

A Passion For Life

**a reflection
by Rev. Bill Gupton**

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Heritage Universalist Unitarian Church
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My colleague, Robert Hardies, whom I quoted in the call to worship at the beginning of this service, writes in the current issue of Quest magazine: “To find the living among the dead – that is what the Easter story is all about.”

He is referring, of course, to the passage in the Gospel of Luke in which an angel asks Mary Magdalene and the other women who have entered Jesus’ tomb on Easter morning, “Why do you seek the living among the dead?” This line – which does not appear in any other gospel account, nor even in many of the ancient manuscripts of Luke itself – captures, in one pregnant sentence, both the Universalist and the Unitarian attitude toward Easter – and toward life.

Indeed, we have gathered this morning, not to celebrate a supernatural miracle that some claim happened in Palestine nearly 2,000 years ago – but rather to celebrate the very natural miracle of Life itself. To celebrate its perpetual renewal – each and every day, each and every moment – a mysterious yet utterly natural rebirth that is perhaps painted in more vivid relief for us, in the springtime, on Easter morning, or in any moment when we set aside our blinders and open our eyes to the wonder that it is, just to be alive.

There’s a magnificent description of this miracle in the opening passage of the book “Jesus and the Lost Goddess: The Secret Teachings of the Original Christians”:

Life is a mystery so awesome that we [learn to] insulate ourselves from its intensity. To numb our fear of the unknown, we desensitize ourselves to the miracle of living. We perpetuate the nonchalant lie that we know who we are, and what life is.

Yet behind this preposterous bluff, the Mystery remains unchanged – waiting for us to remember to wonder. It is waiting in a shaft of sunlight, in the thought of death, in the intoxication of new love, in the joy of childbirth or the shock of loss. One minute, we are going about our business as if life were nothing special – and the next, we come face to face with profound, unfathomable, breathtaking Mystery. This is both the origin, and the consummation, of the spiritual quest.

It is this kind of spiritual quest – the recognition of Mystery, and of our participation in it – that leads Unitarian Universalists to cultivate a passion for life. I choose that word “passion” intentionally today, for I want to distinguish my use of it, from the way it has been more commonly used, by Mel Gibson and others, at this time of year – which is to glorify human suffering and to spotlight human cruelty, to promote a theology of death and punishment.

By contrast, we Universalists, even and especially on Easter Sunday, speak of a Spirit of Life and a God that does not judge, does not cast aside, does not separate into “saved” and “unsaved.” Thus it is that in our ceremonies of baby dedication, we affirm our commitment to the idea that people are born not in sin, but in wonder and beauty.

Thus it is that in our ceremonies of adult membership commitment, we do not require some ritual purification of those joining us, but instead warmly embrace them, as they are, and welcome them into our community – with all their human frailties, all their human needs.

Thus it is that Jean Rowe, retiring minister of our church in suburban Memphis, Tennessee, can say of Easter, “As a Universalist, I view the story [of Jesus’ final days] broadly, and [am] open to a number of interpretations. For me, Jesus was not God in human form, but a true Son of God – one who was fully and completely open – transparent to what God would have us do. He was fully attuned ... he knew the secret to the kingdom.”

Rev. Rowe talks of the secret of the kingdom – a secret that, to me, boils down to a passion for life. A willingness to look for the living, among the dead.

To do so – to plumb the secrets of the kingdom, to experience the intensity of the Mystery – we need only to open ourselves to the very natural miracle of resurrection and rebirth. And so, on Easter Sunday, we sing “halleluia” to the unalterable truth that the Earth awakes again, that from a seed, deep within the frozen ground of winter, blooms the rose. We remember not only the symbolic story of rebirth and resurrection that is now almost two millennia old – but we remember the very real story of our own, personal experience.

As Robert Hardies puts it, “Resurrection is the story of our lives – and that makes the Easter tale one of the greatest dramas ever told. It’s the story of how, when we are lost in despair, we find hope. It’s the story of how we can reach what appears to be a dead end, and then discover a new path. It’s the story of how, when death touches our lives, we go on living, and find joy once again.”

Yet, I will admit – it is sometimes difficult, in these troubled times, to find that joy. Each day’s news brings us seemingly endless stories of human sorrow and misery: the ongoing tragedy in Iraq, the massacre of innocent schoolchildren in Minnesota – the heart-wrenching national spectacle of ethics and politics surrounding the life and death of one unfortunate woman in Florida.

This Easter week – as I made preparations for this service, as I wrote and then re-wrote and then re-wrote again the brief words I would share with you today – my thoughts were never far from Terry Schiavo. My heart ached for her husband, for her parents, for her family – and, most of all, for her. Though she is apparently unaware of it, she has become a pawn in a struggle between competing forces much larger than she – much like another human being who, tradition has it, died on a cross nearly two thousand years ago.

For those women who came to Jesus’ tomb, for the family members gathered around Terry Schiavo’s bed – and, yes, for those protestors, on both sides, gathered outside her hospice room – for the media and the judges and the politicians – and even for us, here in a suburban sanctuary in Cincinnati

– the challenge of this time, the challenge of this and every Easter, is to find the living among the dead.

This is the defining test of our human spirit – and it is the reason I believe we are drawn into religious community. We say that ours is “one church, many paths” – and nowhere is this more true than when we consider these matters of life and of death. Each of us has a unique path to follow – a spiritual practice, a personal belief system, a set of religious rules or ethical principles by which we steer our lives, and through which we find meaning. But even with all our differences, we are united – we are one church, we are one human family – when it comes to this great dilemma: knowing that we must die, and seeking how to live.

As I say, I believe this is why we come to church – and why more of us come to church on Easter than on most any other Sunday. Like Thoreau, we want to assure ourselves that, when we come to die, we won’t discover that we haven’t lived. And so, we seek to nurture, in ourselves and others, a passion for life.

Listen to this poem by the Universalist Elizabeth Tarbox, titled “Expect Life”:

Do not live too far in the past, or in the future. Live now. In each moment expect a miracle”: ten kinds of birds at the feeder, the tracks of a fox in the snow.

Pick up a magnifying glass and scrutinize the crocus. See the pollen at the center of the daffodil – Life’s dust – and be astonished ... be arrested by its beauty.

Run naked through the garden early in the morning, and hope the wild geese fly by. Get silly and laugh loudly with your grandchildren – or your grandparents. Refuse to leave the dead behind, but bring their memory to all your chores and games and corners of quiet...

Love – and know that your love will sometimes bring you to tears; grieve, and know that it is because you were willing to love.

Do not be afraid to die today – but expect life!

I can't stand here this morning and tell you that I've rooted out the secret of how to live life, the secret of the kingdom – but to me, that last line: “Do not be afraid to die today, but expect life” – that's a pretty good start.

I once was asked, by a particularly thoughtful high school student, if I had ever seen God. Without hesitation, I answered – to his surprise, and, I must admit, to my own – “absolutely!” He of course wanted to know where – and I told him: “in another person's eyes.”

I encourage you, at least once today, to look deeply into someone else's eyes – and to see there, the reflection of your own divinity, your own Spirit of Life. Perhaps, as you do, you will experience a rebirth, a resurrection inside yourself – and in that moment, know the meaning of the Sanskrit word “namaste:” the divine in me, recognizes the divine in you.

If we could but live in this manner, we could truly live with a passion for life. And after all, this is really all that Jesus asked of us – and all we, who are alive today, need do to honor him, and all the other great religious teachers of human history. And so, this Easter morning, I say to you, along with the ancient prophet:

Look to this day – for it is life, the very life of life.

In its brief course lie all the verities

and realities of your existence:

The bliss of growth,

The glory of action,

The splendor of beauty –

For yesterday is but a dream,

and tomorrow is only a vision.

But today, well lived, makes every yesterday a dream of happiness

and every tomorrow a vision of hope.

Look well, therefore, to this day.

May it be so. Amen.