

Faith in Life
an Easter sermon delivered by Rev. Rebecca F. Benner
at the Accotink Unitarian Universalist Church
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READING by Phillip Hewitt

The conventional Easter parable points to the life resurgent in nature, the “annual resurrection.” Yet this triumph of life does not banish death. It embraces death. Much of last year’s carnival of green, which celebrates the triumph of the spring, now lies in death and decay as the source and sustenance of the new and vigorous life which repeats the cycle. Nature is immortal, but her individual members are not. And it is only when we lose our craving for self-sufficiency, for an individual existence in isolation from, or even in opposition to, the great whole of which we are a part, that we have really absorbed the lesson of this parable. Then we cease to live for ourselves alone, and begin to understand what it can mean to die and come again to life.

SERMON

Every morning I get up early, often before I want to, to walk my dog. I travel the same three routes through my neighborhood over and over and over. While sometimes I get tired of the same paths and the same views, walking this now familiar journey day after day has allowed me to come to know my neighborhood, and to see it change through the seasons of the years. First, just after we moved in a year ago, the bright colors of spring, then the rich green of summer, then the falling of the changed autumn leaves, followed by the quiet dormancy of winter, and now back to spring again. Each morning as I walk I listen to National Public Radio, so that, oddly, the changes in the natural world around me are closely associated with the changes in our human world—the cycles of hope and despair, the violence and the attempts to build peace.

In early March, just as the signs of spring were becoming real here in Northern Virginia, I was stopped short by this piece on *Morning Edition*:

Across the Mississippi River from downtown New Orleans, in an area known as Lower Algiers, you can drive along River Road, past a row of storm-damaged trees to a gravel driveway. It leads into the last bit of bottomland hardwood forest in Orleans Parish.

The land is now home to artists Lucianne and Joe Carmichael, both in their seventies. It was once the site of a sugar cane plantation.

The Carmichaels preside over a nature preserve of more than seven acres. They host an artist-in-residency program for sculptors, writers, musicians and other creative types. The artists spend stints at what the Carmichaels call “A Studio in the Woods.”

Last August, as Hurricane Katrina headed for New Orleans, the Carmichaels packed up some of their favorite artwork and secured the wood-frame house they had built by hand. When they returned home 41 days later, they found a tangle of downed trees. Among the mess was a magnolia tree blooming at the wrong time of year.

Botanist David Baker takes care of the grounds. He also studies hurricane ecology, and so he knew that the magnolia and other trees showing unexpected signs of life were doing exactly what they needed to do.

Trees that were healthy went into reproductive overdrive, sprouting leaves and springtime buds in the fall. It's nature's way of creating a rush of seeds so that new trees will eventually replace those damaged by the storm. (Morning Edition, National Public Radio, March 3, 2006)

What a remarkable thing. In the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, a great many of the trees on the Gulf Coast experienced a second spring, bringing forth flowers and buds even as the weather turned colder, preparing for the premature deaths that will come to many of them in the coming years, putting forth the seeds of the trees which will take their place.

I can only imagine what it was like for those returning to their devastated homes, their flattened neighborhoods, to find blossoms on the trees, to see spring, the season of rebirth and hope, when both the calendar and their hearts were telling them it was fall, the time of death and decay.

This is an Easter story if I ever heard one. Easter, the central story of Christianity, tells the story of the resurrection of Jesus three days following his crucifixion and in so doing reassures us that life will triumph over death. Its connection with spring, here in the Northern hemisphere, means that this message of rebirth and hope is echoed in the physical world around us and in our own bodies as they respond to the warming weather and the increasing light. This message of hope, of possibility, of freedom is heard as well in the Passover story, also celebrated at this time of year—a reminder that whatever bondage we know in our lives, there is for us the potential and the promise of release.

I don't mean to conflate these three messages into one. Each holiday—Easter, Passover, the Spring Equinox—arises from its own tradition and makes its own promises. And yet the same hope plays through all of them—the hope that whatever in our life looks like defeat—be it winter, loss and sacrifice, bondage, or even death—will itself be defeated. That hope and freedom, that life, in one form or another, will prevail.

It is no wonder that such a message runs through so many different religious traditions. The need for it, for this message of hope and possibility, is universal.

Though most of us have been lucky enough not to have known physical bondage; though the power of winter, in this age of snow plows, electricity, and central heating, is dramatically less than it was for our ancestors; though few of us know the kind of oppression and persecution known to many throughout human history, all of us have known fear and loss. All of us have had winters of the soul, when we despaired of spring, of hope, of growth ever coming again. All of us need, at some time or another, to be told that it will be okay. That hope and freedom, that life, in one form or another, will prevail.

The Easter message, the promise of resurrection for all who believe, is particularly appealing because of the personal guarantee it seems to contain. For most Christians, the claim of Easter is literal eternal life for all, the triumph of the individual over death.

As a Unitarian Universalist, I find such a guarantee iffy at best. I do not believe in this kind of eternal life, where we are restored to our physical and mental selves and live as such for all time. And yet, the power and promise of Easter, of spring is very real to me. It is the promise that, even when my life, and the lives of everyone I have known and loved, are over, that life itself will continue. It is the promise that, even if I can't imagine emotional and spiritual rebirth for myself, the possibility continues to exist.

The story of the post-Katrina magnolia blossoms adds another element to the promise of this time. It serves as a reminder that, not only can we be the recipients of renewing life and hope, we can be the source of it as well.

In whatever way they can sense, know, and decide, the trees on the Gulf Coast knew that they were threatened, that they and those around them had been damaged, that they had a job to do to ensure the continuation of life amongst them. The trees knew that even if they were not to survive as individuals, they could contribute to their survival as a species, they could be a part of the promise of life prevailing over all. And so they bloomed, they came to life themselves in their usual season of quiet and dormancy, and they sent out into the world the seeds of future generations. They created the life that would replace them.

One could imagine a different response. A turning inward, an attempt to preserve as many resources as possible, an effort to hold onto their own individual lives and the known rhythms of their usual seasonal cycle. One could imagine, in the face of such destruction, retreat.

Instead, nature responded with generosity and growth. Just as the Christian interpretation of the Easter story tells us that Jesus gave up his life so that other might live, so, too, did the trees respond to their own impending deaths by giving as much life to the world as they could.

We human beings are also faced with such a choice, such an opportunity. We are aware of our own mortality, sometimes in the abstract and at a distance, sometimes in ways up close and personal, the clock of our life audibly ticking toward its conclusion. We have times when the deaths we face are not physical but emotional or spiritual, when loss, or fear, or the damage that life can inflict threatens to shut us down

At such times, when the truth of our death—be it physical, emotional, or spiritual—is undeniable, we have a choice. We can turn inward, pulling our resources into ourselves, holding onto what little life we have as tightly as we can, focusing on our individual survival alone. Such a response is understandable, and the pull toward it is strong.

And yet, within us lies the same wisdom that lives within the magnolia trees of Mississippi and Louisiana, the same instincts toward the survival not simply of ourselves but of life itself. Within us lies a faith in life beyond our own life, which calls forth buds and growth in the most devastating of times, which responds to this season and to the message of Easter with a resounding yes!

Such a faith is demonstrated in so many ways. The most obvious is in having and raising children, in doing all that we can that human life continues after ours has finished. But this faith is known in countless other ways as well—in risking love after a broken heart, in responding to grief by reaching out to others and allowing others to reach out to us, by creating beauty just for the sake of creating beauty, by doing all that we can so that the natural world around us might flourish.

Author Barbara Kingsolver, in her book of essays *High Tide in Tucson*, writes about her own struggles and successes in having faith in life, her own journeys through the valley of death to come back to life again, and particularly her choice to love again after the death of her first marriage. She writes this:

Every one of us is called upon, probably many times, to start a new life. A frightening diagnosis, a marriage, a move, loss of a job or a limb or a loved one, a graduation, bringing a new baby home: it's

impossible to think at first how this all will be possible. Eventually, what moves it all forward is the subterranean ebb and flow of being alive among the living..

To be hopeful, to embrace one possibility after another—that is surely the basic instinct. Baser even than hate, the thing with teeth, which can be stilled with a tone of voice or stunned by beauty. If the whole world of the living has to turn on the single point of remaining alive, that pointed endurance is the poetry of hope. The thing with feathers. (p. 15-6)

And so I have molted now, crawled out of my old empty banged-up skin with a fresh new life, and look here, what is this? I have regenerated a marriage, precious as a new eye.

I'm still feeling fairly soft-shelled...I have a midlife vision of all things, including love and permanence. My dear mate and I will get to watch each other creak into old age and fall into uneasy truces with our own limbs—that's the best case, presuming we cleave together as we've hoped and promised. It's a wonder anyone does this at all, I think from time to time, as I'm visited by the specter of all I could lose.

When I was pregnant I felt like this too. People will claim that having children is a ticket to immortality, but in fact it merely doubles your stake in mortality. You labor and your love and there you are, suddenly, with twice as many eyes in your house that could be put out, hearts that could be broken, new lives dearer than your own that could be taken from you. And still we do it, have children, right and left. We love and we lose, get hurled across the universe, put on a new shell, listen to the seasons.

...Right now, this minute, [it is] time to move out into the grief and [the] glory. (p. 270)

Both Kingsolver and the trees of the Gulf Coast remind us that this pull toward life is an instinct. While we may have some choice in the matter, the most importance decision we have to make is can we trust life, this force which lives deep within each one of us? Can we trust ourselves? Can we feel and live that connection between our individual selves and all that is? Can we, as Phillip Hewitt says, *cease to live for ourselves alone, and begin to understand what it can mean to die and come again to life?* Can we have faith in our own ability to blossom when the world needs us to?

We may not even know when we are planting seeds, when we are acting as part of that promise that life will prevail. In the last few months, I have been blessed to receive emails from two people, neither of whom I have seen or had any contact with in years. One was from someone I knew for some years more than a decade ago, when she was a child. The other was from someone I met only once, who attended a wedding ceremony I performed for a mutual friend while I was in seminary. Both of them wrote to tell me I had made a difference in their life, that I had pointed out a way they had not seen for themselves, offered them a possibility they had not before believed in.

What a remarkable gift to me—these messages of gratitude for things I was not even aware I had done. They have made me think with gratitude of all those who have planted seeds that have grown in my life, all those who in their lives and in their deaths have nourished life beyond themselves. Those who have helped me believe in this message of Easter—that life, and hope, and love will prevail.

Perhaps the most difficult thing in all of this is that such faith in life is only possible if we truly and fully accept the reality of death. Not death in the abstract. Not death as some far-in-the-future eventuality. But death as something that will happen to us. No matter what we believe about death, the truth is that some day, we will no longer exist in the form we are in now. We will not be able to touch those we love, or continue the work of our hands in the world, or see again through these eyes the coming of the spring.

To believe in and hold onto the promise of Easter, of spring, of hope and rebirth without acknowledging the truth of death as well does not work. The trees of the Gulf Coast could not have had their second spring without the reality of the destruction they and those around them experienced. The Easter story would not have the transformational power it does without the suffering and death Jesus experienced before his resurrection. So, too, is it that we cannot do our best work of planting the seeds of life without an awareness that we are doing this not for ourselves but for the life that will follow, so that we will not be the end of the story.

May we, this Easter, not only feel and trust in the promise of this season—that death does not have the last word, that life will prevail—may we commit ourselves to being a part of this promise, planting the seeds of life wherever we find fertile ground. Let us refuse to deny the reality of our own deaths and instead of allowing this truth to cause us to pull back, to grow jealous of our resources, let us respond instead with bud and blossom. May we, in the end, have faith in that greater life of which we are a part and in doing so may we *begin to understand what it can mean to die and come again to life.*

May it be so. Amen.