

**Easter Sunday: 23 March 2008 + “The Eyes of Our Eyes Are Opened”
Rev. Erika Hewitt + Live Oak Unitarian Universalist Congregation**

“i thank you god” by e. e. cummings

i thank You God for most this amazing
day: for the leaping greenly spirits of trees
and a blue true dream of sky; and for everything
which is natural which is infinite which is yes

(i who have died am alive again today,
and this is the sun's birthday; this is the birth
day of life and of love and wings: and of the gay
great happening illimitably earth)

how should tasting touching hearing seeing
breathing any – lifted from the no
of all nothing – human merely being
doubt unimaginable You?

(now the ears of my ears awake and
now the eyes of my eyes are opened)

“The Eyes of Our Eyes Are Opened”

This sermon is dedicated to all of you who are trying to do something different in your life.

This is for any of you who have examined a part of your life, discovered that it wasn't working for you, and sought a new way of being in the world. It's for any of you who are living with a secret struggle, or harboring a secret hope for what your life might be.

Whether it's giving up an unhealthy habit or weathering a major life transition, change is *soul work*. Regardless of how “in control” you feel, growing something from bud into blossom demands our full attention; requires stores of emotional energy; asks us to have faith that, to paraphrase Anais Nin, “the risk to remain tight in a bud [is] more painful than the risk it [takes] to blossom” – even while our lives are turned upside-down.

What does this have to do with Easter? On a day when Christian churches are celebrating the resurrection of Jesus, on a Sunday when many Unitarian Universalists look away from the story of the empty tomb with more than a little discomfort, what do we have to say about “resurrection”?

Like many liberal Christian theologians, I don't believe that the physical body of Jesus was restored to life. I *do* believe that, after his death, his followers experienced the continuing presence of Jesus among them – his spirit as a teacher of love and a prophet of radical inclusivity – as “a living reality.”¹ Life was utterly changed for them.

I'm suggesting this morning that “resurrection” is less about physical resuscitation and more about moving into a new, living reality – whether spiritually, intellectually, or physically – and that such a process is available to every one of us.

I'm also going to do some *truth-telling* about resurrection, reminding us that when we invite transformation into our lives, we necessarily leave part of ourselves behind: something has to die in order for that new part of us to be born.

This sermon is about to lead us through a progression of three readings. Each one peels back a layer of myth; taken together, they point to the fact that when we give up something that we've been clinging to, it takes a while for us to really see the new shape that our life has taken. It takes time for the eyes of our eyes to open.

✦ **Luke 24:13-24, 28-31 (NRSV)**

Our first reading is from the Gospel according to Luke, and recounts a story that's missing from the other gospels. It takes place on the day that Jesus' tomb was found empty, when his followers were still mired in shock and numbing grief.

On that same day, two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem, and talking with each other about all these things that had happened. While they were talking and discussing, Jesus himself came near and went with them, but their eyes were kept from recognizing him.

And he said to them, “What are you discussing with each other while you walk along?” They stood still, looking sad. Then one of them, whose name was Cleopas, answered him, “Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have taken place there in these days?”

He asked them, “What things?”

They replied, “The things about Jesus of Nazareth, who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people, and how our chief priests and leaders handed him over to be condemned to death and crucified him. But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel. Yes, and besides all this, it is now the third day since these things took place. Moreover, some women of our group astounded us. They were at the

tomb early this morning, and when they did not find his body there, they came back and told us that they had indeed seen a vision of angels who said that he was alive. Some of those who were with us went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said; but they did not see him.”

...As they came near the village to which they were going, he walked ahead as if he were going on. But they urged him strongly, saying, “Stay with us, because... the day is now nearly over.” So he went in to stay with them. When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them.

Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight.

I’ve always found this passage humorous, because of the back-and-forth between Jesus’ innocence (“Hey guys – what’s up?”) and the men’s disbelief that they had to explain themselves (“What, have you been living under a rock?”).

It’s also a poignant passage, for the depth of the men’s grief prevented them from seeing what was right in front of them. Now, remember: these people were in mourning – devastated – over Jesus’ death. You would think that they’d see him at every turn... but then again, when we lose something that is a part of us, something integral to our identity, we don’t know what life looks like *without* it.

This is the first truth about resurrection:

When we give up something that we’ve been clinging to, it takes time for our eyes to be opened to the new shape that our life has taken. And when we can’t believe our own eyes – our own senses – we can only trust our “hearts’ burning,” the voice inside of us calling forward and out of ourselves. When all else fails, we must trust the inner voice leading us forward.

✦ **“Adjusting to the Light” by Miller Williams**

In the next reading, poet Miller Williams playfully spins the Biblical account of a different resurrection – that of Lazarus. The story goes like this: Mary and Martha, Lazarus’ sisters, call Jesus to his tomb, where Lazarus has been lying dead for 4 days. Jesus tells them to roll away the stone, and Lazarus emerges from the tomb. Witness the midrash that Miller Williams performs on the story:

*– air – air! I can barely breathe...aah!
Whatever it was, I think I shook it off.
Except my head hurts and I stink. Except
what is this place and what am I doing here!*

Brother, you're in a tomb. You were dead four days.
Jesus came and made you alive again.

Lazarus, listen, we have things to tell you.
We killed the sheep you meant to take to market.
We couldn't keep the old dog, either.
He minded you. The rest of us he barked at.
Rebecca, who cried two days, has given her hand
to the sandal-maker's son. Please understand
we didn't know that Jesus could do this.

We're glad you're back. But give us time to think.
Imagine our surprise to have you – well,
not well, but weller. I'm sorry, but you do stink.
Everyone, give us some air. We want to say
we're sorry for all that. And one thing more.
We threw away the lyre. But listen, we'll pay
whatever the sheep was worth. The dog, too.
And put your room the way it was before.

I love how Miller Williams uses this poem to expose how disorienting and messy resurrection is. Lazarus doesn't wake up to harps playing and golden beams of light – he emerges from his cocoon-like tomb to find out that he's lost his sheep, his dog, his lyre, *and* his fiancée (a first-century Palestine version of innumerable country & western songs).

Not only is Lazarus confused, but, as Williams explains,² he is “told – though he may not be paying much attention – that his return from the dead is going to call for a lot of adjustment on the part of several people, including Lazarus himself.... [he] “can never truly be at home again. Not as he was... every player on the stage has lost something.”

This is the second truth about awakening:

When we merge back into life – or into a new stream of life – it involves a lot of adjusting, and perhaps even profound loss. Commenting on his poem, Williams admitted, “Maybe the poem says the miracles are not something to hope for, after all.”³ Now, I've seen too many miracles to discourage hope in them – but I agree that we must choose our resurrections *carefully*. The savvy hoper-in-miracles knows that when we tell the Universe that we want transformation, we're agreeing to repercussions beyond our seeing. We will never be the same again.

+ “Life in the Tank,” by Mark Nepo

With those risks before us – chaos, never being the same, adjusting to the new normal – “resurrection” doesn’t seem so appealing. Why take a chance? What is the cost, really, of staying just where we are? Can’t we just drown out the voice calling us to awaken?

In our final reading, poet and author Mark Nepo offers a story that hints at the cost of not growing in the direction we’re called:

It was a curious thing. Robert had filled the bathtub and put the fish in the tub, so he could clean their tank. After he’d scrubbed the film from the small walls of their make-believe deep, he went to retrieve them.

He was astonished to find that, though they had the entire tub to swim in, they were huddled in a small area the size of their tank. There was nothing containing them, nothing holding them back. Why wouldn’t they dart about freely? What had life in the tank done to their natural ability to swim?

This quiet yet stark moment stayed with us both for a long time. We couldn’t help but see those little fish going nowhere but into themselves. We now had a life-in-the-tank lens on the world and wondered daily, In what ways are we like them? In what ways do we go nowhere but into ourselves? In what ways do we shrink our world so as not to feel the press of our own self-imposed captivity?

...It makes me wonder... if being spontaneous and kind and curious are all parts of our natural ability to swim. Each time I hesitate to do the unplanned or unexpected, or hesitate to reach and help another, or hesitate to inquire into something I know nothing about; each time I ignore the impulse to run in the rain or call you up just to say I love you – I wonder, am I turning on myself, swimming safely in the middle of the tub?

This is the final truth of resurrections, of awakening, of setting ourselves free: We spend our lives trying to escape the fish bowls and fish tanks that contain and constrict us (and each other). Some of these tanks are real: poverty, discrimination, illness, abusive relationships all keep us from developing into our fullest selves. Some of our tanks are self-imposed, keeping us “going nowhere but into [our]selves”...and some of them were opened long ago.

On the road to Emmaus, Luke’s gospel tells us, “Their eyes were kept from recognizing [Jesus].” Each of us is traveling somewhere, trying to leave something behind and develop new ways of seeing. On our journeys, each of us is approached, over and over,

by strangers. The stranger is often our hope, our heart's burning, the still, small voice compelling us to grow. The stranger is what you've been longing for, reaching toward, and growing to become. Resurrection, then, is a fresh attention to what is, and to the unexpected face of who we've become. *It's never too late for us to do this work*, and "the only resurrection worth paying attention to is the one happening right now, in you."⁴

(i who have died am alive again today,[]] writes e.e. cummings,
(now the ears of my ears awake and now the eyes of my eyes are opened)

May our ears awake and our eyes be opened to the strangers who we encounter on our journeys.

May it be so.

Benediction ~ based on the words of the Rev. Wayne Arnason

It's easy to walk the way of life
with our eyes on the road ahead,
and to forget to look into the eyes
of those who share the way with us.
Let us remember that love
can be found in unexpected people and places;
may we keep choosing to make the journey together.

Endnotes

1. Marcus Borg: <http://www.united.edu/portrait/post1.shtml>
2. In *Introspections: American Poets on One of Their Own Poems*, ed. Robert Pack, Jay Parini, p. 306
3. Ibid, p. 309.
4. A quote from Pastor Lynice Pinkard, First Congregational Church of Oakland, CA, as quoted by Angela Jernigan Ferrell.

