

Rise Again!

the Rev. Edmund Robinson

Unitarian Universalist Meeting House -- April 12, 2009 – Easter Sunday

What a beautiful bright Easter morning! The forsythias are in bloom, the grass is green, the sea is heartbreaking blue, the peepers are making their nightly chorus in the bogs, and here we are in church some in our Easter dress-ups. What fun! It seems almost beside the point to ask why we are here, what the central event of orthodox Christianity means to Unitarian Universalists.

Some of the awkwardness of Unitarian Universalists and Easter is expressed in the story of three third-grade boys on the playground, a Lutheran, a Baptist and Unitarian Universalist. It was just before the Easter holiday and the Lutheran and Baptist kids were chiding the UU boy, “you’re not even Christian, what do you know about Easter?” And the UU boy answered, “sure I know about Easter. Jesus was crucified on Friday, and you-all believe he descended into Hell and then on Sunday he rose from the dead.” “Yes, that’s right,” said the Baptist and Lutheran kids, “and what else?” The UU kid thought for a moment and added, “and if he sees his shadow, he goes back underground and we get six more weeks of winter.”

My own break with orthodox Christianity came over the Apostle’s creed, and a great deal of that creed is taken up with what happens at Easter. So it is natural that those of us who reject the creed have a lot of problems with Easter. But there is more to Easter than the doctrine which orthodoxy hangs on it, and there is a lot more to any religion than the creeds it says.

The writer Judith Warner had a piece in the New York Times online edition Friday about her melded religious sensibilities, being Jewish by birth, but having gone to a Episcopal school as a child. She talks about the Seders of her childhood and the kind of blended seders she goes to these days, and how Christian elements float up to her mind:

“To this day, in good moods, my mind fills with hymns, and on a certain kind of spring day, a day that’s full of promise and hope, I see sunshine streaming in through stained glass windows, graceful specks suspended in the light over highly polished wood pews.”

She goes on to say,

“Some of us just can’t find a home for ourselves in the categories of identity that make sense for other people. Some of us are defined by little bits and pieces of experience and belief that together form a mosaic that for us, at least, is coherent and whole.”

And she quotes William Ellery Channing and says that this year, she’s going to celebrate Easter in a Unitarian Universalist church¹.

Your own personal mosaic is what is valid for you in this UU church. It doesn’t have to all make sense. You can have things from a Jewish past, a Roman Catholic past, bits of Buddhist meditation practice, love of African American spirituals, love of peepers and bunnies and robins and little colored chicks and decorating eggs and having family over for dinner, all coexisting together in the same breast. What I’m going to try to stitch together this morning is my own personal take on the meaning of Jesus’ life and death. Whatever resonates with your own feelings you are free to adopt.

To me the miracle of Jesus is not that his body was resurrected after this death but that something of his spirit and his teachings survived. Think about how unlikely that is. The Jewish people of Palestine were under the yoke of a Roman occupation and oppressed by their own Temple hierarchy. The Messianic tradition of the Hebrew Bible suggested that they would be saved by a secular liberator, someone in the mold of Judah Maccabee, who would spark a

¹<http://warner.blogs.nytimes.com/2009/04/09/this-i-believe/?em>

rebellion that would throw of the yoke of oppression and let God's people be free. The most certain thing of the whole Jesus movement was that it did not succeed in these terms. An abject, politico-military failure. In fact, the most certain thing we know about Jesus' life, from a historical point of view, is his death, for his execution is attested by two contemporary historians who were not Christians.

Many would-be rebels were executed by the Romans; normally their movements died with them. Why did this one survive the death of its founder? Some will say because it was the will of God, some will say because the disciples witnessed the miraculous bodily resurrection of Jesus and spread the word that he was the Son of God. My own thinking is that Jesus' teachings had taken hold during his short ministry of a year or three at most, and that they pointed the way to a new way of living.

But there is something more. Many of Jesus's teachings, as they have come down to us, are obscure and paradoxical. You will find that we ministers cite the same parables – the Good Samaritan and Prodigal Son, for example – over and over because they are they are the only ones we can make sense of. There are many more as to which nobody has a clue. Check it out.

No, there was something more than the teachings. Forrest Church maintains that it was the love of Jesus which survived death, and I think he's right, but that love was embodied in two things: a specific set of practices, practices which were countercultural for his day and in a preaching, a kerygma or message.

The first practice was a radical inclusivity. The Jews of Palestine lived among the Romans and Greeks and other nationalities (the word Gentiles means nations). Most Jews responded to this by living apart and particularly eating apart. Jesus ate with anyone. St. Paul got it right a generation after Jesus's death: there is neither male or female, bond or free, Greek or Jew, all are one in Christ Jesus. Our First Principle, the inherent worth and dignity of all persons, comes straight out of this inclusivity.

Jesus also practiced a radical simplicity. We have three copies of his mission instructions, the directions he gave to his followers as they went out to spread the word in the hill towns around the Sea of Galilee. They were to take no cloak, no purse, no Ipods, no lunchbox. They were to knock on any door, and if they were invited in, they were to eat whatever was put in front of them. This was a radical departure, of course, from the keeping of kosher.

If the followers were admitted to the house, they were to proclaim that the kingdom of heaven had come near, and they were to heal the sick and drive out demons. If they were not admitted to a house, they were to shake the dust off their sandals and say, nevertheless, the kingdom of God is near you.

And God's kingdom is part of the message. As Jesus says in the Gospel of Thomas, don't look for it in the sky, because then the birds get there ahead of you. Don't look for it in the sea, because then the fish are ahead of you. Rather, the kingdom is within you and without you². He goes on to say

When you know yourselves, then you will be known, and you will understand that you are children of the living Father.

A second part of the message is straight from the Shema Yisroel in Deuteronomy that we read last week, the foundational duty of all Jews to love God with all your heart and soul and mind and strength and to love your neighbor as yourself.

²Gospel of Thomas 3: Jesus said, "If your leaders say to you, 'Look, the (Father's) kingdom is in the sky,' then the birds of the sky will precede you. If they say to you, 'It is in the sea,' then the fish will precede you. Rather, the kingdom is within you and it is outside you.

When you know yourselves, then you will be known, and you will understand that you are children of the living Father. But if you do not know yourselves, then you live in poverty, and you are the poverty."

But the third part of Jesus's message takes this duty much further: you must love your enemies as well, and as hard as it may seem, this love implies forgiveness of those enemies.

This is the love that is stronger than death. As Forrest Church says, Jesus was resurrected by his followers in his love for them, that love is embodied in the teachings, the practice, and the message.

This is the kind of resurrection I can believe in wholeheartedly. It is not restricted to Jesus of Nazareth, or to those who follow any particular creed, but says that the best of what a person says and does and the love that the person gives lives on after them. To take an example close to our hearts this year, we in this church still reverberate from the love that Dave Reed gave us while he was here.

I collect resurrection stories, and one of the best of them is in the song we sang a while ago. I think its peculiarly fitting to think here about resurrecting a ship. A ship goes down, the owners get paid off by the insurance company and walk away from it, but the crew stays around and decides that they are going to raise the ship all by themselves. There is a provision in maritime law that allows that – if anyone salvages a sunken vessel, they own it unless the original owner comes and pays them for it. And this crew borrows a barge from a friend and some diving equipment and does some repairs to the boat while it's on the bottom and puts cables around and prepares to watch her rise out of the water once more.

Rise Again. The point of the song is not the ship but our lives. We have all felt like the Mary Ellen Carter, sunk to the bottom. Somehow, sometime, each of us founders on the shoals of life. It may be a divorce, a child gone astray, estrangement from our siblings. We may have lost a job, a parent, a friend; we may be in the grips of an addiction. The kerygma, the message of this song is that resurrection is possible with some effort on our part and a bit of help from our friends.

This song is actually credited with saving a life – not many songs can claim that. There is a video on You Tube in which the mariner tells his story: he was on a barge going from Newport News VA to Fall River MA and they ran into a storm and the vessel sank. This seaman was in the sea for a couple of hours before finding a swamped lifeboat. He managed to bail out enough to get it afloat, but the seas were very heavy and he was constantly getting drenched from the waves breaking over him. He was about to give up when the chorus of Stan Rogers' song came to him, and he started singing to himself out there in the frigid waters of the Atlantic, "Rise Again, Rise Again, that your name not be lost to the knowledge of men." He sang that for hours until a rescue plane spotted him.

Stan Rogers himself did not survive; he was killed in a fire on board an airplane in Cleveland in the mid 1980's. But the love embodied in his song continues to touch people's lives.

Rise Again! Forrest Church himself has come back from some life difficulties a few years ago, and then he got a recurrence of cancer and resigned himself to death, but typically decided to write a book about it. And Forrest is still around, in fact he's writing yet another book; he is continuing his ministry of love, and ensuring that that ministry will go on after his death.

Rise Again! Love is stronger than death and the words and deeds of love that you do, sometimes without knowing it, can help people more than you can imagine. All the ministers in the congregation can tell stories about this, and I bet most of the rest of you can too. Here is one. I had a friend named Dave, a Morris dancer. He was always a fixture at the annual May Day celebration which takes place at dawn on the banks of the Charles River in Cambridge. I played and danced with him on a couple of Morris dance teams and his candle always burned brightly at both ends.

Dave never took proper care of himself, and we were not surprised to learn that he had cancer. In March of 2007, I got a call from our mutual friend Lynn that Dave was in the hospital and might not make it through the night. I decided to come down and sit a death watch with her, to support both of them. I described it afterwards in a piece I wrote in the church

newsletter:

“Most of the night he was nonresponsive, heavily sedated and breathing and speaking with great difficulty. Around 4 AM, Lynn and I began singing songs across his bed from the Morris traditions, mostly English drinking songs, romantic ballads and some seasonal nature songs. As the sky was beginning to lighten, I launched into ‘Bright Morning Stars A-Rising,’ an Appalachian song of hope which is in our hymnal. At that, Dave suddenly sat bolt upright in bed, and held up his arms in the posture of a Morris dancer. Lynn said, ‘Dave are you saying you want to dance?’ He managed to say yes, so I got out my concertina and played him a Morris tune one time through. He didn’t get out of bed, he didn’t have his hankies or his bells, but for that moment, he was the finest Morris dancer I had ever seen. ... no matter what happens, I will always cherish the memory of his waking out of the long night’s battle against death, ready to dance.”

I concluded my newsletter column this way:

“For in fact, none of us has more than temporary victories. Death will come to each of us in the end. In the meantime, we can dance right in the face of death, we can dance with death. May Day is a celebration of the continuation of life, of fertility (what do you think all those May poles represent?), but life is only meaningful in the context of the eternal dance of life and death, of order and disorder. What is eternal is not an individual’s life, but the whole cycle of resurrection and regeneration, the new leaves displacing the old.”

I put this in my column and didn’t think too much about it. It was a small resurrection story that I had left over after the Easter sermon that year. But two days after it came out in the newsletter, I got an e-mail from a parishioner I will call Ellen who I had only met once or twice at the church.

Ellen, a wife and mother of two daughters who had come up in our youth group, said that she had gone to the doctor who in effect gave her a death sentence; he told her that she had a cancer which was aggressively growing and there was little hope of curing. Ellen returned home under the burden of this and wondering where she was going to get the strength to tell her husband and children. The church newsletter happened to be on the kitchen table, and her eye fell on my column. Sitting at the kitchen table, she was able to weep openly and copiously, and somehow found the courage to tell her family and look her situation squarely in the face.

Rise Again! Our words and our deed help others and help ourselves to rise again. To me it is a distortion of what Jesus taught and the love that he practiced for us to look for eternal life in a magic belief in his divinity. I hold with Emerson that Jesus was divine, but so are all the rest of us. I’m not at all sure that life everlasting is a good idea. Dave the dancer has now died; Ellen has probably died by now. For all the love he bestowed here Dave Reed has now passed from among us. The victories of the spirit do not effect a physical victory over the processes of death.

And yet in the end, I want to affirm what I see as the central precept of Easter that love is stronger than death. The more love we make while we are on his mortal coil, the more there will be in the world. This is the meaning of Jesus’s life, this is the meaning of yours.

Rise again! Resurrection is all around us, and we can practice it. We can look at the glass as half full instead of half empty. No matter what you’ve lost, be it a home, a love, a friend. You can recover! You, to whom adversity has dealt a mighty blow, Rise again! You, who were abandoned by that no-good husband all those years ago and left to raise three children on your own, Rise again! You, whose wife left him for another man, Rise again! You, whose teenager got into drugs and hasn’t come out yet at age forty, Rise again! You, who never were able to get the degree you wanted or the job you thought you deserved, Rise again! You who were forced into early retirement by politics at your school or office, Rise again! You who have

seen your retirement fund cut in half, Rise Again! You who are bearing the burden of caring for an incapacitated parent or spouse, Rise Again! You whose friends and loved ones have died too young, Rise Again! You who have loved ones living far away around the world and no one has time or money for a visit, Rise Again! You who are at the end of your rope and just hanging on for dear life, with smiling villains lying to you everywhere you go, put out all your strength of arm and heart and brain, and like the Mary Ellen Carter, Rise Again! Rise above the bitterness, the anger, the hopelessness that is keeping you on the bottom of the sea. It's not easy. It takes effort, but you can do it. Find the forgiveness, the courage, the largeness of heart, the love. You can do it.

Easter is the victory of love over death, but it is not a denial of death. At some point, each of us individually will die. That is not a bad thing. We go back to where we came from. I'll leave you with a beautiful poem from Ruth Treen that she shared with us at the Brawn Bag poetry sharing last Thursday.

But before I do that I want to say that working with Ruth Treen has been a great highlight of my time here so far at the Meeting House. Talk about gifts of the spirit! She has gone way overboard in sharing with us her musical offerings. I was sorry to see her decide to retire, and while I'm looking forward to having our new music director Frank Toppa here next Sunday, and I would like to pause at this moment, on Ruth's last Sunday as our music director, to acknowledge how she has enriched us all with her gifts.

I should also say that I have no idea that Ruth is in any way close to her personal death, and hope she has many more years among us in this congregation and community, but her poem in contemplation of death was so apt that I wanted to close this sermon with it.

CONTINUUM

Perhaps on a day
very much like today
I shall die.
A pleasant July,
warm and kind.

It might be September
when summer is ending
and autumn begins.

If I die in winter
my ashes will mix with the snow
and melt into spring
as willows turn soft and green.

-- and then I'll return
to that time and space
that was my home
before my birth.

May we continue to rise again in spirit during our lifetimes that our love may continue to enrich the world and the lives of all after our bodies are gone? Rise Again! Amen.

Reading

Rev. Dr. Forrest Church from *Love and Death* (Boston: Beacon Press 2008) pp. 69-71

I have no idea whether Jesus was physically resurrected or not, but I suspect he wasn't.

If I am right, for many people that would be it for Jesus, period, end of story. Christianity would be a delusion, a miscommunication of events faithfully transmitted from generation to generation for two thousand years. File it with the Easter bunny under springtime fantasies. Bequeath it to Harvard psychologists as evidence of cognitive dissonance. Or to the Jesus Seminar, a flock of New Testament Scholars who, after thirty years of deliberation, can find no compelling evidence that the resurrection took place.

That this fails to shake my faith is irrelevant, because my faith isn't grounded in the bodily resurrection of Jesus. I ground my faith, my Christian faith, instead in the spiritual rebirth of Jesus's followers, a saving transformation as available to us today as it was to his disciples so very long ago.

Most Christians certify their faith by professing belief in the Apostle's Creed. Cast in its present form centuries after Jesus' lifetime, the Apostle's Creed posits saving powers in four things: Jesus's birth from a virgin, resurrection; harrowing of hell; and heavenly investment on the right hand of God, whence he will judge the quick and the dead. It teaches that Jesus was born in a miraculous way and died in a miraculous way, not that he lived in a miraculous way even as we, too, can live. This is not my credo. I do not believe with biblical literalists in the virgin birth and bodily resurrection of Jesus. Neither do I believe, as some liberal Christians, simply in his teachings. Jesus' teachings are in many ways wonderful, but, as is true of all human teachings, they are also flawed. Limited by cultural and personal experience. So where do I ground my Easter faith? Purely and simply in the saving gift of Jesus's love, transcending the power of death.

I am quite certain that Jesus suffered, thirsted, and felt forsaken in the anguish of his dying hours. I am equally certain that his followers were devastated when he died. They expected for him to live and save them. But then a miracle took place. Jesus did not live to save them. He died and saved them, which is all the more powerful, however you choose to interpret it. Jesus suffered, wept, forgave, and died. His followers failed, scattered, wept, found forgiveness and lived, reborn of his death, children of his undying love. For him and for them, even after death, in his love Jesus lived on. In his disciples' hearts he reigned as never before. Everything that mattered about his was theirs now. The way he cast out fear with faith. His love of God and neighbor. His astonishing humility. His disdain for pretense and cant. His courage and his passion. Each was more present now than ever before because Jesus lived within them, not simply among them. That is the essence of the Easter experience. A transformation occurred. Jesus was reborn in the hearts of his followers. Death was the occasion, love the medium, and forgiveness the catalyst.

The Mary Ellen Carter by Stan Rogers

- 1) She went down last October in the pouring driving rain.
The skipper he's been drinking and the mate he felt no pain.
Too close to Three Mile Rock and she was dealt her mortal blow
And the Mary Ellen Carter sitting low.

There was just us five aboard her when she finally was a-wash.
We worked like hell to save her all headless of the cost.
And the groan she gave as she went down it caused us to proclaim
That the Mary Ellen Carter'd rise again.

- 2) Well, the owners wrote her off, not a nickel would they spend.
"She gave twenty years of service, boys, and met her sorry end.
but insurance paid the loss to us, so let her rest below",

They laughed at us and said we'd had to go.

But we talked of her all winter, some days around the clock,
She's worth a quarter million, a-floating at the dock.
And with every jar that hit the bar we swore we would remain
And watch the Mary Ellen Carter rise again.

Refrain:

Rise again, rise again,
That her name not be lost to the knowledge of men,
Those who loved her best and were with her to the end,
Will make the Mary Ellen Carter, rise again.

3) All spring, now, we've been with her on a barge lent by a friend.
Three dives a day in a hard hat suit and twice I've had the bends.
Thank God it's only sixty feet and the currents here are slow
Or I'd never have the strength to go below.

But we've patched her rents, stopped her vents, dogged hatch and porthole down
Put cables to her 'fore and aft and girded her around
And tomorrow, noon, we hit the air and then take up the strain
And watch the Mary Ellen Carter rise again.

Refrain

For we couldn't leave her there, you see, to crumble into scale.
She'd save our lives so many times, living through the gale,
And the laughing, drunken rats who left her to a watery grave,
They won't be laughing in another day.
And you, to whom adversity has dealt that final blow
With smiling bastards lying to you everywhere you go
Turn to, and put out all your strength of arm and heart and brain
And, like the Mary Ellen Carter, rise again!

(Last refrain only) 2x

Rise again, rise again,
Thou your heart, it be broken, your life about to end,
No matter what you've lost, be it a home, a love, a friend,
Like the Mary Ellen Carter, rise again.