



UNIVERSALIST UNITARIAN CHURCH OF HAVERHILL

“Arriving,”
a sermon given by Julie Lombard
on March 29, 2015

Last Saturday, I was slow to get out of bed. I lay in bed listening to NPR probably a little longer than I needed to when I heard the announcement of a death. The person was in their nineties and I didn't recognize their name. It happened to be the person who stabbed Martin Luther King, Jr. at a book signing many moons ago. It was reported the way King's aorta was damaged, that if he had sneezed before the doctors were able to repair it, he would have never lived to march over that bridge in Selma. But he didn't sneeze and the doctors were able to repair it. The radio report also claimed that this was a common phenomenon for many of our famous leaders; Churchill almost died in a car accident in the early 1930's. Could you imagine World War II without him? President Kennedy almost died when his PT boat was sunk during World War II, a near drowning. What if these leaders hadn't arrived to their special place in time? But they did. They did arrive to do the important work they would go down into history for doing. They did arrive. That's the important thing to remember, they did arrive.

This arriving business is an important business throughout our life. Timing is everything. How many times have we heard that? How did we arrive here today? Some of you might say, “I drove my car or I live a few blocks away, I walked here.” But that is not exactly what I mean. That's not what I'm trying to get at. See, I believe it's a miracle that we have arrived here, in this sanctuary together to worship. How did we arrive here, in the beginning of spring as winter tries to hold its relentless grip upon us? Who liked seeing the snow fly all day yesterday? Here at a time where the days are growing longer and we celebrate the sun's stubbornness to remain in the sky. Here, in this sanctuary with the beautiful sounds of the organ while Lisa plays. We usher in another Easter season. Here, at another stewardship season. Where we've done all sorts of creative fundraising, fun fundraising and we've made friends doing it. Here, here and now because let us celebrate our arrival. Maybe you've noticed for our arrival there were no people lining the street, there weren't palms on the ground as we walked in. But I don't think that makes our arrival any less a miracle. I think it's a miracle that we have come together to do the important work; to worship together, to do our social justice response by attending classes like UU Class Conversation, and by feeding the hungry. That is your heart of hearts mission here, to feed the hungry.

Have you ever noticed how when we plan these arrivals we only plan for them to go perfectly? We don't plan for bad things to happen. Sure, many of us drive around with spare tires in our cars, but we don't think we are going to use them. They're just taking up space. But sometimes our arrivals don't go as planned. One story about that is a long time ago, in a time I like to call

BC- before children, my husband and I went skiing in Utah and we flew out with a friend named Bob. We were due to meet up with a bunch of others and stay at the base of Snowbird Ski Area. It was going to be a great week. The only thing we didn't plan- the major snow storm that would hit Boston. So, here we were in Logan waiting to get on the plane with our skis in hand, so disappointed because they're sending us home. So we did, we went back to NH and returned the next day where we got on a flight to Utah. So we did arrive, late, but we did arrive. On the first day of skiing at Snowbird, we hadn't even gotten to lunch yet and Bob broke his leg, his angle. You know that bone that sticks out, he broke it clear off. The doctors told Bob that he had to fly home, now, to get it pinned in Boston, not here. I bet you can imagine that Bob was a little upset. He was equally upset because Greg said, "You need that lunch?" Bob got over that one eventually. Bob said, "He didn't know if they were feeding him where he was going." He did get his leg taken care of but if he hadn't fallen, there's a good chance he wouldn't have really wanted to get back to Utah. He didn't just want to get back to Utah, he moved to Utah. The next time Greg and I went skiing in Utah, we stayed at Bob's new house.

There's another story like that recently told to me by my friend of his grandmother. Elizabeth had two passions; one was to dance and the other was to go to America. She lived in a small village way up in the mountains of Europe. She talked on and on about her passions and her father said he wished she would stop dreaming of such things because nobody from her village did anything like it. She couldn't stop and her father couldn't stop her. So, he gave her the money to go to America. On the first leg of the journey she took a train to Vienna. She got out into the big city and she thought she had never seen anything so beautiful. On the train to Paris she met another woman traveling to America and they became fast friends. When they got to Paris they had a layover and in that time they ran around the city seeing as much as they could, but they did run fast enough. They missed their train to the port city where they would catch the ship to New York. Elizabeth broke into tears, "What is my father going to say?" That's when a man in the station said, "You know, there's another train that goes to that port, it's a slower train, but you may get there in time." Hope was still there. The girls took that train and as they pulled into the station they saw ships going to every destination, but they couldn't find the ship heading to New York. So, the ladies asked someone, "Where's the ship to New York?" The man pointed way out to the horizon. There was the ship to New York out at sea. Elizabeth missed the boat and it was a good thing she did because this was 1912 and that ship hit an iceberg and sank. She did get to America, she did dance. She also fell in love and started a family. As you know, because my friend is alive and well because Elizabeth missed the boat.

What if Jesus missed the boat that day long ago when he was coming into Jerusalem? What would have happened in he didn't arrive when the crowd were out on the street and all the palms were laid down for him? What if he had been caught up in another miracle healing that took a little longer than usual and he didn't get there until the wee hours of the night? Do you think the crowd would still be there or would they have gone to bed? I would have gone to bed. What about the officials, would they have gotten nervous, or would they have never even known he was there?

What a different way to arrive, there are so many ways to arrive. We celebrate today, Palm Sunday, as a glorious day yet we know the rest of the story doesn't go so well for Jesus. I can gather that it was one of the worst weeks of his life, but it turned into one of the best weeks for his followers. Things really changed and at that time he didn't have the Gospels to look at. He couldn't flip ahead and say, "Oh, this is going to turn out ok, this is going to be good." The only

wisdom he had to draw from was the Old Testament. What we call the Old Testament, they didn't call it that then. He would have known certain things from the literature he studied. It would have helped him.

I've been reading the Bible a lot lately. I'm listening to it, CDs of it in my car as I drive. It's been awesome, all these African-American actors and actresses reading the various parts. If you never heard Maya Angelo read one of the Proverbs, you don't know what you're missing. It's wonderful. I'm listening to the 55th CD and I'm still in the Old Testament. What I really love about the Old Testament is not all the swords and beheading because that gets old after a while. My favorite part of the Old Testament is the wisdom literature. It is comprised of five books; the Book of Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Songs which is also known as Songs of Solomon. Those five books of wisdom, I have to imagine that they were important to Jesus, helping him to understand what might be coming.

As I listen to the Old Testament in my car, sometimes my family gets stuck listening to it, too. One day Annie said to me, she's my daughter who is thirteen, "Mom, this story sounds just like the story of Jesus, but I know it's not. I don't get it, what's that about?" She was right, it was not a story about Jesus, yet it talked about a virgin mother and how her son would grow up to become a great leader. I said, "This is the thing about the Bible, it has repeating themes throughout the literature. These themes might be; exiles and restoration, death and resurrection, and even a mother and child become the most important characters in a society. See, the Jews were often praying for somebody to deliver them from evil, whether it was God, a prophet, or some leader. This is really what they wanted, they were asking for it. So, why would we think that this prophet, or leader, or dreamer, or their dreams wouldn't come true? Why would their young and fearless leader not change the course of time? It's hard to imagine that it wouldn't.

Humans, we are interesting creatures. We can certainly get in our own way especially when we try to understand the deeper meaning of something? My New Testament professor had a good example of that, he told me that when he was at Harvard Divinity School getting his doctorate he spent so much time deconstructing the Bible that if you keep doing that he might end up with nothing. That's when he decided he wasn't ready to lose his faith, he was going to reconstruct. Instead of deconstruct, he was going to take the literature and reconstruct, reframe, and find new meaning in the Bible.

That's exactly what Christine Robinson was doing today with her translations of the Psalms in our readings. She's a UU minister in Albuquerque and she has reclaimed the wisdom literature. The Psalms are so great because there are 150 of them. They start with number one with all the laments and sadness. Literately as though they're singing, "Nobody knows the trouble I've seen." As they continue to sing, they move towards 150, it's all praise. What happened? How did they do that? When you listen to them sing number one to 150 you can hear things about exile and hardship, but then they are not lamenting anymore, they're praising. What created that change? I think it was radical acceptance. Radical acceptance is what took them over to see their brokenness as a good thing and brought them to this wholeness place where they could be grateful, radical acceptance.

Yesterday, when there was this workshop here, people from other churches came to UU Class Conversations, I had an arriving moment myself. I arrived as a minister, not by myself, but by the

helping hands and loving hearts of all of you. Frank was helping set up earlier in the week and he registered people, same with Lisa. I asked Lisa to make a copy of the materials and she made all the copies. Sally wanted to give a donation for someone to go, so Basanta who danced for you in January got to go. And when Basanta was there at the end of the workshop she said, "I feel like I am a grown up now. You all treated me like I am a grown up." Thank you.

This arriving business happens again and again to all of us continually. It's not because we are alone, it's because we are in community being supported. That is something so worthy to praise. So like the Psalms, let us take this opportunity to move ourselves from brokenness over to praise. No more laments, it's time for radical acceptance. Because when you are loved like that, like I was yesterday- loved into ministry, you can do anything.

Today is a day to celebrate, whether or not we know what the future holds for us. We have arrived at another Palm Sunday, to start holy week which will end in an Easter crescendo. We have lamented enough throughout this long, cold winter, we've suffered, revisited the brokenness again and again this month. Let us be like the Psalms that begin with laments and ever so steadily move towards praise.

It's time to rejoice in our gathering today. Let us celebrate that we have overcome many obstacles to get here. May we be grateful for this welcoming, caring, faith community. Let us praise each new face that wants to join us on this journey. May our work never come to an end and let us always be willing to respond to the call to do good in this community. Let us boldly say, "Praise be to the Spirit of Life and Love, we are glad we have arrived."

May it be so. Amen.