

“Resurrection: ‘You are Witnesses of These Things’”

Easter Sunday

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Recently, I was leaving the Cedar Lane building when a couple from the neighborhood walked by. It was a beautiful time for a walk. Unlike today, the air was warm—free of the familiar winter chill—the flowers were blooming, white, yellow and purple blossoms emerging from the grass. The cherry tree was in full bloom, the petals moving in the breeze like tiny, pink prayer flags. It was the kind of day that calls all the senses to attention, moves us to ignore whatever we are doing and just marvel at the beauty of the earth.

As our paths came together, the couple and I struck up a conversation. I introduced myself as a minister of the church and the husband pointed through the trees towards their house. They were on their daily walk through the neighborhood.

Our casual conversation moved to more serious concerns, the tragic wars in Iraq and beyond, the looming environmental crisis, corruption in our political leadership. The wife of the couple looked me in the eye and said, “You’re a person of faith. Do you think we will ever find our way to peace?”

I wasn’t sure what to say. Considering all the heartache that raged beyond this beautiful corner of the world, how could I say with confidence that peace was possible?

I responded as best I could. “In our tradition, we put great faith in human will. Within my own lifetime, I have seen human beings develop miraculous new ways to help one another. I have also seen human beings find new ways to destroy one another. We have been given great power. The question is always, ‘How will we use it?’”

From small talk to world peace, the three of us talked about our personal lives—where we grew up and how we came to share this place where Kensington and Bethesda meet.

Our neighbors then continued on their walk. But before they reached the top of the drive, the wife turned around, gestured toward the vibrant spring growth around us and said, “Isn’t it wonderful? No matter how lousy we are, we get this gift, year after year!”

When I left church that day, I did not expect to receive an Easter sermon from neighbors walking by. Yet, this woman’s affirmation of the spring season spoke to the spiritual truth of Easter.

This morning, we come together to celebrate a sacred gift—new life. Our Universalist heritage calls us to name the blessings of life and love as gifts for all of us, “no matter how lousy we are.” On Easter morning, we come together to celebrate resurrection.

The Christian holiday we celebrate draws from accounts of Jesus’ physical appearance after his death. The Gospel of Luke proclaims that:

Jesus himself stood among [his disciples] and said to them, “Peace be with you.” They were startled and terrified, and thought that they were seeing a ghost. He said to them, “Why are you frightened, and why do doubts arise in your hearts? Look at my hands and my feet; see that it is I myself. Touch me and see. ...It is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations... You are witnesses of these things”...

Then he led them out as far as Bethany, and, lifting up his hands, he blessed them. While he was blessing them, he withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven And they worshiped him, and returned to Jerusalem with great joy.¹

As a minister who is often called to lead memorial services and spend time with the grieving, as a human being who has lost too many loved ones to death, I can imagine the joy of Jesus’ disciples. The sadness of death comes from its finality. We always have memories of the living, but when a living thing dies, it is gone. If I had the experience of Jesus’ disciples—seeing a loved one after they died—I, too, would say that I witnessed a miracle. I, too, would feel great joy.

Although physical resurrection after death fails the test of reason and science, belief in new life is grounded in spiritual truth. Throughout the course of life, we all know cold seasons of sadness and loss and seasons of new light. When we are in the heart of a sad time, it can feel like an endless winter, sometimes bleak, sometimes stormy. Belief that peace is really possible in these times can only be a matter of faith.

¹ Luke 24:36-52, abridged, New Revised Standard Version

I was reminded of this truth when I received an e-mail from a Cedar Laner who we will call “April.” From time to time, April shares the concerns of her life with me—aging parents, a loved one’s chronic illness, the challenges of being a daughter, a sibling, a mother, of maintaining hope in this difficult world of ours. With her permission, I share a reflection she wrote after making progress with a number of problems, after a long period of struggle:

I bow my head and give fervent thanks for these gifts. I look back and see that they are not exactly random, but...blossoms that emerged from my own roots and seeds I planted...

I just can’t seem to remember or hold on to a sense of faith or hope in my own gardening when the weather turns or the bugs appear...The best I can do is to bounce back a bit later, to make sure I notice the green buds or whole leaves or rising temperatures. And keep reminding myself over and over that each moment, each day, each life contains all of these, never only struggle and despair...

Taking a deep breath and trying to think of some things I can do...to nourish my roots and encourage my own growth. That is a challenge, amidst other demands that seems so urgent and take so much energy...I will keep...waiting for spring.²

In this way, like Jesus’ disciples, April is a witness to resurrection.

I, too, am a witness to this spiritual miracle. Once, when I was in the depths of a hard season, I went on a seaside retreat with a number of other religious leaders. The retreat began with each of us sharing something about the life we brought into the room. I

² By “April,” Email received March 7, 2007

had nothing to offer but a litany of loss and sorrow. I wanted to share something positive to balance my sad story but I just couldn't think of anything to say.

Later that day, we took a walk along the beach. It was good to be outside, to feel the rough sand on my feet, to push against the ocean wind. Walking with my friends through the pull of the tides, I felt alive. I felt like "myself" again.

One of my companions came up beside me and took my hand. "Here," he said, "this is to remind you that it will come back." When I opened my hand, I found that he had given me a rock, eroded by the water into the shape of a heart.

That rock rests on a shelf in my bedroom. It serves as a constant reminder of that hard season and the truth that my friend named that day—love of life does return over time. Every stone can become softer. Every stone has the potential to roll away. When I received the gift of this heart-shaped rock, believing in love was a matter of faith. Now, I too, proclaim the miracle of resurrection.

Another Cedar Laner gave me a Washington Post article featuring the Rev. Ken MacLean, right before he retired from serving this congregation. In this interview, our Minister Emeritus describes ministry as "a reminding role. This is a congregation of active, bright people and you can't teach them much but you can remind them of what we have in common and...some sense of what we have together."³

So, this Easter morning, I remind you that when it comes to

³ The Rev. Kenneth Torquil MacLean, quoted in "Md. Church's 'Reminder' Leaves Trail of Memories: Unitarian Pastor Embodied Spirit of His Congregation" by Robert H. Williams, date unknown.

resurrection, you, too, "are witnesses of these things." Whenever one of us travels through a time of sorrow to a different season, we witness resurrection. Whenever one of us uses human energy and ingenuity for peace in a world of suffering, we witness resurrection. Whenever cold turns to sunshine and the flowers bloom, year after year, "no matter how lousy we are," we witness resurrection.

This morning, we come together to celebrate a sacred gift—new life. Our faith proclaims the blessings of life and love as gifts for all of us. I, too, "bow my head and give fervent thanks for these gifts."