

Rolling Away the Stone

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During Sunday School, the teacher asks if anyone can explain what Easter is. A little boy waves his hand, so wanting to be called on. The teacher says, "Ok, Johnny, what is Easter?" Johnny begins, "Easter is that time of year when the whole family gathers around a table with a turkey to give thanks for the blessings of a good harvest." "Ah, Johnny, not quite. That is Thanksgiving, but a good description. Does anyone know what Easter is?" A Little girl raises her hand. "Easter is that time of the year when the family all gathers around a tree to sing carols and put decorations on the tree and they all give presents." "Well, maybe a bit closer, but not quite. Would anyone else like to venture a guess?" Another little girl of course knew the answer. "It is the time after Jesus died when the stone at his grave was rolled back, and Jesus started to go up to heaven and looked back down and saw his shadow and went back in for six more weeks."¹

I may have already admitted to you, Easter is the holiday I struggle with most theologically. It is so important to the Christian community that I find I cannot cover it up in the cloak of spring, new life and bunnies to better appease our Unitarian Universalist sensibilities. At the same time, the basic concept of the crucifixion of Jesus providing saving grace for humanity is not one that I can accept for myself. So the challenge is finding meaning in the story that works in a Unitarian Universalist perspective.

My friend, colleague and poet, Rev. Lynn Unger wrote this:

“What I want to know is simply this:
Who rolled away the stone?
Did Jesus, reviving from the touch of Judas’ kiss
turn miracle to muscle on his own?
Or did some savior of the Savior move the rock
to let life enter from outside—
Resurrection as a sort of picking of the lock
That separates the bridegroom from his waiting bride?
Perhaps the stone itself got bored
with waiting for a happy ending to the story,
And rolled itself away, to set the body it had stored
Upon the royal road to new life and eternal glory.

You might say it does not matter,
But when you are waiting in the dark
A person wants to know if Life is company or caller,
The friend you trust to seek you, or the waiting spark.”²

Is “Life company or caller”? “The friend you trust to seek you or the waiting spark”? I think that is a question we can all relate to these days. Does it matter how that stone gets rolled away?

The story of the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus is the foundational event in all of Christianity. The stories of Jesus’ miraculous birth, the stories he told, the healing he did, all are eclipsed by the tale of his death and resurrection. It is the one story that is relatively consistent in all four of the

1. <http://celestiallands.org/phpBB2/viewtopic.php?t=68>

2 Unger, Lynn, **Blessing the Bread**, (Boston: Skinner House Press, 1996) p.33

gospel tales. Contained in it are all of the elements of high drama. A rabble rouser or an innocent man—depending on how you look at it—is tried by a rigged court, shamed in front of all, and put to death in a tortuous way. His body is taken down, covered, entombed, and by an act of God or nature, the stone in front of his tomb is moved to reveal the absence of his body.

It makes for great drama, but as a tale of discipleship and loyalty, and faith, in my opinion, it fails miserably.

The gospels are full of stories of Jesus with his followers eagerly trailing him from one place to the next. In the story of the miraculous loaves and fishes feeding the masses, five thousand people surrounded their teacher and were fed, probably by one another, with food they had with them. He drew crowds wherever he went. His return to Jerusalem was a triumph wherein an immense throng gathered and spread their garments and palm branches on the road before him and hailed him as their prophet. But when it came time for Jesus to face his death, the hoards and even his most trusted disciples were nowhere in sight. It was a very few women who remained, Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of James were named among them. Once Jesus died, all dispersed. The mount was deserted with three dead bodies hanging from wooden crosses left to gather flies. Joseph of Arimathea, not one of the inner circle came forward and asked to take down the body, enshroud it and put it in a tomb for a proper burial. He did so, all by himself.

Joseph in essence took the shame of the people that had been displayed for all to see and covered it over. Those who left their families to follow Jesus, those who ate and drank with him, those who shared the last supper with him and pledged remembrance in their drinking the wine and eating the unleavened bread—all were gone. God did not rescue Jesus from his death, and neither did his followers. They quietly slipped away until Jesus miraculously reappeared among them days later. They were content—all but the two Marys—to let their own personal shame be enclosed in the tomb with their leader. A cold dark place was a good place to store it.

As we know, the stories in the Bible and in other sacred scripture keep coming back to be retold from one generation to another. The stories exist not as history, but as metaphor, as mirror. Were they not able to strike some chord, make some connection with our own psyches, we would have no need of them. The Easter story goes beyond Christianity to something more primal. As Unitarian Universalists, we can try and skirt the issue and use the happy mention of spring and new flower buds emerging from the death of winter year after year and feel somewhat content, but it is a shallow contentment. The real work of Easter and resurrection needs to have with it an understanding of pain and death, not in the literal sense, but a tangible palpable brush with all the things from which we hide or fear.

Our lives are a series of little deaths, of pain and loss, of hurting others and being hurt ourselves. We wear our masks to hide that pain, shame and loss. We each have our own tomb somewhere into which we have locked up and covered over those things we have done or those things about ourselves of which we are not proud, those things over which we feel shame. We all have them. Our tombs encase those things that we would not want anyone to know about us. Our secret fears, our insecurities, our greed and lack of generosity toward the institutions and causes we profess to support, our racism, our homophobia, our anti-semitism, the relationships we have destroyed with friends and family, the love we have withheld from those who need it. Those tombs lie deep within our souls in places we fear to venture.

The Easter story would not be with us today if we were left on the outside of the tomb alone and

with no hope. Pure tragedy with no hint of hope or redemption is not something we can hold on to, it is devoid of Spirit, it is devoid of any motivating force to live, to continue, to work through the struggle. I was once told by one of the participants at a Passover Seder who had never been to one that she had been told by a friend what a somber experience a Seder was, at least in her experience. Much to the visitor's surprise, there was joy mixed in with the sadness, just as there were sweet wine and apples mixed in with the bitter herbs and hope mixed in with despair. The Seder would not be complete without both, but certainly the hope is what it lifts up for all to see.

The Easter story would not be the most powerful one in the Christian world without the hope of life beyond death. Those who profess belief in Jesus Christ as their lord and savior do so because the story of the resurrection has been interpreted to mean that the death of Jesus has redeemed them from sin. Not all Christians will affirm this literally, but the creed states in no uncertain terms that Jesus died for the sins of humanity. The Unitarians and the Universalists were among the first to take exception to that statement of belief. If anything, Jesus died to make us aware of our sins. Many of us prefer to look at Jesus as a hero with flaws rather than a God. As Rev. David Blanchard says:

"I'll take a hero that lives and dies in the world I know over a God that's capable of transcending the limits of time and space that hold the rest of us earthbound. I'll take the mythology of the hero whose life allows him or her to transcend death, over the theology of the God that never could die, that would never share the passage we take."³

The message he preached in town after town, on the road, in the temples was about the here and now and how to live on this earth. It was one of acceptance and love. He is reported to have said:

"Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
Blessed are those who mourn for they shall be comforted.
Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.
Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness for they shall be satisfied.
Blessed are the merciful for they shall obtain mercy.
Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.
Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called the children of God." (Matt. 5:3-9; RSV)

Jesus kept company with the outcasts, with the prostitutes, the tax collectors, the sick and lame. He set an example for his followers. He led them to face their own sins, their own prejudices, their own inadequacies. He did not curry favor with the wealthy, in fact he rejected their overtures toward salvation by showing them a different kind of wealth, the wealth of the spirit. And for all of this, he was killed. Is that a surprise? It shouldn't be. In all ages prophets and truth tellers have been killed. Jesus, Joan of Arc, Michael Servetus, Lincoln, Gandhi, King, Oscar Romero, all sought justice and their words and ideas were too hard for the people to hear. Better to kill them and hide them in the tomb where they can be worshiped from a safe distance.

All of these figures were mirrors into our souls making us look at the truths from which we would rather hide. Jesus did that as well and the Romans in authority were so threatened by that mirror they needed to act. They needed to remove the threat, the mirror. They killed him—the one act that his followers did not believe could really happen. Were he truly the son of God, this could not have happened. God would not have allowed it. So why were they absent from Golgotha? Where was the faith they professed for their prophet and teacher? What was their fear?

3. Blanchard, David, **A Temporary State of Grace**, (Boston: Skinner House, 1997) p. 53

Perhaps they feared for their own lives. But they all knew that it was Jesus that the authorities were after. Were they afraid that he really would die? Were they afraid that he would defy death? Were they afraid that they had not done their part to protect their leader? The tomb covered over their fears, but it also held their hope. The question was, would hope triumph over fear?

We all know that there would be no Christianity if fear had won out. Religion exists for the purpose of making sense of the world, marking our life passages in ritual, and binding us together into communities of memory and hope. A massive stone lay between the people and their hope for the future. Two or three women were present, certainly without the strength to move the stone by themselves. Matthew told us that a great earthquake took place and moved the stone, something that the people in Italy can easily identify with right now. Mark and Luke gave us no explanation other than the stone had been moved. The series of miracles continued after Jesus' death, they did not die with him. The Marys entered the tomb. They found no body, no shroud, no trace of the shame that was hidden from sight. Instead they found, depending on the story teller, one or two messengers or angels sent from God in sparkling white robes. They were amazed, they were frightened, they were perplexed. They went and told the disciples, who of course did not believe them, after all, they were women. The men went to the tomb to see for themselves. It was empty.

They who were without hope had their eyes opened. Their prophet had died and they had abandoned him. Their shame, their disappointment, their pain was palpable. They had lost their purpose, their inspiration, their leader. With the stone rolled away, a glimmer of hope appeared, but it was not until Jesus appeared to them again that their faith was restored, and along with their faith, their mission. The resurrection of the body of the prophet brought with it the resurrection of the faith and hope of his followers. His appearance brought them out of the tombs of their own making.

The Easter story exists for the sake of bringing us all out of our tombs. It is most certainly not an easy thing to do. It takes a lot of strength to move that stone, extraordinary strength. It takes enormous strength of character to take our pains, our disappointments, our fears, our shames out of the darkness and bring them into the light. Secrets thrive better in the dark, but that's just the point. As they thrive they eat away at our souls. But we are also shown that though the stone may be too heavy for us to roll ourselves, help appears from somewhere. The stone can, and does move. We are not destined to be locked away. No matter how bad things get, we can find help to open the cave and emerge from it's depths.

Easter happens to give us the opportunity to see the sun rise on our darkest selves, our worst fears, and know that we will survive. Easter happens so that we can find faith somewhere—whether it be in the Christ, in God, in the creative power of the universe, in our congregation, or even in ourselves — that saves us, that comforts us, that reassures us that our lives are a gift to the universe, that we can be a blessing to one another. Easter reminds us that whatever challenges we face, they can be overcome.

Yes, the flowers are lovely, the eggs remind us of new birth, the bunnies assure us that life begets life, but Easter is more than those symbols. Easter exists to remind us that no matter how low, how afraid, how wretched we feel about ourselves and the world around us, we can roll away the stones, the barriers that block us from fully living our lives. Rather than see our shadow and retreat and hide, we need to see the sun and let it awaken us. The tomb that may nurture us for a while like a womb, eventually must be opened so that we can come out into the light and truly live.