



## UNIVERSALIST UNITARIAN CHURCH OF HAVERHILL

---

“Let Easter Come,”  
a sermon given by the Rev. Frank Clarkson  
on Easter Sunday, March 31, 2013

You know these words from the book of Ecclesiastes:

To everything there is a season,  
and a time to every purpose under heaven:  
A time to be born, and a time to die;  
a time to break down, and a time to build up;  
A time to weep, and a time to laugh;  
a time to mourn, and a time to dance (3:1, 2a, 3a, 4).

I want and need seasons--winter and spring, and the seasons of the church year--the comfort and the challenge of moving through times of light and shadow, birth and death. I try to walk this way with Jesus, whose life challenges and inspires me to live in ways more loving and more courageous; Jesus, who our preacher last Sunday described as “a scene-making sometimes pushy Jew who spoke his truth regardless of who he angered.”<sup>1</sup>

For some of us, religious faith seems impossible because we see it as a suspension of the intellect or the laws of nature. But Jesus didn't see it that way. He didn't think doubt was the opposite of faith. He said to his disciples, “Why are you afraid? Do you still have no faith?” For Jesus, the opposite of faith was not doubt, but fear.

This week I read an essay called “Holy Week for Doubters,” about the courage it can take to just show up at church, especially on this day. Its author, Rachel Held Evans, says, “there is nothing nominal or lukewarm or indifferent about standing in this hurricane of questions every day and staring each one down until you've mustered all the bravery and fortitude and trust it takes to whisper just one of them out loud (like) “What if we made this up because we're afraid of death?”<sup>2</sup>

Some of us believe that when you die, it's over. Others of us hold on to hope that there's something more. I believe there is a spirit world; that we are connected to those we have loved and lost, that in the end, love is stronger than death. But I have doubts too. “What if it's all wishful thinking?” I wonder.

---

<sup>1</sup> Rev. Leaf Seligman, sermon titled “The Truth of Complicity.”

<sup>2</sup> Rachel Held Evans, “Holy Week for Doubters,” available online at <http://rachelheldevans.com/blog/holy-week-for-doubters>

I make peace with my doubts this way: “Does my faith help me lead a happier and more helpful life? Does trying to follow Jesus cause me to be a better person?” The answer, for me, is yes. But questions and doubts are my companions too.

In the words we just heard from the Gospel of John, Mary Magdalene goes to the tomb and finds it empty. Did you hear the tenderness in that passage? Have you ever stood at the grave of someone you loved, and wept? “They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him” (John 20:13).

The gospels were not meant to be accurate history--they are more poetry than nonfiction, telling a story, an invitation into mystery. Mary comes to the tomb, and sees who she thinks is the gardener. And he calls her by name, “Mary.” And she turns and says to him, “Teacher.” Can you feel the love and heartbreak in that moment?

Feminist theologians like Rita Nakashima Brock help us imagine the resurrection in ways that make room for both mystery and reason. Brock argues that death should never be seen as necessary for salvation, that Jesus was killed because of his “commitment to solidarity with those crushed by oppressive powers and to the expectation that justice must prevail.”<sup>3</sup>

For her, the resurrection only makes sense within the context of community. The followers of Jesus refused to let death defeat them. They “remembered his presence and affirmed divine power among them... by not letting go of their relationships to each other and not letting Jesus’ death be the end of their community.”

In spite of two thousand years of church patriarchy, there are still people at the margins telling this story, not as a witness to top-down power, but as an invitation to relationship, to a more caring and committed and liberated life. The people who loved Jesus, who felt more alive and more courageous when he was in their midst, they caught glimpses of him after he was killed: by the sea, in a garden, walking down a dusty road. The stories of the empty tomb are trying to express what they sensed: that he was not lost to them, that that even death could not contain his spirit.

The church I attended as a child had a cross made of a wood frame covered with chicken wire. On Easter morning we brought bunches of flowers, and put them in the holes of that wire, and that cross, an instrument of torture and oppression, became a sign of beauty and life and possibility.

Here in New England, Easter can come when there is still snow on the ground. Look at the buds on our altar table--pussy willows just breaking out. Like snowdrops and crocuses--glimmers of fragile new life appearing in the cold and gray of early spring.

There’s a lovely essay in the most recent UU World magazine. If you haven’t seen it, there are copies on the table at coffee hour. Rev. Gary Kowalski writes that our seasons only happen because our earth is tilted on its axis at 23 1/2 degrees. “Fortunately,” Gary says, “we inhabit a world that’s cockeyed, off center, more than slightly askew.” And so, he says, we have this world

---

<sup>3</sup> Rita Nakashima Brock, “Journeys by Heart.”

in which “grief and celebration are interwoven . . . like kisses and *adieux*, dusk and dawn, winter and spring.”<sup>4</sup>

Several weeks ago, Delight Reese, who many of you know as a poet, a gardener, and a quietly soulful woman, sent me this essay. In it, Gary tells the story of the little frog scientists call *Hyla crucifer*, the spring peeper. *Crucifer* is a Latin word that means, “the one who bears the cross.” Did you know that spring peepers have this cross on their backs? As a kid, I was the crucifer some Sundays, carrying the cross, and sometimes at a funeral, ahead of the body as it was brought into the church.

Well, those cross-bearing frogs spend the winter hibernating in the mud. Their little bodies freeze--the glucose in their cells allows them to freeze half-solid. Around this time of year, they start to thaw out. For a million years, Gary Kowalski writes, “the peepers have chorused the arrival of spring.”

Delight, one of our poets in residence here, knew about these cross-bearing frogs and how they come back to life every spring, and some years ago she wrote a poem about this. It’s called, “Death by Semantics,” and she’ll share it in three parts.

Did you hear the peepers last night?  
that joyous vernal question-  
always, but always, delivered with a happy smile  
by folks with contagiously buoyant steps.

Spring peepers - throats like tiny song-inflated balloons.  
Little brown wisps of frogs clinging with oversized toes  
to branches and reeds above the water.  
With incessant good cheer they welcome spring  
with their chorus of ascending notes.

Time to throw open the windows and strain to hear  
music sweet to winter-chilled ears - the evensong  
of jingling bells rung by hosts of peepers  
secure in their “protected” wetland abodes.

What is it in our human nature that causes us to harm and destroy? Surrounded by so many simple blessings, we fight wars and and kill our prophets. We pave over wetlands. And still, the earth and its creatures seem bent, in spite of everything, on resurrection. But we are called, aren’t we, to face the consequences of our actions, the ways we are complicit in death and destruction?

### **no structures allowed**

What of those earthgorging invasions of caterpillars?

---

<sup>4</sup> Gary Kowalski, “Metamorphoses,” in *UU World*, Spring 2013, available online at <http://www.uuworld.org/spirit/articles/284011.shtml>

Dreaded treads popping songful throats  
Wetlands smothering  
under yard by spreading black yard  
of heavy,  
thick  
tar.

Too often destruction of our earth has been justified on religious grounds, that human “dominion” over the earth means we can do whatever we want with it. But more and more, theologians are taking a different view, equating the damage we do to the earth with the violence that was done to Jesus, and seeing all creation as a body we are called to love and cherish and protect.

**a parking lot is not  
a structure**

Did the cross-bearing heralds of spring  
    appreciate the semantic distinction?  
Did the cattails, bearers of velvet batons,  
    appreciate their extinction?  
Did the red-winged blackbirds, flashing their chevrons  
    from march grass nests,  
    appreciate this deadly deduction?

How many ‘improvements’ can the wetlands bear?  
How many springs until we no longer ask,  
“Did you hear the peepers last night?”<sup>5</sup>

There is plenty to mourn, so much that has been lost. And yet, the peepers will come back this year. One night soon, you’ll find yourself near a wetland, and you will hear their song. The song of life’s longing for itself. This resurrection hymn. If you want to savor Delight’s poem, take today’s bulletin home with you--it’s printed on the back cover.

Rebecca Parker says we have to choose whether to bless or curse the world. And she insists that we do live in a universe that is tilted toward the good:

There is an embrace of kindness that encompasses all life, even yours.  
And while there is injustice, anesthetization, or evil  
There moves  
A holy disturbance,  
A benevolent rage,  
A revolutionary love,  
Protesting, urging, insisting  
That which is sacred will not be defiled.<sup>6</sup>

---

<sup>5</sup> “Death by Semantics,” by Delight Reese.

<sup>6</sup> Rebecca Parker, “Choose to Bless the World.”

We know that what is good and tender can be broken, trampled, abused; that so much has been lost; that there is plenty to mourn. But that is not the whole story, or how it ends. There is a power at work in the world, insisting “that which is sacred will not be defiled.”

It’s my contention that the resurrection we celebrate on Easter took longer than three days. That the spirit which was so alive in Jesus of Nazareth didn’t bounce back as fast as a literal reading of the Gospels would have us believe. But something did happen among those women who followed him all the way to his death, and those fishermen who kept trying to have faith rather than fear. They sensed his presence in their midst, and it set them free. It inspired them to build a new kind of community. Under the heel of the oppressive Roman empire, it emboldened them to make a way out of no way.

Don’t you see that this spirit is alive among us too? Easter happens, just as surely as the peepers thaw in the spring and take up their resurrection hymn. The question is, will you take up the song? Or will you choose to remain entombed in grief, fear and despair?

Don’t get me wrong--the way to Easter is through those dark places and times. You don’t get resurrection without death, just as you don’t get dawn without the night. We are called, May Sarton says,

to be the always hopeful  
gardeners of the spirit  
who know that without darkness  
nothing comes to birth  
as without light  
nothing flowers.<sup>7</sup>

My fellow gardeners of the spirit, let us be ever hopeful, ever expectant, ever faithful--which, remember, is not about being sure, but rather, not being afraid. Easter happens, and calls us to respond, to sing our own resurrection hymns, with our voices and in our lives.

Amen.

---

<sup>7</sup> May Sarton, from “The Invocation to Kali.”