

4/24/11 Sermon

"The Three Stories of Easter Ending in Hope"

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The Easter experience can be understood in a number of ways. Rev. Rob Voyle writes, "Whenever a bad or traumatic thing happens, three stories can be told about the experience" ...

The Victim's Story – This is the Bad Friday (Golgotha) violent story of Jesus suffering on the cross, which tells all the ugliness of the bad thing that has happened.

The Survivor's Story – This is the Holy Saturday and Emmaus road story. We survived the bad thing but life is very different and we have no idea how we will go on.

The Thriver Story – This is the Easter story of resurrection. We discover that despite the bad thing that has happened, life in all its fullness goes on. Things are not just different ... they are transformed. Bad Friday becomes Good Friday, the day when the seeds of new life and possibilities were planted and now are yielding the fruit of new life. This is the authentic Easter message: that there is no place we can get that is beyond the reach of God's grace and the possibility of new life.

Sadly, when bad things happen, many people and churches get stuck in endless telling and retelling of the victim story. Some of us may discover they have survived, but over the years, the years of struggling to endure takes its toll. Working on having less death will still get you death. Thriving doesn't just happen ... it needs to be worked at, first by discovering how God is still here and secondly by joining with God in what God is doing. As the Easter story tells us, God doesn't have a survival plan. God has a resurrection plan.

Which story do you resonate with? The victim's story of the violent Crucifixion, or the survivor story, or are you co-creating with God and God's People of the thriving story centered on the resurrection and the promise of paradise to come?

Yes, The Easter story begins in despair and hopelessness, but it ends in a revival of the spirit, a renewal of hope through the bodily resurrection of Jesus.

For Unitarian Universalists, literal bodily resurrection is difficult – if not impossible – to accept. Reason dictates that it is not logical for someone to die and be physically reborn.

Remember, however, Christianity exists as a matter of faith, and is the origin of our faith also. We believe that faith and reason can coexist when we seek to find the kernel of human truth embodied in these ancient stories. Even as Unitarian Universalists reject the particulars of the resurrection story, we do celebrate the victory of life over death, a resurrection of the spirit, life ever renewing. We mark this special time as a seasonal rebirth when the first crocus raises its head to the sun. We recognize that when our spirit is crushed by life and its losses, hope centered in the very fiber of our being can come again in the morning and peace to us at night.

In an earth centered way, we honor this Christian myth and celebrate the cycle of the seasons with flowers, nature's symbol of hope, renewal and life everlasting. This follows an even more ancient understanding. The spring equinox welcomes in a greener time, life resplendent and renewed.

The fallow ground cracks open yielding up its buds, new born harbingers of hope and life. Thus we celebrate nature's beauty – flowers springing forth in all their glory and color: red, yellow, magenta, fuchsia, and all the hues of the rainbow. As we view the dappled landscape, joy comes rushing back into our hearts. How could we not find elation, a renewal of hope amidst such splendor?

Like most Unitarian Universalists, I don't believe the story of the resurrection literally. As my colleague Mark Bulletin put it, "I preach against the literal, the foolish notion that the ancient story are to be understood in an authoritatively shallow and surface way, or else tossed into the garbage pail. But at the same time, I preach on behalf of a literate understanding of our ancient traditions, one respectful of our life experiences, our reason, our passion, and a desire to live a good and honest life."

We may find synchronicity in this and herein lays our hope when we confront our own crucifixion moment.

No matter how we camouflage this day, it is still a profoundly human story about the life and death of Jesus. Today we celebrate the ordinary transformed into the holy. A carpenter and teacher, a man of humble origins who through the power of his spiritual presence, his simple message of peace and hope, compassion and mercy, turned the world inside out and upside down. The awe inspiring part of this story is that an ordinary person born to poverty single handedly created a new paradigm of what it means to

be human and a person of faith within community.

Because of his unique spiritual nature, his death was no less devastating to his disciples as of the death of children to a parent, or of a partner to a spouse would be. For all times, Jesus' crucifixion profoundly changed the disciples' world and sadness and inconsolable grief enveloped them. The world seemed without color, lifeless, devoid of joy. No different than it might seem to us today when we experience our own "dark night of the soul." Like the disciples before us, that was the moment when we all would most want the communion of love, of life and hope that Jesus represented. That is what the disciples thought they had forever lost. Can you imagine the depth of their grief; your own grief?

After the resurrection, the disciples professed to see Jesus everywhere; as a humble gardener, a slave in the fields tending flowers, a stranger along the road to Emmaus. It was in these encounters that they came to believe that they had experienced the spirit of Jesus, reborn to life as the risen Christ. Hope was reborn. And they needed that hope, as we need it today, but perhaps of a different sort. We need to believe that death can somehow yield to life; that grief can surrender to gladness. It is why we gather at Easter time, to share the company of others who struggle with the same pain of human existence. Now, in this very moment, we are assured that we are not alone. We know that the message we seek on Easter, that life can emerge from death, that resurrection is possible, will be heard here in this place, each year when the flowers bloom. That is why we bring flowers today as a living symbol of our hope for the possibility to live and to love again.

Hope can and will push through the darkness of the loam and bloom in the nurturing, healing sunlight. Peace and joy will once again shine on us as the golden orb of the sun casts its beams over the crest of the mountains of sorrow.

So it is in the struggle to find the meaning of loss and death, of life itself that we gather to mourn and be comforted, to celebrate and share the dawning of a new day. We seek and have the opportunity to give and receive the love which we all need, regardless of how we understand this day. It matters not whether we see today as a celebration of bodily resurrection, as a mythic symbol of renewal, a rebirth of hope, or a turn of the pagan calendar and of the seasons.

The good news for this day is the triumph of joy over sorrow. Today we open ourselves one again to a renewal of our heart and spirit, to commit to the living in the face of loss and death, to laughing in spite of the tears, to

care in the face of a world seemingly indifferent to our existence, and loving in response to the challenges of what it means to be human.

As a church community, we too, have an Easter choice. We can choose to see our own communal experience as a victim only remembering our losses or we can focus on the fact that UUMAN has survived 20 years and in that time we have been radically transformed but yet unsure of our future or that we can go on; or we can thrive in the face of adversity. This is our resurrection moment. We are in the process of rebirth which will take time, patience and faith and, thus, like Jesus, we too will be transformed.

Remember this Easter: Jesus came that we might have thrive and have abundant life and hope, not less death.

Thus it is and shall be. Amen!