



The Unitarian Church in Westport

SERMON TRANSCRIPT:

Freed from the Tomb

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It has been hard to see the possibility of a resurrection in the midst of this pandemic. Many of us ache for the chance to be freed this Easter, free to go to church, free to see family and friends, free to share a real meal, full of real food and not virtually each imprisoned in our own homes. If there were ever a desire for liberation and resurrection, today would be it. Can you hear me?

Easter seems far away in the midst of our confinement. For many of us today is still Good Friday. If you look at this Holy Weekend like the Corona virus, it climbs all week until Friday -- “the top of the curve” -- then flattens before descending into Easter morning. Who here is tired of looking at those graphs and curves?

For some of us, scared and alone, we feel we are already in the tomb with its big boulder rolled across the doorway. Easter, it might seem, is a long way off. And yet here we are. Easter in our captivity. If ever there were a need for rebirth, this day, this year, this moment is it. Spring is nature’s way of reminding us that it all comes around, eventually. Such is the place of Easter in our lives. It’s not so much the religious significance of the holiday as it is the hope of the season. Spring is the ticket to the big game of hope. Despite it all, Spring has come. Perhaps more gloriously than ever as we pause the capitalist machine and allow the earth to breathe again.

At this very hour you will hear people talk about the reason for the season: the Christian reason for the season, the resurrection of Jesus Christ. It’s an important message, and one I will speak about this morning but let us begin by remembering that Easter is a great deal more. Easter is an ancient holiday pre-dating the Christian story by almost a thousand years. Easter or the Festival of Eostre, the Anglo-Saxon goddess of spring, is a fertility holiday celebrating the return of life to the earth. And all these so-called silly symbols of Easter go far beyond commercial trappings. The eggs which our children are gathering up even as we speak are an ancient Greek symbol of fertility. They are hidden in the Anglo-Saxon tradition to remind us that new life must be found and cherished. The bunnies – well we all know what bunnies do – but more than the obvious, rabbits were, for the ancient Celts, spiritual messengers, leading the priests and priestesses to

magic circles and trees of the forest. But the bunnies were also troublemakers, much like the coyote of the Southwest Native peoples, and could easily lead you on a wild hare race to nowhere. It was part of the fun of spring. Remember the Jimmy Stewart movie "Harvey" about the imaginary giant rabbit? Spring is truly a mental condition. The ham which some of us will eat today is an ancient pagan symbol of posterity. This year, as perhaps in the time of Jesus, Easter shares the calendar with the Jewish Festival of Passover; commemorating the Jewish exodus from bondage in Egypt when the plague of God passed over the doorways of the Jewish homes marked with the blood of the lamb. Lamb, as a traditional Easter food, has more to do with this sacrificial meaning than with the new life a lamb is thought to represent.

Some of you remember the little Unitarian girl who was attending a Lutheran pre-school. The teacher asked her little class what the holiday of Easter was all about. One little boy raised his hand and "Isn't that the day we have fireworks?" "No" replied the teacher "that is the fourth of July." Another boy raised his hand "Isn't Easter when we eat turkey?" "No" again said the teacher "that is Thanksgiving" Growing more impatient, she heard from two other children, about Christmas and Halloween. Finally the UU girl raises her hand, "I know" she says "Easter is when Jesus died on the cross, was placed in the tomb, and on the third day the stone was rolled away, and he emerged and if he saw his shadow there would be six more weeks of winter."

It was about the third century when the early Christian church overlaid the death and resurrection story on a holiday that was already quite popular. "Jesus has risen!" is the Christian proclamation on this day. Easter is the primary story in much of the Christian church. The Christian Easter story is a powerful one. The march of Jesus into Jerusalem, the showdown at the temple, the last supper, his betrayal, his arrest and his trial are all powerful symbols of our own lives. I ponder the brutal crucifixion and those who stayed by his side (all of them women if you remember), I think of his cry of anguish and the death. I think about the tomb he was laid in, and the huge stone that was placed over the entrance. After the Passover feast, the women went to the tomb to anoint his body only to find the great stone guarding the entrance rolled away and a man ... dressed in white ... and he said unto them "Do not be amazed; you seek Jesus of Nazareth who was crucified. He has risen, he is not here..." (Mark 15-16). The women run out of the empty tomb in terror.

The story of Easter, like much of the Gospels, is a Jewish Midrash. Midrash is a way of interpreting legend to reinforce other teachings. Jesus, the man, did live and did amazing things and spoke a timeless and loving message. But his life and death are

reinforcements of earlier Jewish teachings. That Jesus died a gruesome death on the cross is no small matter. Not because he had failed, but because he reminds us of the human frailty of all life, and more importantly, he reminded his earlier Jewish followers of another “suffering servant for God:” the prophet Isaiah. The death and resurrection story, as John Shelby Spong and many other scholars have shown, is a replay of the death and message of the prophet Isaiah who died five hundred years earlier. He too came to bring the people a redemptive message of love; he too spoke of loving thy enemy and turning from the obsession of rituals and laws to the care of each other; and he too died an unprotected common death. It is in that same tradition that Jesus is laid in a tomb -- an eternal grave. The fact of the matter is that Jesus was probably not laid in any kind of marked grave at all, much less a tomb. Crucified criminals were taken down and tossed into a common grave, as we might imagine from Mary Magdalene’s lamentations in the gospel of John when she says, “they have taken my lord and I do not know where they have laid him.”

The story of the tomb, far from being a Christian event to glorify a gruesome death, was probably a Jewish take on a very old story. “The messiah has risen” wrote the disciples -- the one promised to lead the Jews out of bondage. Only then did they realize his leadership was spiritual not physical. Ponder that my friends in this time of pandemic because it’s important , “Spiritual Not Physical.” The Easter story reminds us that while our physical lives are threatened and we are confined, the inner peace we need won’t come from the pandemic magically going away. It will come when we are able to see our resurrection as spiritual and metaphorical. I am reminded often these days of Emily Dickenson, who rarely left her home, as if the world itself was a disease. From her confinement, likely, scholars now believe, because of her epilepsy, she experienced powerful Easter moments. Death for her, and therefore life, was nothing to fear, the physical only a pause in the eternal promise of God:

'T was a long parting, but the time
 For interview had come;
 Before the judgment-seat of God,
 The last and second time
 These fleshless lovers met,
 A heaven in a gaze,
 A heaven of heavens, the privilege
 Of one another's eyes.
 No lifetime set on them,
 Apparellled as the new

Unborn, except they had beheld,
 Born everlasting now.
 Was bridal e'er like this?
 A paradise, the host,
 And cherubim and seraphim
 The most familiar guest. – Emily Dickenson, *Resurrection*

In the Easter story then, the cross, his death, the stone and the empty tomb are metaphors of a great truth in life. They speak of the unmistakable suffering we all feel, the hope for a better tomorrow, and the spirit that carries us onward despite the odds of living. We die or some part of our life dies, we place the memory in a tomb, and in time we emerge in a new form. Resurrections happen to all of us. Easter from the Latin means passage. The Easter event is a story of passing through suffering to be freed from the empty tomb in a new form.

Many of us house our losses in a tomb; some of us quite literally are seeing our houses as tombs. For those women suffering domestic abuse, for the poor with too little space and no internet, for the front-line workers, in health care, food, delivery, home can be at best a tentative respite.

Most of us have done so well in keeping up the faith of our best intentions. I am so proud of you who have brought your best selves to ZOOM meetings. (And, might I say, our worst housekeeping; there has been nothing so personal as our virtual glimpse into each other's homes, with kids running around, cats on keyboards, and laundry on the bed.) But I am well aware that many of us are struggling with darker thoughts, anxieties that make us want to crawl out of skins, relationships that are frayed, and deep worries about money. These are real moments in the tombs of our fears my friends. I know you are having them. Please call me. Don't journey this way alone.

We have learned to bury our darker thoughts. To roll the stone across the door. It makes sense. It's what we do with persons and things that die. We bury them. In the tomb are possibilities for the kind of relationships we hoped to have, the kind of love we hope we would have experienced, or been able to hold onto. Maybe there are dreams for the kind of life we could have led if circumstances would have been a little different, if we would have been a little different.

As my colleague Rev. Joseph Boyd wrote: "In many ways, especially now, this is a mature and noble choice, and it has its limitations. Of course, we tell ourselves that this pandemic will end. The tomb remains, waiting. The angel remains inside, waiting. The boulder in our mind looms so large dividing our life from the life we hoped for, that we

know there is no use in even going there. Not now, not ever. The root of our grief and thus the root of our love waits for a visit. Our hearts lament.

“But here is the good news. We will emerge. I promise you we will free ourselves from the tomb to the possibility of new life is there every single day. It is not a miracle, it is not supernatural, it is not rare. What is rare is our ability to see it up close, to let it in, to move us to the point of terror and amazement.

“The beginning of resurrection is never death. Death is commonplace. And it touches us deeply, but it is not the beginning of resurrection. The beginning of resurrection is honor. Like the women bringing spices, ready to anoint Jesus, we must be willing to honor our losses, to honor the life we had and what could have been. We begin our freedom by honoring the fears of our lives and then honoring the fact that we are surviving them. Because each day that passes is one more day to freedom.

“We go into the tomb not knowing how we will ever manage it. The emotions and experience [is] visceral. We expect to smell rot and to see ghastly sights, and we don’t know how we will deal with it. We don’t even know if we’ll be able to get inside. But we go anyway, not knowing how we will get out, not knowing how we will manage.”
 (“Easter Homily” Rev. Joseph Boyd UU Church of Youngstown, OH April 1, 2018)

In that moment you discover the life you have lived is much bigger than you ever imagined, bigger than this pandemic, bigger than our lack of money, bigger than even our country. All your grief, all your love, all your hope, all your fear – it’s not hidden in some tomb. No boulder could keep it out. The boulder is rolled away and we are free. Whatever is human is nameable, whatever is nameable is manageable, whatever is manageable can set us free, said the great Fred Rogers. It’s all alive and out in the world right now, everywhere, part of you, every single moment. It’s in the valley, in the grass, in Galilee, waiting. Your heart beats out of control and your blood rushes as you run out of the tomb, and as you run as fast as you can, you notice something – you’re alive.
 (adapted *ibid*, Boyd)

Life can only come from death. One depends on the other. Only from the renewed earth do tulips rise to a warming sun, only from the ashes does the phoenix rise, only from the tomb does Jesus walk freely again. Only from death comes life, physical or otherwise. The good news is this: Each of us has an Easter waiting. It’s not reserved just for the holy, or even the courageous. Each one of us has the power of resurrection, right here and right now.

What stands in our way? The stones of doubt, control, and fear. One of us must face a

life of new choices but feels powerless to move. The stone of fear. A marriage seems stuck and while others have suggested how to get it going again, we resist. The stone of control. We feel anger at a loved one for an almost unspeakable hurt. We know we need to forgive but how? The stone of anger. We need to make a decision about our future and soon, but what if the path we are considering is the wrong one? The stone of doubt. But even when these stones are rolled away some of us stay in the tomb, empty save for our fears of stepping out. It is not always easy. Behaviors, even unhealthy ones, are a part of our comfort.

I have no illusions here, my friends; I have been through some of these troubles. And we all feel entombed now. These stones are not easy to roll away from the tomb of our lives. This can easily be the most difficult work you will ever face. But you can do it! I know that God is within us and around us always and know that we can leave the empty tomb and walk freely again into the light.

Easter remind us that we are already freed from the tomb. Easter reminds us that spring follows winter, even this long winter of our pandemic. Light follows dark and even today, when it seems cold, we can remember that with faith all life is possible. We learn, again, out of the tomb of our struggles lies a new life of grace and giving, a creative power that shatters the icy tomb of our winter to the light of day that whispers, Hallelujah, life rises once again. Amen.