

Seeking the Living

April 24, 2011 Unitarian Universalist Church of Winchendon ~ Rev Marguerite Sheehan

“On the first day of the week, at early dawn they came to the tomb saying “Who will roll away the stone from the entrance? They looked up and saw that the stone had already been rolled back, and on the right they saw a young man. They were alarmed but the man said to them, “Why do you seek the living among the dead? So they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them. And they said nothing, for they were afraid.” (Mark)

In just about every Resurrection story it is women who were first to brave a visit to the tomb of Christ Jesus. In this story by the Gospel writer Mark, the women arrived at early dawn, just as the light was beginning to break over the hills. They came to the tomb so that they might offer their prayers, perhaps have another chance to touch the body, or maybe just because they could not stay away. I am sure that they were crying, clinging to each other and wailing because their friend, their Lord, the one who they had envisioned would save them from all that was wrong about their lives, had died a horrible death, and now their hopes were dashed on that very stone that sealed the tomb. “Who will roll back the stone? We need to see him for one last time.”

Have you been there? Have you lost someone that you love so dearly you would have rather have died for them than have them die? Have you been there? Have you ever lost your hope that your sad and sorry life might change for the better? Have you been there? Have you experienced deep within your soul the suffering, the betrayal and finally the death of Jesus? Have you been there with the women who could not stay away from the tomb? I know that I have been with these women, many times in my life and so today, in this reading, I can feel their sorrow and their fear. And I can also imagine how they ran, in terror and amazement, when the man at the tomb said to them “Why do you seek the living among the dead?” They ran because they could not wrap their minds and their hearts around the truth which is that the tomb was not the place to stay, not for Jesus, not for them, and not for us. The tomb is the place for the dead, but we are called, as Jesus was called, to return to the land of the living.

Our Easter hymn was written by Charles Wesley, the brother of John Wesley who founded the Methodist denomination. Hymns, like any form of worship, change with the times and the people who sing them. In another version I read the stanzas’ repeat the Gospel with these lines “See the holy women come, bearing spices to the tomb; hear the white-clad angel's voice bid the universe rejoice. *Alleluia, Alleluia* Go tell all His brethren dear "He is risen, nor is here! Seek Him not among the dead; He is risen as He said! *Alleluia.*

In our Unitarian Universalist version we sang “Soar we now where Christ has led, living out the words he said, made like him, like him we rise, ours the cross, the grave, the skies.” All the words, in any version, speak one central truth, which is that Jesus is no longer tucked away in a tomb, forgotten. He is risen today and lives again, in our hearts and our minds and in our renewed commitment to living. On Easter Sunday we break out all the stops and sing, not about death, not about suffering and sorrow, but about choosing life. Our life is to be like his. We too are given the cross of suffering, the grave for our mortal bodies, and the skies for our spirits. On Easter Sunday we are called to walk away from the tomb and instead to seek the living wherever we can find true life.

Today we brought symbols of life and hung them on a dry branch so that our hopes and our visions and our commitments would bring more life into our families, into our church and into the wide world. In some churches Easter is a time to renew Baptismal vows, a time to say again, we are made new in our faith. To be a person who seeks the living is to be a person who is willing and ready and wanting to experience change and renewal. To be a person who seeks the living is to be a person who can say “A tomb is no place to stay when each morning announces our reprieve, and we know we are granted yet another day of living.”

(Gilbert)

Every day we rise up out of beds and put our bare feet on the floor and we are granted another day of living. We step out of our houses and smell the air. We look around us and see who is standing next to us. We take a first sip of coffee, a bite of breakfast, and we give thanks for another day. And if we are at all aware of chance and mortality, we know that it might have been otherwise and some day it will be otherwise. The poet Jane Kenyon wrote:

“I got out of bed
on two strong legs.
It might have been
otherwise. I ate
cereal, sweet
milk, ripe, flawless
peach. It might
have been otherwise.
I took the dog uphill
to the birch wood.
All morning I did
the work I love.”....

It will be otherwise for all of us someday but today, we are given another reprieve and we get to do what we love. We get to walk, not toward the tomb of despair and grief and hopelessness, but toward the living. And that is one of the gifts of Easter. On Easter Sunday we get to sing Alleluia, and we get to bring to our world back to life. And when we do this we will be like the women in the Gospel story who were both afraid and amazed because immediately they knew

that their world would never be the same. New life is not the old life done over again in the same way day after day. It is something precious, something new, something unexpected and amazing. If only we remain awake and willing to take in on with joy and Alleluias.

Today we filled our “tree” with symbols of life for our church and for our lives. I read once that a minister said “I would not want to serve a church that thought of itself as a “dying church.” And another minister replied, “As for me, I would not want to serve a church that thought it was not dying. The only kind of church I want to serve is a church where the people acknowledge that yes, we are dying, and yes, we are praying for resurrection!” Like many other churches of many denominations, our church has been a dying church. We have been dying to many of the old ways that used to sustain this congregation. We have used up a good amount of our savings and even some of the gifts of our ancestors while trying to keep our old ways alive. And that is the good news; because without dying to the past we cannot be reborn. Yes, in some real ways we have been a dying church and we are now praying and working to become a “turn around church” or a church that rises up to become something new.

I believe that the truth and the life and the light of Jesus could not transform the world without his dying. When his disciples understood that he had died they

were finally committed to taking his life and his teachings into their very being. It was in Jesus dying that the Holy Spirit, the source of inspiration, came on them and changed them from being passive disciples to preachers. In the same way our personal lives, our church and the church of the world, cannot transform into a deep and meaningful new life without dying to the old ways. I believe that our church and many other churches will resurrect into something new if we look squarely at our past and then look within to see who we are now being called to be and to serve in the world.

It is in dying that we are born again. It is in dying that we can finally turn away from the tomb and break out into something more vital, more essential, and something more alive. This is frightening, amazing, and life giving.

The women fled in terror and amazement because they knew that their world was being turned upside down. For Jesus to have risen meant that everything could change, including them. And they were both afraid and amazed. In this version of the Resurrection story, the women said nothing because they were afraid. We can only hope and believe that they finally faced their fear and seized their amazement and made another choice to keep running but this time running to tell their friends.

That is the choice that all of us have when we are faced with the reality of death and the gift of resurrection. We can run and hide or we can run and speak.

We can choose to proclaim that new life is possible. Not the old life patched up and called something else but new life. Resurrection. Paradise has been opened and we get to step in only if we are willing to take the risk of not running back into the tomb, because a tomb is no place to stay. It is life that we are meant to live. Today, put your feet on the ground. Look around you. See who you love. See what you love. Be willing, today, to take on life again and make it new. May this Easter Day be the beginning of a new life, for you, for the churches, for our families, and for our communities. Choose life. Amen!

Sources

Otherwise by Jane Kenyon A Tomb Is No Place to Stay by Richard Gilbert, Gospel of Mark