



## UNIVERSALIST UNITARIAN CHURCH OF HAVERHILL

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“Easter Happens,”  
a sermon given by the Rev. Frank Clarkson  
on Easter Sunday, April 24, 2011

What do you make of Easter? What does it mean to you, and how do you celebrate it? I’m not talking about Easter as the arrival of spring, or that holiday of bunnies and decorated eggs, or of family gatherings and pastel colored candy--as much as I like those things. I’m talking about Easter, the story we heard from the gospel of Mark--the story of the the empty tomb.

In John Irving’s novel *A Prayer for Owen Meany*, the narrator, Johnny Wheelwright, says, “I find that Holy Week is draining; no matter how many times I have lived through the crucifixion, my anxiety about his resurrection is undiminished--I am terrified that, this year, it won’t happen; that, that year, it didn’t.”

I identify with Johnny Wheelwright, and share his fear and doubts.

He goes on, “Anyone can be sentimental about the Nativity; any fool can feel like a Christian at Christmas. But Easter is the main event; if you don’t believe in the resurrection, you’re not a believer.”

For me, this hits pretty close to home. As one who came back to a new understanding of Christianity after I became a Unitarian Universalist, I love the Christmas story of the incarnation. I struggle much more with Holy Week and Easter. That’s where the rubber meets the road.

As a younger person I moved away from Christianity because I couldn’t believe in some of those things that I thought were essential to the faith: the virgin birth, the resurrection, the ascension into heaven. What brought me back was when I realized I was worrying about the wrong things. That some of those details didn’t really matter, and none of them were meant to be taken literally. I came to understand that there are different kinds of truth; that a story don’t have to be verifiable in order to make it true.

I’ve told you about my Bible professor who would make us repeat after her, “Mark is not accurate history. It is a good story, proclaiming the gospel.” Gospel simply means “good news.” And what is the good news that Jesus was proclaiming? It was that the kingdom of God is at hand. This gets interpreted in different ways. I think it means now is the time, and we are the people to bring God’s love into the world. That’s pretty much what Jesus said when he stood up in the temple and read from the prophet Isaiah:

‘The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,  
because he has anointed me  
to bring good news to the poor.  
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives  
and recovery of sight to the blind,  
to let the oppressed go free,  
to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour.’ (Isaiah 61:1-2, Luke 4:18-18)

The good news is about liberation, particularly for those in trouble and at the margins. That’s what Jesus was saying, and that’s what got him killed.

I struggle with Easter, and I figure some of you do too, because we know that a bodily resurrection is pretty much impossible. That’s one reason I’m drawn to the earliest gospel, Mark, which ends with the women fleeing the empty tomb. There is no resurrected body in Mark--only the empty tomb, and promise that “he has been raised... he is going ahead of you to Galilee” (Mark 16:6-7).

I have no interest in trying to deconstruct Easter this morning, either to debunk it or find some kind of rational understanding for this greatest of mysteries. That’s not why I’m here. I’m here to stand with you in the presence of this mystery and invite you to see for yourself that the tomb is empty, and invite you to wonder what it means to say “Christ is risen.”

There’s a whole sermon I want to preach about that word “Christ” and how we might find it liberating and empowering. Not today--but coming soon to a church near you!

I believe in the resurrection. Probably not the same way some other Christians do--I don’t take those gospel accounts literally, nor do I think the early Christians expected people to. They understood the power of a good story to tell deep truths about the nature of humans and the nature of God. But I’m not saying the resurrection is just a metaphor. I believed that Easter happened--just not literally the way the gospels describe. It’s more of a mystery than that.

Six years ago I was completing my ministerial internship at the First Parish in Lincoln. They have an Easter sunrise service there, in a field near the church, and I was glad to lead it. The winter that year was like this one, long, with lots of snow. Easter came earlier that year, so it was chilly when we gathered at dawn, and there was still snow in the shady parts of the field. We stood there, a ragtag group of people and as many dogs, listening to the Easter story as the sun came over the trees and warmed our faces. That image has stuck with me--we were like plants in the early spring, with our feet on and in the thawing earth, craning our faces toward the light.

Imagine yourself, standing in the mess and the muck of your life, and still, waiting for the light to appear. Waiting and not knowing for sure if it will, but hoping and expecting it nonetheless. And when it does, turning your face toward the light. Letting it warm you, and bless you. Basking in its glow. Trusting that, as mysterious as it is, it is real. That’s what Easter is.

"Faith is not making religious-sounding noises in the daytime," Mary Jean Irion says. "It is asking your inmost self questions at night — and then getting up and going to work." It's being open to what comes out of the darkness, and then walking with it into the new day.

The great rabbi Abraham Heschel, talking about the central story of the Hebrew people, the exodus from slavery in Egypt, said, "The Exodus lasted a moment, a moment enduring forever. What happened once upon a time happens all the time."

What I love about the Exodus is that it is the story of a whole people finding liberation together. It is a powerful story of hope and courage and perseverance, a long journey through the wilderness to get to the promised land.

The Easter story is more individualistic, focused on the person of Jesus. It seems to me that the real resurrection is not what happened to Jesus, but what happened among the disciples.

That's how I believe in the resurrection. Not as a one shot deal. But as something that happens again and again, even in your life and even in mine. You know and I know that bad things happen. Accidents happen. Natural disasters happen. We humans screw things up. Stuff happens, things we can't fix or even explain. The trick is to not turn away, to be as present to the suffering and the pain as we can, and make our way through it. The invitation, as Frederick Buechner says, is to be stewards of our pain. And to trust that pain and suffering and even death are not the end of the story.

Easter is not a Hallmark card with all light and no shadows. No, it's the daffodil pushing up through last year's dead leaves. It's the person whose heart has been broken, because of her own failings and the failings of others, opening her heart once again and finding an unexpected blessing. It is the empty tomb.

Easter is the followers of Jesus, brokenhearted and scattered after his brutal death, going back to their lives, but not forgetting what had happened when he was in their midst. It is them gradually coming to sense that he was somehow still with them. It is a mystery, and we will never know exactly what they experienced, but it's clear that something did happen among them. They remembered how it had been when he was with them, and they believed his spirit was still in their midst. And they began to tell stories about what that was like. They said he was one "whom death could not contain." And the story spread across the Mediterranean world.

Think about a martyr of our own era. Did the Civil Rights movement end when Martin Luther King, Jr. was killed? Did Rev. King's spirit, or his dream, die on that day in Memphis? Has death been able to contain that dream?

Easter happened once upon a time. And Easter happens all the time. Start looking for it, and I think you'll find it, in the people and events around you and in your own life.

What would happen if you allowed yourself to be liberated by that holy Spirit, the spirit that liberated the followers of Jesus? What would happen if you could proclaim, “The Spirit is upon me, it calls me to bring good news to the poor, and release to those who are captive”?

Sometimes it’s easier to live in the shadows, to grow accustomed to your frailties and failings, to stay in the relative safety of the tomb you have built for yourself, or allowed others to put you in. The good news, and the challenging news, is this--Easter happens! And not just once a year! Easter happens all the time. If we will have ears to hear and eyes to see, we will witness the resurrection for ourselves.

We are invited, encouraged, compelled to be Easter people. To be awake to the spirit stirring in our midst, calling us to rise, calling us to be liberated from what binds us, and helping others to be free.

There are shadows all around, but don’t think that is the whole story.

“Listen  
with the night falling we are saying thank you  
we are stopping on the bridges to bow from the railings  
...  
we are saying thank you and waving  
dark though it is” <sup>1</sup>

Dark though it is, we are leaning toward the light. We are saying thank you, and hallelujah, and he is risen, and we are risen. We are saying thank you, and hallelujah, and amen.

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<sup>1</sup> From “Thanks,” by W.S. Merwin, available online at <http://www.poets.org/viewmedia.php/prmMID/20492>