

Through Death to Resurrection

Rev. Peggy Meeker, Easter Sunday, 4/1/18

1st Reading: “God Says Yes to Me,” by Kaylin Haught

I asked God if it was okay to be melodramatic
and she said yes
I asked her if it was okay to be short
and she said it sure is
I asked her if I could wear nail polish
or not wear nail polish
and she said honey
she calls me that sometimes
she said you can do just exactly
what you want to
Thanks God I said
And is it even okay if I don't paragraph
my letters
Sweetcakes God said
who knows where she picked that up
what I'm telling you is
Yes Yes Yes

2nd Reading: Mark 16:1-8 [New Revised Standard Version]

When the Sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices, so that they might go and anoint [Jesus]. And very early on the first day of the week, when the sun had risen, they went to the tomb. They had been saying to one another, “Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?” 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.

Through Death to Resurrection

Yesterday a hymn from my Presbyterian childhood came to mind: “The day of resurrection! Earth, tell it out abroad.” A hymn of real joy. I was pretty sure the same tune is in our hymnal, but with different words and theology. It’s “O Day of Light and Gladness” [#270, *Singing the Living Tradition*]. Listen to the 2nd verse: “Earth feels the season’s joyance; from mountain range to sea the tides of life are flowing, fresh, manifold, and free. In valley and on upland, by forest pathways dim, all nature lifts in chorus the resurrection hymn.” I’m so thankful to live in a part of the world where we have spring. There’s something about resurrection that’s hard for us to accept, but spring comes every year to help us remember that always, always, new life comes.

I say hard because we just don’t see it very easily. Like the women who went to the tomb in our reading from Mark, we’re focused on other things. “Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?” Right? Who will roll away the stone? And then when we do see the possibility of new life we’re often not ready for it. The women at the tomb were grieving. They weren’t ready for new life. *And* they were terrified. Never mind that an angel told them not to be alarmed. Would that do it for you? If you encountered something totally unexpected and unbelievable and maybe holy? We often run away from things like that.

Yet there is resurrection in our lives. There is resurrection here, in this congregation, as we move through this transition year toward new life. And there is resurrection in each of our lives as we move through our various challenges toward the life to come. That’s another phrase from my childhood. What it used to mean to me was life after death in heaven, but now it means the life that still lies ahead, next week or next month or next year, beyond the current worry or stone or grief. Like Jesus going ahead of his followers into Galilee, where Jesus symbolizes ongoingness itself and Galilee is the life to come. And we all have that life to come, because we are alive and we can’t help but keep growing. There is within each of us, within you, something that is your truest, deepest self; something that is both who you are and what you seek; an inner abundance; a shining. And we spend our lives moving toward that, discovering it anew sometimes, finding what we already knew, finding our own song.

And so from our Judeo-Christian heritage comes the story of Passover and deliverance and new life, which some of us celebrated here Friday night, and the story of Easter. Two of today’s most respected Jesus scholars, Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan, wrote a book together called *The Last Week: A Day-by-Day Account of Jesus’s Final Week in*

Jerusalem. For Easter Sunday, then, here is their story of Jesus and his passion for what he called the kingdom of God, and his death and resurrection—a story about the amazing creativity of life.

We begin with Palm Sunday, last week. I'm following the account in Mark, the first of the gospels to be written, perhaps just a generation after Jesus lived and died. On that day, Jesus and his disciples were on their way to Jerusalem, the sacred center of the Jewish world, where thousands of pilgrims were converging to celebrate Passover. There were two very different processions entering Jerusalem that day. From the west, the Roman governor Pontius Pilate was at the head of a long column of cavalry, horses, and foot soldiers. Pilate was the representative of the Emperor Tiberius, ruler of Rome and Son of God, since he descended from Caesar Augustus, son of the god Apollo. Tiberius was called "lord" and "savior," language that later became associated with Jesus.

From the east came Jesus, a peasant from the village of Nazareth, and his followers, mostly from the peasant class. Jesus was a Jew who knew his scriptures, and he planned a counter-procession, sort of a bit of street theater. Many Jews were watching for a Messiah who would deliver the people from Rome, banish war and oppression, and rule as a king of peace. So making use of symbolism from the prophet Zechariah, who said that a humble king would come to Jerusalem riding on a colt, Jesus sent two of his disciples ahead to fetch a colt, and he rode into Jerusalem surrounded by a happy crowd who called out, "Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!"

A peasant's life was hard. Agricultural workers, who made up 80-90% of the population, were exploited by an elite 5% who owned and controlled most of the land, the production of crops, the distribution systems, and so on. Taxes imposed by Rome were high, and on top of that, the Jewish Temple in Jerusalem had become part of the whole political and economic system and imposed even more taxes [Hanson and Oakman, *Palestine in the Time of Jesus*, 1998]. It was a true domination system—the many ruled by the few, with most of the society's wealth going to the rich and the powerful, and all of it justified as the way things are supposed to be, God's will, since Caesar was the Son of God.

And so the stage was set for a confrontation between the kingdom of Caesar and Jesus's vision of the kingdom of God, a realm of justice in which everyone has what they need and no-one has to remain in debt to anyone. And further, something that Jesus repeated over and over in the Gospel of Mark, "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all" [9:35]. A total reversal of the domination system.

That night, Jesus visited the temple, and perhaps began formulating his plans for the next day, because on Monday he returned to the temple and, as we read in Mark, “began to drive out those who were selling and those who were buying in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the money changers and the seats of those who sold doves” [Mark 11]. This is sometimes referred to as the “cleansing” of the Temple, but its purpose went farther than cleansing. Jesus was symbolically destroying the temple because the high priest and whole Jewish priestly class worked closely with the Romans, and the temple had become a “den of robbers.”

All that week, Jesus continued moving toward what his life was calling him to be and to do. On Tuesday, he engaged in a battle of words with the Jewish religious authorities. The authorities had to keep the peace, and Jesus was causing more and more of a disturbance, and yet the crowds loved him, so the authorities tried to make him look foolish. On this occasion they asked him “Teacher, . . . is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor or not?” [Mark 12]. Taxation was hugely unpopular, both as a heavy economic burden and as a constant reminder that the Jewish homeland was occupied by foreign forces. If Jesus said no, don’t pay taxes, he would be denying Roman authority. If he said yes he would be betraying his people. The answer he gave was masterful. “Bring me a denarius,” he said, “and let me see it.” When they produced one, he asked “Whose head is this?” on the coin, and they answered that it was the emperor’s. So Jesus said, “Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s, and to God the things that are God’s.” The amazing thing about this answer is that a denarius, a Roman coin equal to about a day’s wage, was a coin that many Jews would not carry, because Jewish law prohibited graven images. The fact that these religious authorities carried these coins, showing the emperor and identifying him as the Son of God, immediately exposed them as collaborators.

The confrontation was coming to a head. On Thursday night, Jesus celebrated a final meal, the Passover meal, with his disciples, after which he was arrested, abandoned by his disciples, interrogated and condemned to death by the high priest, tried before Pilate, and executed in the manner reserved for those who subverted Roman law and order—crucifixion. A rebel against Rome, eliminated. Except that, somehow, he was not eliminated.

Today, Easter Sunday, we remember the day on which his followers found his tomb to be empty. In Mark we are told that the stone had been rolled back and a young man dressed in a white robe was sitting there. In Matthew we are told that the young man is an angel, and in Luke, that there were two angels.

Mark ends with the women fleeing in terror and amazement. There are no stories of the risen Jesus appearing to anyone. The other gospel writers, Matthew, Luke, and John, do have

such stories, but they're all different. And so we know that these are not factual stories, yet they *are* telling truth. They tell us that the followers of Jesus experienced him going before them into Galilee. They knew his presence was with them and they experienced the power of his ideas, and they continued to work out what it all meant. They understood that their God had somehow said "yes" to Jesus and "no" to the powers who killed him, and that Jesus, and all that he stood for, was not to be found in the land of the dead, but in the land of the living.

We find the idea of resurrection everywhere. In Buddhism we find an emphasis on emptiness, and the point of emptying is to return to daily life from a new place. The Sufis, from the heart of Islam, say that we must die before we die. And here at the heart of Christianity is this idea of transformation coming out of death. It's not just that spring *follows* winter, though thankfully it does. As Hal Borland once wrote, "No winter lasts forever, no Spring skips its turn" [quoted in 4/17 *Our Outlook*]. But more crucially, *through* winter comes spring. *Through* death comes resurrection. And lest you think that Unitarian Universalism doesn't speak to resurrection, consider our first source: "Direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder, affirmed in all cultures, which moves us to *a renewal of the spirit* and an openness to the forces that create and uphold life." Resurrection is not just a story about Jesus that we can choose whether or not to believe, it is something that life does, and something that we do. All through our lives we experience small deaths, and we rise up from them, discovering more and more of our truest deepest self, hearing more and more our own song. Because life is more creative than death. And your own life is more creative than you have yet seen.

What might be new life for you? What wholeness, what beauty? What sings for you? Life says "yes, Sweetcakes, yes."