

APRIL'S THEME: LIGHTNESS OF BEING
EASTER FOR MORTALS
Unitarian Fellowship of Peterborough
April 5, 2015
The Rev. Julie Stoneberg

OPENING WORDS *excerpted from We Who Believe* ~ Alicia Roxanne Forde

Who will roll away the stone for us?
Who will help...roll away the stones of despair, injustice, apathy?
And once those stones are gone...we who believe -
Who come to be free,
Who come to find comfort,
Who come to share wisdom,
Who come to find compassionate community with its moments of struggle, must tell.
Tell.
Tell that our task is to set free forces of love and justice that may scare as much as they
might delight.
Tell that we believe in resurrection.
Come, let us celebrate Easter together.

READING *An Easter Meditation* ~ Samuel A Trumbore

Eternal spirit, we witness
bringing green growth throwing out tiny tendrils seeking support;
sprouting thin twigs reaching for the bright golden sun;
guiding new tubers seeking water in dark, sandy soil,
Be in and amongst us this Easter morning.

We gather this morning to celebrate the triumph of life over death.
The body can be killed but the spirit cannot be quenched.
Only yesterday had we given up all hope of the promise of the coming divine realm
and today we are renewed and inspired as we realize it is now already here.

This morning we remember that pain, suffering and death are not ends
but can be scary underground passageways to more abundant life –
If ... we have the courage to face our fear and crawl through
to be pushed and pulled by the mind narrowing forces of lust, hate, and
confusion.

This morning we renew our dedication to act from our love rather than our fear,
We renew our faith in the inherent dignity and worth of all humanity –
including ourselves – which cannot be removed from anyone
and seek the nerve to face the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune
which may come our way.

In our moments of defeat and surrender,
may we turn away from the paths of revenge, denial, and cynicism.
May we remember the eternal truth spun into the web of life:
our wounds can become sacred incarnational teaching
of the wisdom imbedded in the story of resurrection.

Let us celebrate together this morning,
the one who never gives up even in the darkest night of winter,
our blue green planet earth, resurrected anew each spring.

MESSAGE *Easter for Morals: We Rise Again*

The title for today's service...Easter for Mortals...did not begin with me. It's the title of a meditation in *A Temporary State of Grace*, published nearly twenty years ago by Skinner House Books. I imagine that its author, David Blanchard, wouldn't mind, although I didn't ask him. I came across it while looking for a particular reading I wanted to use a few weeks ago (remember, 'Why did the UU Cross the Road?') and this particular title leapt out at me because I could already feel the looming pressure of giving another 'Unitarian Easter' sermon... Ah, I thought...perhaps there's a gem here.

So, that's where today's message began, (if anything can be said to have a beginning.)

On Friday when I sat down to write, Easter sermon looming, I got to feeling guilty about having borrowed the title. I picked up Blanchard's book again, and re-read this meditation, but what he was saying there, though valuable, did not resonate with what I wanted to say today. Good title. Dead end. (As if any end is ever completely dead.) I looked again. See, there was SOMETHING in it I could use today, and I proceeded to paraphrase a few of his words for Sheena to read a bit earlier. But that was it. (As if anything is ever it.)

I stared at the computer screen. Time was running out. I stared at the little meditation manual laying closed on my desk. And then I got to wondering why this collection is titled *A Temporary State of Grace*, and that seemed like a good clue to follow. Surely this must also be the title of one of the individual meditations, so I searched the table of contents...and, it's not. Oh dear, another dead end. (As if 'another' could ever mean the end.) But what I did notice was that one of his meditations was titled 'Everything I needed to know...' Aha, thought I. He has also borrowed a title or two in his life. I'm off the hook. For now. (As if one is ever really off the hook.)

But hold on. Isn't it a lovely turn of a phrase...a temporary state of grace? Temporary. Like being mortal. Grace. Like getting endless chances to try again. Surely I can do something with that, and although Blanchard hadn't used it for a meditation title, certainly he would have used it somewhere in the book, so I started to browse, starting at the beginning, the first page, with the first words..."Beginnings and endings always seem to capture our imagination and attention." Yes, thought I. Yes. Beginnings and endings. (As if anything really has a beginning or an ending.)

Inane little story. The story of the beginnings of this sermon. And yet, its series of fits and

starts is indicative of the way in which our human lives cycle through disappointments and hopes, death and new life. In every moment of every day, we are experiencing endings...and beginnings.

A 'sweet nothing' was once whispered into my ear, one which was part of what led me to fall in love with Unitarian Universalism. It was these words of Rev. Forrest Church..."religion is our human response to the dual reality of being alive and having to die." Beginnings and endings. Life and death. This is a religion where I could feel at home.

We pretty much know the Easter story, right? Be it fact or fiction, or some combination thereof, the story goes that there was a young and sage activist named Jesus living in what is now known as Palestine at a time of persecution and oppression (as if there have been times in that region free of such violence.) He spoke words of love and justice. He did things, and said things, that led people to hope and to see possibilities. He walked and talked with everyday folk, insisting on righteousness. He shifted paradigms which set transformation in motion. He upset the status quo, and made the powers-that-be angry; so angry that he was arrested and convicted of political blasphemy, and hanged...nailed on a cross...until he died.

The people who loved him took his body off the cross, and lovingly wrapped him in a shroud, and buried him in a cave. His life was over. And they sealed that reality by rolling a stone in front of the cave's entrance. End of story, right? (As if any story ever really has an end.)

But then, see, a few days later his friend Mary Magdalene came to lay some flowers by the tomb, and found the stone rolled away and the tomb empty. The body of Jesus was gone. Frightened and upset, she ran and spread the word. Jesus is no longer in the grave.

Who knows what happened, (as if we really need to know the facts.) That's not what this story is about.

No body in the grave means no proof of death, right? As the story goes, a few days go by, and some people say they have seen Jesus alive...walking, talking. Then his disciples claim he visited them and showed them the wounds in his hands. Who knows what really happened, (as if we need to know. As if this story is about the historical facts.)

Okay, now here we are with a very important and beloved leader who was killed but is still alive. That can't be the end of the story (as if there couldn't be an ending.) What happens next is that Jesus hangs around for a while, imparting more invaluable wisdom and inspiration, and then ascends to heaven... but we can leave that part of the story for another day..

Is this about how you remember the story? (as if a story is ever remembered in only one way.)

No matter. What is so very beautiful about a story such as this is that it is full of layered meanings and nuances that can be explored and re-visited over and over again...like every year, for instance. The story lives on, and on, which should be our first clue that it contains a message that we need.

There's a line I love in a Mary Oliver poem (What Can I Say) that goes: "inside the river there is an unfinishable story and you are somewhere in it, and it will never end until all ends." I love it because it gives me a comforting perspective and a sense of being connected with all

that is. I love it because, though of course I'm not in an actual river, it contains a truth that I need.

We are somewhere in an unfinishable story. We are temporary beings immersed in the grace of ongoing-ness. At Wednesday's Board meeting, Vicki Avison lit the chalice with the words of Heraklitos of Ephesos, found in our hymnal... "The same road goes both up and down. The beginning of a circle is also its end. Not I, but the world says it: all is one. And yet everything comes in season." Beginnings and endings...spring and rebirth...death and renewal. Not I, but the world says that this is so.

The world says that it is so. You need only turn to a modern-day scripture, Facebook, to see pictures of spring springing into life being posted almost frenetically. Croci appearing through the snow (as they are outside the doors here), fiddleheads pushing up through the earth, streams rushing past the last residues of ice and snow. We have been living through a seemingly endless death in nature, and are now seeing signs of life. It is intoxicating. Exhilarating. Inspiring.

We are somewhere in an unfinishable story. Beginnings and endings that never begin and don't ever end. But here's the thing. A lot of 'stuff' happens in our story. Things don't just benignly and sweetly stream along...there is suffering, and racism, and oppression, and war, and persecution, and hatred, and bullying, and injustice, and environmental disaster, and, and, and... There's STUFF that we need to deal with. If this were not so, would Jesus have needed to say things like "Love your neighbour" and "Do unto others" and "Forgive, and you will be forgiven?" In the river of the story, there is hopelessness, and despair, and defeatism. If this were not so, would Jesus have needed to encourage people to "suffer the little children" and "take up the cross?" There is doubt, and wrong-doing, and self-hatred. If this were not so, would Jesus have said, in words that give us the will to go on, "you are the light of the world?"

The words of Jesus, the example of his life, and the message of hope and love and courage rise up in the face of all that would try to defeat that message. In mythic fashion, one man's death and unexplainable rising has been told, and retold, as the Easter story of hope and new life.

A myth is an interesting thing. Our rational impulse makes us skeptical, yet our psyches are intrigued and can't help but be drawn in. As Ben Wolfe said on an Easter long ago, "Myths are a door to an interior landscape in which we keep and explore our core beliefs, our highest dreams, our deepest hopes, our most secret fears." We re-tell myths such as the Easter story in order to be drawn again into that deep place of belief and dreams...to be reminded that miracles...miracles we can't rationally explain or understand...are happening every day, all around us. And the particular miracle of Easter is that death is not the end of the story. We are mortals, all facing the end of our lives. Yet, life goes on.

And hope goes on. Insistence on love and justice goes on. No matter how often we are beaten down, no matter how often we lose hope, no matter how deeply we grieve, something in us rises again to hope. We're like the cartoon characters we've created... characters who make us laugh and cry because they represent US...creatures who get shot through with holes, or blown up with bombs, or rolled over until we're flat as pancakes...and still we come back to continue

to fight the battle, and to insist on life.

Jesus is not the only historical figure who represents this resilience. Is this not also true of Martin Luther King Jr, and Mahatma Ghandi, and Lotta Hitschmanova, and, and They have died, but their example and their words have become scriptures for our lives, and we turn to them for wisdom and inspiration. Their stories live on in us.

We are inspired over and over again not to give up. Wars. Denial for freedoms and civil rights. But, as evidenced by events like the Arab Spring, protests of the people have risen up throughout history...death moving toward life.

Last Sunday the film “Highway of Tears” was shown to a full house in Wenjack Theatre at Trent, a showing that we co-sponsored. It is the story of Highway 61 in northern BC and of the unbelievable numbers of women who have gone missing or who have been murdered along a 724km stretch of road. The story, of course, is much larger than that; the RCMP reports that 1,017 indigenous women were murdered in Canada between 1980 and 2012. Another 164 aboriginal women went missing. One hundred and sixty four empty graves. What do we do with that?

On Thursday there was a gathering here in Peterborough, along with another 22 gatherings across the country, to honour the life of Cindy Gandrue (whose accused murderer was acquitted last month) and to call for justice. People are rising up to insist on a public inquiry into Canada’s response to these missing and murdered women. The gruesome reality of this violence lays us flat....and then we rise up in protest.

You’ve heard of the die-ins? Protesters lie down to simulate being dead, to disrupt normal activity, and to call attention to a particular injustice. Recently, die-ins have been used in Ferguson, Missouri to protest the handling of Michael Brown's fatal shooting case and in New York City to protest the killing of Eric Garner. We are knocked flat by these deaths. We can’t breathe in this environment. But you can’t hold us down, or kill our spirit, or our demands for justice. Black Lives Matter.

In her book, *Safe Passage: Words to Help the Grieving*, Molly Fumia writes:

“Resurrection. The reversal of what was thought to be absolute. The turning of midnight into dawn, hatred into love, dying into living anew.

If we look more closely into life, we will find that resurrection is more than hope, it is our experience. The return to life from death is something we understand at our innermost depths, something we feel on the surface of our tender skin. We have come back to life, not only when we start to shake off a shroud of sorrow that has bound us, but when we begin to believe... in all that is still, endlessly possible.”

Yes, our individual, very mortal, lives will come to an end, and have sometimes (too often) ended through violent means. We are temporary beings existing inside a story that flows with both death and grace. What lives on is our ability to begin again by returning to words of hope. May we be grateful for all those times we have arisen from the depths or simply taken a tiny step toward a new beginning. May we be empowered by the grace of extraordinary

second chances.

May we remember that the story is never at its end. What lives on is our ability to rise again, to get back up when we're hurt or feeling defeated. What lives on is our insistence on love over hatred. Death does not prevail. Life prevails. One thing dies, and another begins. Even in our mortality, we embrace the message of Easter...a message of endings and beginnings.

The world tells us that this is so.

The end. (As if anything is ever the end.) Amen.

RESPONSIVE READING *Rolling Away the Stone* #628

In the tomb of the soul, we carry secret yearnings, pains, frustrations, loneliness, fears, regrets, worries.

__In the tomb of the soul, we take refuge from the world and its heaviness.

In the tomb of the soul, we wrap ourselves in the security of darkness.

__Sometimes this is a comfort. Sometimes it is an escape.

Sometimes it prepares us for experience. Sometimes it insulates us from life.

__Sometimes this tomb-life gives us time to feel the pain of the world and reach out to heal others. Sometimes it numbs us and locks us up with our own concerns.

In this season where light and dark balance the day, we seek balance for ourselves.

__Grateful for the darkness that has nourished us, we push away the stone and invite the light to awaken us to the possibilities within us and among us -- possibilities for new life in ourselves and in our world.

***CLOSING WORDS** *Rising To Life* ~ David S. Blanchard (abridged)

At Easter, I find plenty of cause to celebrate....I celebrate the heroic possibilities that I have witnessed in human souls, when through resurrections of our own fashioning, we rise.

Rise to hope,

Rise to love

Rise to heal,

Rise to forgive,

Rise to courage,

Rise to foolishness,

Rise to wisdom,

Rise, even to die.

But most essentially, to rise to life.

Not to die as a hero, but to live as one.

May we rise to Life.

Go. Arise. Live. Amen.

EXTINGUISHING THE FLAME