



*The Unitarian Church in Westport*

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## **SERMON TRANSCRIPT:**

### ***We Become***

***By the Rev. Dr. John Morehouse***

***Sunday, April 4, 2021***

Roberta Bondi teaches church history at Candler Theological School at Emory University in Atlanta. In the midst of the mass shooting of Asian American spa workers in Atlanta, she speaks of what our perceived differences can mean in a time such as this. What we become as people says so much about what we accept as truth. This Easter morning, as we celebrate the resurrection of life with or without the story of Jesus, Rabbits or Flying Bells from Rome, I want to tell you a story Roberta tells in her work [In Ordinary Time](#).

She had just started teaching in the seminary. Her own life had not been easy. Brought up by secularly minded father who abused her and her Southern Baptist mother who ignored her, Roberta had to reconcile a life of abuse, hell and damnation with her longing for love and compassion. She had finally broken through her abuse, went to graduate school, started a family and landed a new professorship. She and her husband attend an ecumenical dinner church, that is a church that shares its liturgy over a meal. One of her dear friends called her to say that her son Evan had been in a motorcycle accident on Good Friday. Evan had been estranged from his parents for years, preferring the company of hard drinking and drugging motorcyclists to the more genteel society his parents kept in Atlanta. That said, Evan had not been drinking and was wearing his helmet when a drunk driver hit him head on. Roberta, who had a daughter Evan's age, rushed to Grady Hospital in Atlanta. Grady is a large and complex public hospital with Atlanta's only Level 1 trauma unit.

When Roberta arrived, she found Evan's parents Nicole and John in a waiting room off of the ICU. They were surrounded by other people from their church holding them and crying. Evan was still alive but clearly in grave danger. Roberta looked around the drab waiting room with its chipped green paint and coffee machine in the corner. And then she noticed another group in the room with them. Evan friends, about six of them all wearing leather and piercings and spiked hair. They were there to keep vigil as well.

Roberta didn't want to like these people, in fact, despite priding herself on being a progressive Christian, she didn't like these people. They represented all the heartache Evan's parents had been going through, the emails unanswered, the holidays missed, the worry that their wayward 21-year-old son would end up just like this. And the more Roberta looked at them huddled quietly in the corner the more she felt her heart seized upon by the darkness of this time.

Roberta finally had a chance to go see Evan. He was on life support, his body bruised and broken. She found herself staring at his thick black hair and wishing it could save him now.

After several hours now late into the night, the doctor finally came in. He was young and not at all experienced in how to talk with a family in this kind of crisis. He finally just blurted out the truth. He is very serious, even if he survives he is likely to not regain consciousness. I am afraid there isn't much more we can do. And with that the room exploded into tears.

Over the course of the next twelve hours more and more friends of the family and friends of Evan started to arrive, bringing flowers, food, someone brought a guitar. The staff moved the entire group into a very large conference room with only chairs alongside the walls. As the two groups grew they became one, still separated by age, faith and circumstances but becoming one, becoming a we. Evan's friends would go into to see him and come out broken. The friends would relate to the family how Evan took care of so many of them, bringing food when needed, helping them get help with addictions and drug rehab. Evan was clearly the center of this biker community. Clearly, his loving heart had found its own home and now that community was grieving right alongside the family. As this new community began to become, someone suggested a prayer circle. All forty or so of them, clad in leather or homespun vests made a circle with the chairs. Someone suggested that Roberta should lead them in prayer, she was after all the religious professional in the room. It did not escape her that this was after midnight of Good Friday, now into Dark Saturday, and she did her best to ask for strength and love, and yes even a miracle to bring Evan back. Through her tears Roberta could see this new community, of those so different than anyone else holding hands and singing to an out of tune guitar. She sobbed.

Easter is a powerful holy day. It starts with the heartbreak of Jesus' death, seen as a defeat, even as a lie by his disciples who believed he would be the one to change the world. But instead he died, a gruesome death, broken, not unlike Evan, despite having saving so many. His last words My God why have you forsaken me, is a heart break of astonishing depth. His male disciples scattered to the wind, afraid for their lives, while the women, especially his favorite disciple Mary Magdalene kept vigil over his body and his grave. They washed him and laid him in the tomb, and sobbed. What had happened? Wasn't he supposed to become God in all his glory?

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. On the third day the stone of tomb has been rolled away and Jesus is gone, to become the God man, the Christos, the anointed one. the Christian Easter story is a powerful one.

To understand these words, you have to understand not only the time in which they were written but the form of story they take. These passages, like much of the Gospels are 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, it’s important, “Spiritual Not Physical”. 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. 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, paques in French, from the Latin pesah, means passage. The Easter event is a story of passing through suffering to emerge from the empty tomb in a new form.

What would it take for any of us to experience a resurrection, to come down off the cross and emerge from the tombs of our lives? “Life” observed an old friend of mine “is the tomb”. We are surrounded by finitude. There is only so much time to fill, only so much money to spend, the people we love die or they go away and our days are, more often than not, filled with sorrows punctuated by happiness. It was the Buddha who said, “life is attachment, and with that comes sorrow.” What would it take to emerge from the tomb and feel the sunshine on our faces once again?

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. Only from death comes life, physical or otherwise. Think about those new directions that your life took after some failing in another; the death of the loved one, a divorce, losing your job. 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. Today, one of you is feeling the pain of a separation, today one of you is struggling with the demons of addiction, today one of you is feeling numb after seasons of meaningless labor, today, more than a few of us are feeling the chill of winter’s sorrows. We want to feel spring but it’s so hard! The fact is as my friend Rev. Scott Taylor puts it, Easter

and Spring are different stories, Spring always returns over and over again, but the disciples of Jesus, or the friends of Evan were waiting for a miracle.

In order to become something new, we have to die to what is old and broken. But there is so much that stands in our way.

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. These stones are not easy to roll away from the tomb of our lives. There is a lot more to resurrection than daffodils and bunny rabbits. 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 again into the light.

We can emerge from the tomb of our struggles to a new day with trust and hope. Trust is what underlies our hope. So, it is there that it must begin. Resurrections are only possible when we begin with the ones we love. When couples struggle in a relationship their ONLY salvation lies in trusting again. The tomb of doubt, fear and betrayal, is powerful and it takes time and hope to walk out of it again.

Trust is the leap into love that says "it's going to be o.k. to open up again even if the worst does happen." Trust says "whatever happens, it will all right". Trust allow us to become something, someone new. That's the true Easter story. That's the Easter message. That even in death you can trust that it will be all right. When Jesus gathered his disciples, he asked them for that same trust; "Take of this bread my body and eat of it. And know that I am in you always." Trust calls out of the empty tomb.

And when we trust, hope dawns. Easter Sunday dawned in Atlanta, gray and cold. Evan's parents were clearly exhausted. Family members and friends, both the parents and Evan's own had been cycling in and out of that large conference room for almost 40 hours. It had been a dark vigil but a powerfully healing one as well, as his parents learned that their son had not been lost, but newly found by those who needed him most. These many different types of people (neither Jew nor Gentile, Black nor White, Man nor Woman are different in his eyes wrote St. Paul. Neither was it so here. The parents finally decided it was time to pull the plug. Evan wasn't coming back. There wasn't going to be an Easter Miracle. Each said their goodbyes and he slipped his earthly coil to rest in the hereafter.

Roberta held one last prayer circle for those who remained. It was then that she understood. Yes, Evan had died but not in vain. His death was the Easter Story for those who had been so different, so estranged had found comfort in each other's arms. Literally, staunch and stuffy hugging rough and tattooed, crying and somehow rejoicing in the new people they had become together.

Easter remind us that we can always walk out of the tomb. Easter reminds us that spring follows winter. 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, we become anew, once again. Amen.