it, until the other players tackled him. One of the English guys on our team described rugby this way. He said, “It’s a rough game for gentle men, not a gentleman’s game for roughs.” I loved playing rugby, the game itself was great, and the camaraderie with my teammates even better. But I was never a very good player. One day at practice my friend Johnny, who wasn’t a big guy, but who was incredibly quick and agile, assessed my ability. He said, “Frank, you’re not big--but you’re slow.”

In the past week we’ve gone from cold and rainy to sunny and almost hot. I don’t know about you, but it’s a little much for me. Every year, I hope that spring will come on slowly. I want to savor it, and I need time to adjust, to realize that it’s not winter any more. I can wait until June, or July, for that 80 degree weather. Like my friend said, I’m slow.

And I can feel the same way about Easter. Earlier this week, our Bible class spent time with the gospel passage that describes Jesus praying in the garden the night before his death, when his disciples kept falling asleep. Some of us were struck by the raw humanity of the story. We felt the real pain and sadness of being alone and afraid, of being let down by your friends on the night when you most need them.

I kind of apologized to the group for giving them what was a hard and sad passage to wrestle with. But one of them rightly observed, “the only way to get to Easter is by going through Good Friday--you have to have death before you can have resurrection.”

This Friday, my sermon writing day, I struggled with putting together something to say to you this morning. At the end of the day I didn’t have much to show for all the hours I spent at my desk. I wondered if I was going to be ready, by Sunday, to sing those triumphant Easter hymns. I realized I wasn’t ready for Easter yet--I needed to spend time with the other events of this week--the last supper on Thursday night, the crucifixion on Friday. So I gave up writing, and sat down to read the gospel according to Mark. It’s short enough that you can read the whole gospel in one sitting. I especially needed to hear the end--the story of Jesus’ farewell meal with his friends, his betrayal by one of them, his arrest, trial, crucifixion and death.

It’s a long way from Palm Sunday to Easter. I’m thinking that next year, I’d like for us to have a service, maybe on Thursday night of holy week, to provide a chance to spend time with that part of the story. Words from Wendell Berry come to mind: “At night

make me one with the darkness, in the morning make me one with the light.” I don’t know about you, but I need to spend time in the shadow of holy week if I’m going to be able to live into the light of Easter.

Some of you know the shadows all too well. You’ve had your share, some of you more than your share, of sorrow and suffering. Like the poet Robert Frost, you are already “acquainted with the night.” Here’s the first few lines of his poem by that name:

I have been one acquainted with the night.
I have walked out in rain -- and back in rain.
I have outwalked the furthest city light.

I have looked down the saddest city lane.
I have passed by the watchman on his beat
And dropped my eyes, unwilling to explain.

We are each acquainted with trouble, with sorrow, with pain. It’s part of being human. The good news is, that is not the whole story. That is what Easter is all about--affirming life in the midst of death. Not just 2000 years ago, but in these days, and in our lives.

In our reading this morning from the end of the gospel of Mark, the women who come to anoint the body of Jesus find an empty tomb. They run away, afraid, and that’s where the gospel ends. The early church decided this ending, in what is the oldest gospel, wasn’t good enough. They came up with at least two different attempts to provide what they called “a more satisfactory ending” to the story, and these are printed at the end of Mark, a shorter and a longer version, both of which have Jesus appearing to the disciples.

I like the ending the way it is, with the women fleeing the empty tomb, because it leaves it up to us to finish the story. In Mark we’re told the women run away in fear, that they are amazed. And we’re told that they didn’t tell anyone.

And maybe they didn’t, at least not right away. When Jesus was crucified, this horrific act likely had its intended consequence--his followers were scattered, probably intimidated by Roman power and violence. I imagine they went back home, defeated and dejected. They probably felt lucky to have escaped with their lives. Maybe they felt guilty that they had been less than courageous, and less than faithful.

But something happened. They felt a presence, they remembered what it had been like when they were together, and they began to tell the story to others. I like to think it took a lot longer than three days for the resurrection, for the presence of Jesus to be felt among his followers. I don’t know what happened. I don’t think it happened literally as the gospels say. But something happened. And the story spread across the Mediterranean world.

The later gospels do include instances of Jesus appearing after his death. Rita Brock says the tellers of the gospels “constructed an innovative strategy” to resist the violence of crucifixion. These include stories of Jesus’ friends finding him, not dead, but in their midst, “in the garden, along the shore, breaking bread, and telling them to carry on his ministry.” She says, “they experienced him as many people and cultures experience those they love who have died, as present still in visions, dreams, and rituals. These loving details said that Rome was impotent to erase Jesus from memory, to deny his humanity, or to end his work for justice, healing, and peace.”¹

As Carl Scovel says in his reflection we heard just now, it all goes back to the empty tomb. Emptiness is at the heart of the story. But we live in a world that abhors emptiness, that wants us to fill every empty space with something--with activity, food, entertainment. That’s why silence and inaction are part of most spiritual practices--because creating emptiness is one of the best ways to invite the spirit in.

The image of the empty tomb reminds me of a question asked by the Sufi mystic Rumi:

Why, when God's world is so big,
Did you fall asleep in a prison
Of all places?”

I remember a conversation I had with a friend a few years ago, about how we can create our own prisons; how we can wall ourselves in, brick by brick. And how, with grace, we can begin to take those walls down. I wonder, where are you on this Easter morning? Are you still in a tomb, maybe one of your own making? What might help you to get out?

We were not made to be imprisoned. We are meant to be free. I’m not talking about freedom the way it’s sometimes used, as freedom from responsibility or accountability, I don’t mean free in the the “you can’t tell me what to do” kind of way, but free as in liberated--free to be who you were born to be, free to live your life without shame or fear.

In some ways a prison cell, or a tomb, can be a safe place. It’s a place when you can hide, where not much will be asked or expected of you. Where your own expectations are low, so you won’t be disappointed. If you never dream, you won’t be heartbroken when those dreams don’t come true. I hear people all the time say things like, “When I retire, then I’ll get to do what I want.” “If I ever win the lottery, then I’ll be able to...” “I wanted to do this, but my spouse (or my children, or my dog) is holding me back.” Sometimes it’s easier to make excuses, to stay in prison, than to be responsible for your own happiness.

¹ Rita Nakashima Brock and Rebecca Ann Parker, *Saving Paradise: How Christianity Traded Love of This World for Crucifixion and Empire* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2008).

Easter invites us to walk out of the prisons we have created for ourselves, or that others have put us in. Easter invites us to tell the story of our own empty tomb. I'm not saying that it's easy. We live in a world that is not particularly life-affirming, that doesn't encourage our liberation. But it's what we're invited to do.

I like the description of Christians as "Easter people living in a Good Friday world." Whether you call yourself Christian or not, this is a good description of what it means to be a person of faith. To be Easter people is not to say that God is in heaven and all is right with the world; no, it means that in this broken and hurting and beautiful world, we are, as Desmond Tutu says, "God bearers," we are the ones who are called to bless and heal and redeem our world. We won't all do this in the same way. But I'm convinced that we each have a part to play.

Easter is not the end, it is just the beginning. It's an invitation to be awake, in this world of pain and sorrow, to the possibility of joy. It's an invitation to lean toward the light, to resist those powers that are not life-giving and life-affirming. We are invited to be Easter people. It's not easy, and it takes time--it doesn't happen overnight. But what's the alternative? Spending your days in a tomb?

May Sarton wrote this prayer: "Help us to be the always hopeful gardeners of the spirit who know that without darkness nothing comes to birth as without light nothing flowers." Easter invites us to flower.

Today, and in the days to come, let us be Easter people. People acquainted with the night, who are living into the light. We sing "Jesus Christ is Risen Today." Let us affirm that we have risen too, that in this season we will live with hope, with courage, and with joy.

Amen.