



UNIVERSALIST UNITARIAN CHURCH OF HAVERHILL

“Welcome Happy Morning,”
a sermon given by the Rev. Frank Clarkson
on April 8, 2012

The older I get, the more I’m becoming a morning person. I like to be up early--at least once my feet are on the floor. I’m glad to be up when the world is quiet and the day is new. I had the chance once to lead an Easter sunrise service, at the church where I did my internship. Because I lived an hour away, I drove down there the night before, and slept on a couch in their version of our Ladies Parlor. I set two alarms and got up early, put on jeans and L.L. Bean boots, and over that, a black robe and stole, and walked down the road and around the corner to the field where that service happens every year.

It had been a long winter, and there was still snow along the edges of the field. It was a cold morning, with frost on the hard ground. We gathered at the top of a hill, facing east, the field dropping down before us. Once the sun came over the horizon, it shone in the people’s faces. I like that image of Easter: people standing on the cold and shadowy ground, leaning toward the light, being touched and blessed by its warm glow.

Thinking about the story of Jesus’ last days, and especially the verses at the end of Mark that describe the women coming to the tomb, I’m struck by the fact that Easter doesn’t happen without them. Listen to those last verses again:

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.

That’s the end of the story, according to this telling of it. But we know the story didn’t end there. It spread across the Mediterranean world. And here we are, telling it. For over two thousand years people have told it. Back then, it had a power that compelled people to share it with others. “Have you heard?” they must have said.

Try to put yourselves in their place, those followers of Jesus. They led hard lives, living in a time and place where the Roman empire was in charge, and their homeland was occupied by that

oppressive force. They lived in a harsh and unforgiving land, where it was hard to eke out a living. They lived in a culture that privileged a few and pushed everyone else down.

Into their lives came this man--a teacher, a healer, a prophet, a friend, who showed them a different way. The world said "Judge," and he said "Forgive." The world said "Look out for yourself," and he showed them how to share. The world said "These are the rules, and you'd better follow them," and he said "You are the light of the world, you are the salt of the earth." When he challenged the authorities, they killed him, because that's what oppressive power does when it's confronted by someone speaking the truth, the truth that sets people free.

His friends and followers must have been devastated. Not only did they lose a leader and a companion; even worse, their hope, that life could be different, better, their hope must have been gone. Did they feel even worse, that they had loved him, that they had hoped for something better? Did they say to themselves, "I should not have been so foolish to trust in this man who channeled the presence of God. I should have known that my life would never be different or better."

We don't know what happened in those days after Jesus was killed. I suspect it took longer than three days. But something happened. His friends began to sense his presence, at least sometimes, in their midst.

Have you ever experienced this with someone that you love, who has died? That they are somehow with you still? Seventeen years ago, just as our second child was about to be born, my mom's mother died, at the end of a long and good life. She was a lovely woman and a beloved grandmother to her nine grandchildren. One of the things she would always say to us to was, "Don't you want to put on a sweater?" Remembering her, one of my cousins said she didn't think our Gama really cared what we did, as long as we had a sweater on while we were doing it.

Well, she died early one morning, and I was awakened by the phone call from my mom. After I heard the news, I went out and sat by myself on our back steps. It was a spring morning, and the sun was just coming over the horizon. I sat there for a while, remembering my grandmother, thinking about her life and holding her in my prayers. At some point I saw a mourning dove land on the branch of a big tree in our yard. A few seconds later, a second dove landed just beside the first one. The thought came to me, that my grandmother was now with her husband, who had died twenty years before. Whenever I see a dove on that branch, I think of that morning, and of my grandparents. This doesn't make sense in any rational way. But I don't care. It makes me happy to think of them, to think that there is a connection between us here on earth and the spirit world, and this brings me peace. I expect that some of you have had similar experiences.

Did something like this happen to those followers of Jesus? Did they begin to get glimpses of him as they went through their days? Did they sense his presence in their midst; feel again the hope, the courage, the power, the love he inspired in them?

They must have, because their hope and courage returned. This group of scared and scattered disciples began to tell each other about what they had seen and felt. They began to understand,

in a real way, that death could not contain that spirit of life that Jesus embodied. They began to embody his spirit, and they passed it on to others too.

“He has been raised,” they proclaimed. “He is not in the tomb! He is here, in our midst. He is in the wind and the sea and the sky. Maybe he is even in me, and in you.”

This is how I understand Easter--as a mystery that we are invited to inhabit and explore and live into. In the midst of our broken and busy lives, we are invited to see, to really see, that there is another reality too. That the Spirit Jesus embodied, that spirit of abundant life, is alive in the world, and available to us, if we will ask for it and welcome it. That's what it means to say, “Christ is risen.” That his spirit is still present and available to us. And we who are alive, we are the ones who have to embody this spirit, it's up to us.

Easter asks us, “How are you going to live? Where are you going to stand, and with whom? Are you going to stay imprisoned and entombed to whatever it is that is keeping you from being who you were born to be? Or are you open enough, courageous enough, foolish enough, to have hope in things not seen? Do you have the nerve to put your hope in life, in love, in the arc of the universe toward justice, in spite of all the evidence to the contrary? That's what Easter invites you to do--to say yes to life.

In the church I grew up in, one of the hymns we sang on Easter was “Welcome Happy Morning.” I've been humming it to myself this week. Claudia grew up with this hymn too, and she played it during our silent candles today. The refrain goes, “Welcome happy morning age to age shall say.”

What if you and I made this a daily practice? What if we woke and said to the new day, “Welcome happy morning. Thank you God, Spirit, nature, for this gift, this most amazing day.”

That's what the poet Mary Oliver does. She wakes early so she can be present to the gift of a day on this earth. Is this why she is able to write such moving, openhearted, transformative verse? Because she wakes early? Because she is so awake to the wonder and mystery and awesomeness of life? What if we made this our practice, made her poem our morning prayer?

Hello, sun in my face.
Hello, you who made the morning
and spread it over the fields
and into the faces of the tulips
and the nodding morning glories,
and into the windows of, even, the
miserable and the crotchety –

best preacher that ever was,
dear star, that just happens
to be where you are in the universe
to keep us from ever-darkness,
to ease us with warm touching,

to hold us in the great hands of light –
good morning, good morning, good morning.

Watch, now, how I start the day
in happiness, in kindness.¹

Every day invites us to begin this way. Open and receptive, expecting grace and blessing. Aware of the challenges and the pain, but just as aware that is not the whole story. Aware that every day, you and I get to choose.

My colleague Rebecca Parker says our gifts, whatever they are, can be used to bless or curse the world. We have that power, and that choice. She admonishes us, “Choose to bless the world.” This choice, she says,

can take you into solitude
To search for the sources of power and grace;
Native wisdom, healing, and liberation.

More, the choice will draw you into community,
The endeavor shared,
The heritage passed on,
The companionship of struggle,
The importance of keeping faith,
The life of ritual and praise,
The comfort of human friendship,
The company of earth
The chorus of life welcoming you.²

You always have a choice. Choose to bless the world. Choose to accept Easter’s invitation: choose hope over resignation, choose love over indifference, choose faith over fear.

Choose to say “Welcome happy morning!” Today, and tomorrow. Choose to live into the promise of this season.

Happy Easter, and Amen.

¹ Mary Oliver, “Why I Wake Early.”

² Rebecca Parker, “Choose to Bless the World.”