

First Unitarian Universalist Society of Albany, NY

“Easter – Love Never Dies”

Rev. Samuel A. Trumbore March 23, 2008

Empty Tomb Playlet

I expect you know the story about Jesus' birth, that he was born in Bethlehem on Christmas Day. When he grew up, he traveled across the country teaching about God and everywhere he went people gathered to hear him speak. The story of how Jesus died and what happened afterward is the Easter Story.

As Jesus continued his teachings and more and more people followed him, the Roman leaders and chief priests grew more fearful of him. They began to look for a way to have him arrested.

One night, while Jesus was praying with his followers, soldiers captured him and brought him before the Roman governor, Pilate. The governor condemned Jesus to death.

Jesus was taken to a hill outside Jerusalem called Golgotha (which means The Place of the Skull). There Jesus and two robbers were put on crosses and left to die. Above his head, the Roman soldiers put a sign that said, “This is Jesus, King of the Jews.”

Some cruel people who passed by on the road said mean things like, “You who were going to destroy the temple and build it in three days, save yourself! Come down from the cross, if you are the Son of God.” As Jesus suffered and before he died, he called out, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

As evening approached, there came a rich man from Arimathea, named Joseph, who had himself become a follower of Jesus. He asked for Jesus' body to be given to him. Joseph took the body, wrapped it in a clean linen cloth, and placed it in his own new tomb that he had cut out of the rock. He rolled a big, heavy stone in front of the entrance to the tomb and went away. Because Jesus had predicted he would rise again after three days, a Roman soldier was posted to keep an eye on the tomb.

On the third day, just before daybreak, the ground shook and the stone covering the tomb moved. This frightened the Roman soldier who ran away.

At dawn, a group of women - Mary Magdalene and Mary mother of James and Salome bought spices to the tomb to anoint Jesus' body. As they were on their way, they asked each other, "Who will roll the stone away from the entrance of the tomb?"

But when they looked up, they saw that the big stone, had been rolled away. They saw a young man dressed in a white robe come out of the tomb, and they were afraid. "Don't be alarmed," he said. "You are looking for Jesus the Nazarene, who was

crucified. He is not here. See the place where they laid him.” They looked and saw that he was not there.

Trembling and bewildered, the women went out and fled from the tomb. The women ran back to the other followers to tell them what they had seen. But the others did not believe the women, because their words seemed to them like nonsense. Peter, however, got up and ran to the tomb. Bending over, he saw the strips of linen lying by themselves, and he went away, wondering to himself what had happened

Homily

Leah and I decided to create this little tableau for you this morning about the empty tomb to help young and old connect emotionally to this 2000-year-old story. What must it have been like to grieve the loss of the person you thought was going to be the Messiah? Many of his followers thought Jesus was the man who would use his energy and power to liberate the Jews from Roman oppression. Many of his followers saw Jesus as a prophet who would fix any and all religious problems and unify the Jewish people.

On the day of Jesus’ death, that dream died too. Hope went out of their hearts.

So seeing an empty tomb was a shock. What happened to him? The man in white said he had come back to life ... could that be true? Could the dead be restored to life? Modern scientists say this is impossible. But 2000 years ago, people believed anything was possible if God willed it. Mary and Peter must have been convinced their Rabbi, their leader, their teacher, had returned to life. They told that story again and again, a story still being told by every Christian on every Easter.

We will never know for absolutely, positively sure what happened with the empty tomb. No one had a camcorder to record the events. A doctor wasn’t there to pronounce Jesus dead or alive. No one could take a DNA sample to analyze. There are just too many questions and too much time has passed to get reliable answers.

We Unitarian Universalists are very uncomfortable with this story because we believe in science and reason. The story violates the laws of physics, chemistry and biology that form the basis of our understanding of the world. But this scientific approach can make us into our own kind of Biblical literalists if we reject the story as false. In our focus on facts, we can lose the meaning of the story.

We are not alone in questioning the resurrection story, so do our Transylvanian Unitarian brothers and sisters. Transylvanian Unitarian minister Erika Orban spoke at our Unitarian Universalist General Assembly last year in Portland. Here is what she said about Easter:

In our tradition we can celebrate Easter without the resurrection because we believe in the eternal life of the spirit; that eternal life, which we are living already. And the spirit and some teachings do not need resurrection since they are eternal.

One important meaning we can find in the empty tomb is the discovery that whatever happened to Jesus' body, the spirit of his words and deeds didn't disappear. The spirit of those words and deeds can be even more powerful after he is gone than when he was alive, if they find a home in our words and deeds.

Mary and Peter rediscovered the message of Jesus was still with them even if his body was no longer leading them. And that message could continue to lead and teach them no matter what happened to his body.

The first Unitarians in Transylvania knew this over 400 years ago. They understood that the message of Jesus was far more important than whether he came back from the dead or not.

When Unitarianism took shape here, founder William Ellery Channing believed the study of the message of Jesus was what Christianity should be all about. Channing wanted us to follow Jesus not worship him.

Then Ralph Waldo Emerson came along thinking the message of Jesus was bigger than Jesus. Emerson saw a Spirit at work in Jesus that could be found in other great religions too. Emerson saw that Spirit not just in church but in his backyard too. Everywhere Emerson looked he found it. He wrote in his famous essay Nature:

... that behind nature, throughout nature, spirit is present; one and not compound, it does not act upon us from without, that is, in space and time, but spiritually, or through ourselves: therefore, that spirit, that is, the Supreme Being, does not build up nature around us, but puts it forth through us, as the life of the tree puts forth new branches and leaves through the pores of the old. As a plant upon the earth, so [we] rest upon the bosom of God; [we are] nourished by unfailing fountains, and draw, at [our] need, inexhaustible power. Who can set bounds to the possibilities of [humanity]?

The spirit of Jesus cannot die because his spirit was never born. Jesus, Buddha, Moses, Krishna, and Mohammed were and are the Spirit of Life that is in all of us; the Spirit every one of us shares in common even though our senses tell us we are separate; the Spirit we will never find in the empty tomb, body or no body.

Today, we remember that Spirit of Life can be found again in our love. Every time we rediscover our love, that Spirit of Life returns to our awareness again.

Today, let Easter be a reminder that love will always be with us for the Spirit of Life and Love never dies.

Hymn #352 "Find a Stillness"

Easter Prayer

Spirit of spring and new life

We know you're out there someplace
Just as surely as we know the sun rises and sets.

We crave crocuses, daffodils and tulips,
Forsythia, apple and cherry blossoms,
And the explosion of tree leaf green
Coming to our gardens very soon!

But right now, all we see
are a few hardy shoots pushing up through the dirt.
The thawing soil is still March muddy
Freezing at night and liquefying during the day.

Yet each sunrise is a little earlier and each sunset a little later,
And the warmth of the sun gets a little stronger each day.
And before you know it,
winter will be a distant memory.

Can we remain in the place between winter and spring
And discover it for the first time?

Brown lawns with dead grass stubble
Dry, broken leaves tumbling around in a cold wind.
Lonely mounds of dirty, crystalline snow lurking in the shadows.

Patches of ice clinging to the shore of a pond,
soft edged and translucent.
The grayness of the landscape with
The naked silhouettes of the trees
shuddering against a bleak sky.

This early Easter is so much like the mystery of the empty tomb.
The dismal days of capture, torture,
trial and execution have passed.
On the third day now Jesus' body is gone.
What was thought to be the end now is a new beginning.

But this year, not quite yet ...
We stand in wonder before the empty tomb
In a "between time" when new possibilities are yet to be discovered.

Just as winter cannot cut off life's yearning to flourish

So death cannot bring an end
 to the Spirit of Life Jesus fully embodied.
 We smell the renewal of life in the air, but we have yet to taste it.

May we take courage from the Easter story
 That no matter the challenge or difficulty we face,
 The spirit of hope can spring forth again and again.
 Even though expressions of life will and must pass away
 The Spirit of Life and Love never dies.

We're going to get another chance. It's coming soon
 When it does, let's make the most of it!

Let us hold a moment of silence together...amen

Offertory - Peter Brown

I am honored to be asked to speak to you today, and a bit anxious about the task. In the spirit of transparency in advertising, I should tell you my opportunity here is related to the coming canvas and I am very happy to support that effort. Since I'm not the primary speaker I need to keep this short and, mercifully, I can only tell you about a few of the things which make FUUSA important to me

On this traditional day of hope and rebirth it is all the more honor, and challenge, to try to tell you my reasons. I can also say the thought of a new day and new opportunities makes me excited for us all.

We've been through some traumatic changes in the last weeks, or perhaps I should say the last few years. From the attacks on the World Trade Center and elsewhere, to the meltdown in the economy, the completely unimaginable resignation of our Governor, the dramatic restructuring of the State Budget and the run up in gas prices, we have had one shock after another. Our sensitivities have been so assaulted that having our current Governor turn a press conference into an amateur version of Oprah was rather anti-climactic.

There was a time when people said things such as "It is God's will that the mighty be brought low," when confronted with unanticipated and chaotic change, and then put their hope into some sort of unanticipated intervention, divine or otherwise. That excuse never worked for me and I think it is increasingly falling into disuse, as our knowledge and experience increases and our philosophic and religious frameworks mature.

There is much about life that is uncertain, and learning to deal with that uncertainty is one of the great intellectual and emotional challenges I face, and I expect you do too. So one of the great things about FUUSA is that it is a place which calls me to find new meaning, and share the continuing quest for meaning in life with others. Most other places expect participants to fit each new event into some long

established framework. Yet, I think the only real hope is to continue to evolve, and find new meaning and new means of coping with life's uncertainty each day. I find help in doing that in FUUSA.

There have been a number of studies which point to an increasing sense of separation and even isolation between us in our nation, even as we are encouraged to become more competitive and conformist, and I find those studies to be disturbing. I can see many things contributing to our disconnection. The result is a significant increase in anxiety and a loss of some crucial connections with other human beings for me, and for many others I expect. We are, above all else social creatures, and losing those social connections decreases our wellness and our sense of purpose. FUUSA is a connection for me which reduces that sense of disconnection. It provides a place which is happy to accept me despite my strangeness and my unconventional views. I can be as I am, and I will still be a valued part of this community. That's one of the crucial benefits FUUSA offers to others and which we receive for ourselves.

My last great thing about FUUSA which I want to offer you is: it offers a beacon of inclusion to all who need a place of intellectual freedom. The world around us is increasingly wary of "unorthodox" beliefs. In a time when officials at many levels feel compelled to frighten us all into unified support of difficult choices, I need more than ever to have a place which will allow me to question openly, and with you, the best alternatives to those underlying problems. FUUSA provides that unique opportunity.

I hope you will think of these and your own reasons for valuing FUUSA and our quests together as you consider our canvass this year. Now it's time for our offering for today.

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