

Reading

Gospel of Matthew 26:36-46

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³⁶ Then Jesus went with his disciples to a place called Gethsemane, and he said to them, “Sit here while I go over there and pray.” ³⁷ He took Peter and the two sons of Zebedee along with him, and he began to be sorrowful and troubled. ³⁸ Then he said to them, “My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death. Stay here and keep watch with me.”

³⁹ Going a little farther, he fell with his face to the ground and prayed, “My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will.”

⁴⁰ Then he returned to his disciples and found them sleeping. “Couldn’t you men keep watch with me for one hour?” he asked Peter. ⁴¹ “Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak.”

⁴² He went away a second time and prayed, “My Father, if it is not possible for this cup to be taken away unless I drink it, may your will be done.”

⁴³ When he came back, he again found them sleeping, because their eyes were heavy. ⁴⁴ So he left them and went away once more and prayed the third time, saying the same thing.

⁴⁵ Then he returned to the disciples and said to them, “Are you still sleeping and resting? Look, the hour has come, and the Son of Man is delivered into the hands of sinners. ⁴⁶ Rise! Let us go! Here comes my betrayer! **Thus ends the Reading.**

Message**All on a Rising Day****Rev Pam Rumancik**

Today is the Christian celebration of Easter – the most important holy day of the year for many Christians because it is the day that Jesus rose from the dead. It’s a day for celebrating life’s victory over death; the victory of good over evil.

As Unitarian Universalists, many of us are skeptical that a man named Jesus, 2000 years ago, actually died and came back to life. This Jesus may have been an amazing teacher and may have really changed the way his followers looked at life – their own and others – but rising from the dead? Really.

The only thing we know we can definitively count on in this world is death and taxes – there have been no documented accounts of people coming back from the dead – at least not after 3 days. We know, from studying the history of the times, that many important people were declared to be divine, Caesar Aurelius and Caesar Augustus among others. And many mythic characters were said to have come back from the dead – like Persephone coming back from hades.

In addition, many important people were said to be born of virgins - and lauded for miracles and prophecy. I'm sure you've heard about the man who was incarnated into human form (as prophesized by Zarathustra.) He was born of a virgin, who was called the Mother of God. His birthday was celebrated December 25 and he was called "the light of the world." After teaching for 36 years, he ascended into heaven - in 208 BC. His name was Mithra.

Sounds just a little bit familiar – no?

During his time, Jesus was just one more, of many, who were said to have special powers that set them apart from ordinary folks. But here's the funny thing - Jesus' story stuck. The story of a simple country Rabbi who taught radical ideas about the worth and value of all people outlived the same kinds of stories about other people in his time. Jesus' story became the basis of a religion that spread around the world and has lasted over 2000 years. Why did this story last – when most of the others faded from memory?

One of the theories is that it was the power of his presence. People who met this Jesus were so impressed with his innate self-assurance, his confidence in his relationship with God, and his conviction of the value of all people, that they told stories to try and convey the impact he had had on them. His presence was so powerful that people used all the tropes of the day to tell others about the hope he gave to them in a very bleak time for being alive.

You see in those day, at the height of Rome's power – empire ruled with an iron fist, squashing any hint of insurrection immediately. And someone who taught that slaves and women should be treated with respect and that all people had value – who spoke out against the empire – had to be silenced. Thousands upon thousands of crucifixions were carried out along the road outside the walls of the cities. It was a way of both shaming and crushing any thoughts of standing up to empire.

And it worked. Once a person was crucified, a horrific death, they were left on the cross as a grim warning until carrion and scavengers, the elements had worn away the corpse. There was nothing left to bury. The person crucified effectively disappeared. Because it was a shameful death, the family did not talk about it. The crucified person was erased from the family, from the village, from having been around at all. This was the power of the Roman Empire.

In the book "Saving Paradise" Rebecca Parker and Rita Nakashima Brock write:

"Crucifixion was used against the underclasses and slaves and was regarded as so shameful that even victims' families would not speak of it. It functioned to fragment societies, tearing apart even the strongest of bonds of connection.... The passion narratives (of the Gospels) broke the silence about the shame and fear... To lament was to claim powers that crucifixion was designed to destroy; dignity, courage, love, creativity and truth-telling. In telling (Jesus) story, his community remembered his name and claimed the death-defying power of saying his name aloud."

In that time in history – the miracle was not that Jesus physically rose from the dead. The miracle was that his name and story were not allowed to die according to the Roman plan. The miracle was that his ministry took on a life of its own – and continued to influence and support people long after he was gone.

This is the Easter story as we understand and celebrate it. A story of a man who had such connection with deep and important truths that he was able to pass those truths on through centuries after his death. It is a victory over death, albeit a completely human and natural one.

This is one compelling reason that Jesus' story lived on but I believe there is another layer as well. His story is also a universal metaphor for a deep experience of being human. It tells of the journey each of us faces, in trying to find the **real** meaning of our lives. It is a story reflected all over the earth in other cultures and other faith traditions and it speaks to that place of realizing that what we thought was real and true and life giving is actually not so much.

It speaks to dying to one understanding of reality and being born into another deeper and more meaningful life. Whether it's the experience in school of realizing that popularity is a false lie. That being popular doesn't make you any happier than anyone else, it just brings with it the burden of living up to other people's expectations.

Or the realization that chasing after the American Dream, having all the good stuff and accumulated goods that you're supposed to have, doesn't really make you any happier than anyone else – it loads you with more responsibility and less actual time to enjoy the short life we have.

Or the realization that being in a relationship might not be the pinnacle of happiness. If you have to give up your own identity and needs and wants to maintain a relationship then it could be much better to be whole, and comfortable with yourself and on your own.

These are some of the common ways we can understand dying to one way of thinking in order to be reborn into a new, better, way of being human. Each of us probably has our own story - or multiple stories – of things we had let go, to die to; ideas or beliefs that we had to leave behind in order to be reborn into new, authentic and nourishing life experience.

I had to let go of my identity as a housepainter, a regular Joe (or Josephine) in order to imagine myself going to seminary and becoming a minister. It was a change from one identity to another – and I had to relinquish an identity that was a part of me.

This is a story we see reflected in the natural world around us – a seed has to die in order to become a plant. A caterpillar has to let go of its grub state in order to become a butterfly and soar. As we grow and develop, every time we make a leap forward, we leave something else behind.

And here's the really hard part. It's not easy. Transitions are rarely painless. Often they involve a psychological journey into our deepest self – paralleled by Jesus' supposed descent into hell. It takes us to places we don't want to go and asks us to confront things we don't want to face. Sometimes we have to acknowledge the places we contribute to our failings instead of just blaming someone else; sometimes we have to take responsibility for who we are and what we do, in order to make new and different – and more life-giving choices.

Some people never make the journey. Many folks spend their whole lives living other people's values, and other people's choices. The Roman Empire – no matter what guise it wears now – keeps people moving along the path of empire, mindlessly buying yet another iPhone or the latest version of HD TV, or that bigger better automobile; never thinking of the interconnections between us or the way our choices can be destroying the planet or injuring other people.

I know some folks first hand who missed the opportunity for transformation. I've a friend named Josie who was offered the choice, who knew what she should do to live more fully into her life, but who refused to change. She was in a very unhappy marriage, miserable and unable to be herself, but they had a nice house and a bunch of land – and she had animals which gave her comfort. Although she was on the verge of divorce a number of times, each time she pulled back and refused to go through with it. She figured she would have to give up her pets, & her comfortable house and felt it was too much to lose.

So she chose the comfort of the familiar over the challenge of making big changes – and she ended up being pretty miserable. Her husband eventually became bed-ridden and needed constant care. She still didn't like him – but she couldn't bring herself to leave him after he became ill. So they were both miserable. It's very sad. If she had left earlier, he might have found someone to actually love him, to want to spend time and care for him. And she might have found someone to enjoy her last years with.

This was a story without a transformation – although I always hold out hope. Sometimes transformations are internal and imperceptible – and no one around us knows they've happened. I hope that happened for my friends. Even when we miss one chance, as long as we're alive I believe there is always another opportunity for redemption, for transformation, for digging into the core of our lives, if we stay awake to possibilities.

I believe this is the story of the death and resurrection of Jesus – of dying to what you think is important and rising again to a new and more authentic life. It's a universal human challenge. It's found in the stories of the Phoenix rising from the ashes, the story of Beowulf diving into the black water to wrestle Grendl's mother. It's found in the Buddhist teaching of non-attachment, in the Islamic exhortation to surrender.

Each of these teaches that we have to let go in order to gain the deepest desires of our heart. To step off the cliff and trust you'll sprout wings. We must give up that thing which we think is important, which we hold onto tightly, which brings comfort, in order to grow into something

more. Like a child giving up their blanky in order to move to the big bed, we have to break free of the restrictions which hold us back and take a plunge into the unknown.

But... It's not easy. I bet some of you were wondering why I used that reading by the gospel of Matthew for our reading today. Why read from what happened on Holy Thursday today – on Easter morning? Just another UU minister who doesn't understand the bible?

No. I chose that because it shows a very real part of the Easter story. It shows Jesus being afraid. It shows him praying that this cup be taken away from him. It shows that Jesus, this icon for a human being who was so strong a personality as to even conquer death, didn't want to do it. It wasn't easy. He was afraid and he wanted his friends to support him – but they didn't.

How human is that? Both that we try to gather folks around us to help – and that in the deepest place of challenge, we are on our own. People can support us with their love, but in those places of deepest challenge, of inner transformation, we have to dig deep inside and do it ourselves. In the ones where we make a leap into a new and more powerful life, that we have to walk that path alone.

Collectively, this church community is in the midst of transformation. You've called a new minister, you've reinvented your church governance from Portfolio to Policy Governance, you are creating a Mission statement to guide you into a new era. But each one of you has to figure out your own place amidst the changes; have to decide how you will participate and where you can bring your best self to the process. You have to decide how you will respond to the things you don't like – and figure out the deeper truth this community holds for you. What is the core of the Unitarian Church of Hinsdale that will take you through the difficulties of transformation and lift you into a new way of being in church?

It's hard. You've had to say goodbye to people you loved. You've had to learn new ways of communicating, new lines of responsibility, new faces with new ideas. The comfortable patterns of the past are gone – and there is always pain in loss. No matter how expected – or needed – or even desirable. Letting go is hard and takes energy and will. But the good news is that once you've gone through the hard winter of change, you can open up and enjoy the fresh breezes of spring. The new life it brings can offer delight and elation, even as the old is held in comfortable and fond memory.

The gift of the Easter Story is that - in the end - life wins. That going forward, taking on the challenge, facing the fears, standing up to bullies - whatever it is that we are called to do in our lives - will have an Easter morning. Each time we descend into the darkness, we trust that we will also rise – in hearts and minds and spirits. Whether it looks pretty from the outside isn't the point. By claiming our deepest truth; our most authentic self, we will be transformed, and we will rise to greet another day. Whatever challenge you face on your own personal Good Friday, trust yourself and trust life. Easter morning is available to each and every one of us. Amen & Blessed be.