

EASTER: NEW LIFE!
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Our message today begins with the story of a group of friends of various religious traditions who were sitting together one day discussing the true meaning of Easter. The Baptist spoke up first: "I believe we place too much emphasis on chocolate bunnies, colored rabbits and Easter eggs instead of the spiritual aspects, which is the real meaning of Easter. That's what I believe." "Me too," said the Methodist. "Me too," said the Lutheran. "Me too," said the Catholic. "Me too," said the Nazarene. -And the Unitarian Universalist was silent.

"I believe the real meaning of Easter is that Christ died on the Cross for our sins," said the Methodist. "I believe that too," said the Nazarene. "Yep, me too," said the Lutheran. "I concur completely," said the Baptist. "Count me in," said the Catholic. And the Unitarian Universalist was still silent.

"I believe the real meaning of Easter is the triumph of Jesus over the Grave," said the Lutheran. "Me too," said the Catholic. "Me three," said the Nazarene. "I agree," said the Baptist. "Here, here!" said the Methodist. And the Unitarian Universalist continued to be silent.

"I also believe that the real meaning of Easter is that all people who believe in the Resurrection of Jesus...they are cleansed of original sin, restored to God's favor, and share in His eternal Life," said the Catholic. "Yes, yes indeed," chimed in the Nazarene, the Baptist, the Methodist, and the Lutheran. All except the Unitarian Universalist, who remained silent.

"In addition," said the Nazarene, "I believe the real meaning of Easter symbolizes that the bodies of all people will be resurrected and joined with their souls to share their final fate." "Me too!" exclaimed the rest.

And the Unitarian Universalist sat thoughtfully, wordlessly in her chair.

The group then turned to their Unitarian Universalist friend, whom they all recognized as being a little different, and said, "Your silence is a mystery to us. Just what do you believe is the real meaning of Easter?"

The Unitarian Universalist said: "I believe the real meaning of Easter is the appreciation of life's renewing cycles and, that for all things there is a season. I believe the real meaning of Easter is the acknowledgment, with its accompanying sadness, of a very human Jesus who was forced to die on a cross because of his liberal religious views and beliefs. But most important of all, I believe the real meaning of Easter is the celebration of Thanksgiving for the presence of the sacred in each and every living person and thing...for the presence of the sacred in the birds that sing; for the presence of the sacred in the flowers that sway and the grasses which rustle in the gentle breezes of spring. This is what I believe is the real meaning of Easter," said the Unitarian Universalist.

“Me too,” sang the birds. “Me too!” waved the flowers. “Me too!” rustled the grasses. “Me too,” sighed the wind. And all the rest who were present fell thoughtfully silent.

The people of these other faith traditions weren’t the only ones who fell silent during a conversation about Easter. Months ago Julie was reviewing the Sunday morning worship service schedule, and when she said that I had been slated to do the Easter service, I fell silent. So silent that after a moment or two Julie said, “We can change things around if we need to.” I quickly said, “No, no, this is fine.” But what I was thinking was, “Easter is a big holiday, and people are going to come here expecting something. AND, what in the world do I have to say about Easter? Like many Unitarians, I personally don’t espouse the traditional story of Easter. In fact, a Presbyterian friend asked, “Why do you Unitarians even acknowledge Easter?” And, well, I found it to be a fair question.

The more I thought about it, though, the more relevance I found in the idea of Easter...even for us Unitarians. Not so much from a ‘died and rose from the dead on the third day and thus saved us from our sins’ perspective. But more from an appreciation of the idea of redemption. Now, to be sure I was on the right track about this whole “redemption’ thing, I consulted with Websters, and of course there was the Christianized definition of “the act of saving people from sin and evil.” The second one was ...”the act of making something better or more acceptable”...I could do something with that. The third one was, “the act of exchanging something of value for money, an award.

At first I went right past that last one about exchanging something for something, because all I could think of was redeeming your tickets in an arcade for rubber dinosaurs, tootsie rolls, stickers, and other kiddy-coveted items. But the more I sat with it, the more this definition made sense...even *theological* sense.

The concept of redemption isn’t limited to the traditional idea behind Easter where somebody has been sinful or evil, and somebody else does something to redeem them from their sinfulness. Redemption is applicable in any situation where division occurs.

And this division can happen in all kinds of scenarios....within ourselves, in our intimate relationships, in communities like ours...and the list goes on.

And regardless of the scenario, we typically think about guilt being relevant there’s division and need for redemption. Especially when we’ve been indoctrinated to think of ourselves as sinful and evil. I mean, surely if you’re evil you’re guilty of something.

We’re so accustomed to thinking about guilt – someone having done something wrong – that we tend to overlook the VAST need we have to be redeemed from shame.

I learned about this from a guest speaker in the most painful class, bar none, of my seminary studies. It happens to be the class that I finished just two weeks ago, a very Christian-centric class, called “Doctrines of Reconciliation.” What made this class painful was that the lectures and readings and discussions were about the very theological tenets that resulted in me picking my marbles up and moving them to the Unitarianism playground...about the sinful nature of man, and how separated we were from God before

Jesus died. But what *this* guy had to say pricked up my ears like no other professor had done in my three years of seminary.

He said that there's an essential difference between guilt and shame...and it's an important one. Guilt has to do with what I've done...my actions...something outside of me. And the redemptive act of forgiveness can help to heal what's been done.

Shame, on the other hand, is a different beast. Shame is about me. It's about my personhood, WHO I AM. Forgiveness has no redemptive value here. How do I apply forgiveness for being who I am?

Shame divides us from our true selves, from living authentically in the essence of our inherent worth and dignity.

I stumbled upon this very topic in a conversation just this week with our RE director Kate Huband. She was telling me about recently going to a dance seminar, where she had to get up in front of numerous others and dance. Now, as you can imagine, dancing is a very personal thing...to be in front of others, steeped in vulnerability as you put your heart and your soul and your body into your offering. And then you stand and receive critiques of your sacred offering from onlookers.

She said she received some feedback that wasn't so fun to hear, and that she had to work hard at staying out of what she called "The Pit of Shame." Doesn't that sum it up well... "the PIT of shame." Shame is indeed the pits.

And as Kate talked about how she purposefully worked to stay out of that pit, to remain in touch with her goodness and her worth, I couldn't help but think of that third definition of redemption...exchanging something of value for something of greater value. Trading something in to get something better.

Kate traded in important things....safety, comfort, dignity to some extent...to put herself on the line, to risk humiliation and become vulnerable to show her true self through dance.

And she risked receiving messages that her offering, her true self, embodied in her dance, wasn't good enough. She admitted that the slippery slopes of the Pit did pull her in a bit. But she *intentionally* willed herself away, and then experienced a renewed sense of self.

Many of us, myself included, can miss those redemptive, growth opportunities. It's easy to shy away from the potential for renewal and connection because we've all been hurt, and our hurts often divide us...from ourselves and from each other.

Clearly there was a division between the man and the leopard in the film clip we saw earlier.¹ Whether or not you believe in the ability of the woman to communicate with animals, the real message there is about redemption. It's about the division that existed between the leopard and the man, an abyss of misunderstanding and mistrust. The story turned because of their desire for something better. As in Kate's story, redemption offered its gentle but steadfast hand, requiring that something be traded in. Both man and beast

¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J6FyGIDnbgM>

had to lay aside their guardedness, and in trading it with authenticity and vulnerability, received an amazing prize of understanding and connection! They said yes to redemption, and became then deeply connected. And the new life that was born between them was wonderful. Indeed it filled me with wonder.

One of the things that was most striking about that video was Spirit's desire that no demands be put on him. At first I didn't quite understand this....what kinds of demands...what had they expected of this animal at his previous location? Then the bigger picture became clear...our need to be ourselves, to be comfortable with who we are, to be known by others as who we are.

This is easier said than done, especially when the Pit of Shame is always lurking around the corner. Here's an example in my life: in my family there's a weird thing about weight. Not that any of us stick thin, but there's a thing. So every time I'm getting ready to head back for a visit I always make it my business to shed a few pounds...to look a certain way, because to be my authentic self with whatever stage my body is in at the time, wouldn't be good enough (she says to herself). These dynamics have subtly been supported through the years. The last time I spoke on the phone with my mom a couple of weeks ago, and I barely recall her saying that her husband had lost some weight because of not feeling well. But I CLEARLY remember her asking, "So Lori, how's your weight these days?" "Fine," I lied. "Oh good!" she said. I chose not to tell her about the extra house-selling stress pounds that have crept on. I didn't tell her because I didn't want to worry her. But mostly I didn't tell her because I didn't want to disappoint her. PIT OF SHAME. I didn't choose to be vulnerable and to say, "Mom, when I get asked that, I feel inadequate almost every time." That moment of authenticity, and thus the opportunity for deeper connection, was lost.

And I use the word "CHOOSE" here thoughtfully. It was a choice not to say anything. It's a choice to be a participant in this decades-old family dynamic. Kate had a choice too, when she was being critiqued for her dancing. She chose life, she chose to be an architect of redemption.

When I was in the convent (I was a Franciscan convent for a little while about 103 years ago), my best bud's name in the novitiate was Liz. And Liz always used to wear this white sweatshirt with big block black letters....**CHOOSE LIFE**. I haven't thought much about that shirt in many a year, but it sure has come to mind lately.

Life, abundant life, new life is ours for the choosing. We are blessed beyond belief to be the recipients of the gifts of Nature this time of year that remind us of new life. Most of the time, though, new life, redemption from the things that keep us from being in connection with our true selves, is an option for us to act upon.

A very simple option, really.

The reason the picture on the front of our order of service was chosen for today was because it so beautifully captures this simplicity.

Please, take a few moments now and just look at it, and consider what message is held for you within this image.

I love this picture. I love the hands, gently, steadfastly, holding something delicate...perhaps their own sense of worth, or the dignity of another, but nonetheless offering the foundation from which the seedling comes forth. I love the richness of the dark, moist soil, providing sustenance that promises growth. I love the young tender plant, naked in its vulnerability in the strong hands of another, yet trusting as it rests in its cradle. At first glance you only see three things - hands, soil and a young plant. But there is a fourth... the enveloping caress of light that joins the three into Oneness, illuminating the purpose of the hands, soil, and seedling, all contributing to precious new life.

This Easter, may we celebrate new life. May we join with nature in re-awakening to all the wonders that await us, and allow those wonders to transform us, so that we can truly appreciate the presence of the sacred in each person and creature... in the birds that sing; in the flowers that sway, and in the grasses that rustle in the gentle breezes of spring.

So may it be. Amen!