



## UNIVERSALIST UNITARIAN CHURCH OF HAVERHILL

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“What Resurrection Means, and Why it Matters,”  
a sermon given by the Rev. Frank Clarkson  
on Easter Sunday, April 5, 2015

Some years ago, my sister was coming to visit from California. It was late March or early April, and before she arrived, I told her, “Your timing is good—it’s starting to look like spring around here!” But when she got here, she didn’t think so. She said, “What are you talking about? There are no leaves on the trees, nothing is blooming, everything looks dead!”

I saw what she meant. After a long winter, our world was still mostly gray and brown. My sister had come from northern California, where spring begins in February, and there’s ample sunshine, and fruit trees blooming and everything is green from the winter rains. But it was spring, here in New England. There were crocuses pushing up through decaying leaves. There was the promise of green grass in the sunniest spots of the yard. And yes, there was still some snow in the shady parts. It might not have seemed like spring for someone from California or Florida, but it was definitely spring for a New Englander. You just had to look for it.

The gospel of Mark, the earliest gospel, ends with the empty tomb and a crazy promise. “You are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here... he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you.” The women don’t know what to think, so they fled from the tomb, terrified and amazed, “and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid” (Mark 16:6-8).

The story should have ended right there, right? A rebel leader, a prophet, is killed by the oppressive authorities. His followers are afraid, and scatter. This is not a new story.

But the story didn’t end there. His friends, who went back to their lives out in the country, remembered what it was like when he had been in their midst, when people were fed and healed and made whole. Some of them even sensed his presence, and they started to tell stories about this. Walking along a dusty road or out fishing, they felt that he was with them.

Like many young adults, at some point I couldn’t believe in the miracle stories that some Christians put so much stock in—the virgin birth, Jesus walking on water, the resurrection. I thought faith meant believing in the unbelievable, and I couldn’t do that any longer. I didn’t think the physical laws of this earth could be suspended. And I still don’t. But now that I’m older, I understand faith in a different way. I believe in the resurrection. I have seen it with my own eyes, and felt it in my own heart.

The empty tomb leaves it up to us to finish the story. Nature abhors a vacuum, we're told, and we humans are loathe to leave something empty—we want to fill it. So eventually church leaders wrote what they called “a more satisfactory ending” to the gospel of Mark, an ending in which the risen Christ does appear. And the other gospels follow suit, with more stories of Jesus in the flesh. But if you read them, you start to see that they are more like dreams remembered than any kind of accurate history. “There was this guy in our midst, and then we saw it was him, but before we knew it, he was gone!”

We are not meant to read these stories literally. This includes the story of the empty tomb. We're invited to inhabit that emptiness, to hold open a space where something could happen.

The Bible scholar Marcus Borg, who died in January, says these stories contain signals that they are meant to be read, not as historical data, but as mystery. Not as a problem to be solved but as a new way of being that we are invited to try on. Borg says it helps to understand the difference between resurrection and resuscitation. “‘Resuscitation,’” he says, “involves something happening to a corpse; a person dead or believed to dead comes back to life, resumes the condition of physical existence, and will die again someday.”<sup>1</sup> You see dramatic examples of resuscitation on those hospital shows on TV.

Resurrection is different. “‘Resurrection’ does not mean resumption of previous existence but entry into a different kind of existence,” Borg says. “The core meaning of Easter is that Jesus continued to be experienced after his death, but in a radically new way; as a spiritual and divine reality... The truth of Easter is grounded in such experiences of the risen Christ as a living presence, not in physically observable events restricted to a particular day or a few weeks in the first century.”<sup>2</sup>

Resurrection is finding new life where you thought there was nothing but death. And this is something I think you know about. You know that you don't get resurrection without first experiencing some kind of death, and then the hard work that accompanies death—grief, anger, denial, acceptance. Resurrection is a new reality; it's not bringing what has died back to life; that's called resuscitation.

Resurrection is not a word people use that much. But you know something about renewal, about second chances, about new life springing up where it looked like all was lost. Don't you?

Ten years ago, this church went through some hard times. People lost trust in one another, hurtful things were said, and it wasn't certain that the center would hold. Things got broken open, and some old ways of being had to die. But out of that pain and struggle something new has come to life. The image of the phoenix, rising from the ashes, comes to mind. I'd say the recent history of this congregation is an Easter story.

I never cease to be moved and amazed by the resilience of the human spirit. Against the odds, some people are able to persevere, to bounce back from adversity; are able to adapt and grow

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<sup>1</sup> Marcus J. Borg, *The God We Never Knew: Beyond Dogmatic Religion to a More Authentic Contemporary Faith* (New York: HarperCollins, 1997), p. 93.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

and thrive in the midst of the brokenness, even able to bust out of the prison cells of addiction and abuse. No matter our situation, each of us knows something about about loss and despair and brokenness, don't we? And don't we also know something about resurrection, whether we use that word or not?

Remember the 2004 Red Sox? In the American League playoffs against the devil, I mean the Yankees, they had their backs against the wall. Down three games to none and trailing in the bottom of the ninth, they managed to pull out a win in that game, and then win the next three. In the locker room, were they jumping up and down shouting "Woo hoo, resurrection!"? Probably not. But isn't that a resurrection story?

Some of you could tell a story like this: "I was stuck in a dead-end job, with an abusive boss, for years. I felt trapped with no way out. Then one day, something changed in me. I thought, 'I'm not going to conspire any longer in my own imprisonment.' So I walked out. I got out of that hell hole, I said, 'I'm not going to play dead any longer. Because I have this one life.'" You probably didn't say, "I walked out because I believe in resurrection," but isn't that a resurrection story?

This week, on Wednesday, I got to hear not one, but two resurrection stories. These stories did not come from a book or from the radio or TV, they were told to me, face to face, by people like you. Each of these stories began, as these stories do, with loss; with hope that had died, a relationship ended, and all the pain and despair these kinds of endings contain. Each involved some time of walking in the darkness, not knowing if a new day would ever dawn. But in each of these stories, there is now a new reality emerging. There is the promise of something new coming to life. What has died, what has been lost, is not being brought back; the past is not being erased. And even in this time of hope, the future is not certain, nothing is guaranteed. This is no Hallmark card with only sunshine and buttercups. But each is a resurrection story. Of that I am sure. And it is a powerful thing, a blessing beyond words, to witness.

Resurrection is not resuscitation. That's what happens on TV, and sometimes in real life. Resurrection is the emergence of a new reality, often against all the odds. It's hope appearing where once there had been only despair. "It is the opening of eyes long closed," as the poet David Whyte<sup>3</sup> puts it. It's the friends of Jesus, brokenhearted and afraid, finding to their amazement, that though he had died, his spirit was not lost to them. It's the oppressive situation, the abusive relationship, the tomb or prison that you walk out of. That's what resurrection is.

Why it matters, is because we live in a world where there is so much suffering, where there is so much that's broken, that we sometimes think that's just the way things are. It's so easy to fall into cynicism and despair. Sometimes we forget that is not the whole story. We forget that resurrection happens!

If you doubt this, look at our world coming back to life. Crocuses pushing up through dead leaves, birds singing and building nests, where two months ago there was only snow and ice. Look at your own life. Don't you know at least one resurrection story? Don't you have a story of an empty tomb, of new life emerging? And so I ask you, this Easter season, will you look for a

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<sup>3</sup> David Whyte, "The Opening of Eyes," available online at [http://www.davidwhyte.com/english\\_opening.html](http://www.davidwhyte.com/english_opening.html).

way share your resurrection story? You don't have to use that word, but they may be someone who needs such a story right now, who needs a reason to hope, to have courage, to expect life in a world that knows too much of death.

We tell the story of the empty tomb, of the resurrection of Jesus the Christ, not because we think he is the only one, but because it's a good story that we need to hear. The story of the empty tomb is a story left unfinished, because we are meant to add our own chapters. We are meant to live, made to tell our own resurrection stories. To lift our voices and sing, "Made like him, like him we rise, ours the cross, the grave, the skies!"

Thanks be to God, the source of life and love, who has been with us from the beginning, and companions us through the light and the shadow, who blesses us and keeps us, now and forever.

Amen.