

If Not Now, When?
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First Parish in Hingham (Old Ship Church)
Unitarian Universalist
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Meditation

Let us join our minds and hearts
in the spirit of meditation, prayer, and then gathered silence...

Easter... spring... life renewed once again.

May we breathe into the season, into the day...
Grateful to be here, with one another, in this place made sacred by love.

May we breathe into the season, into the day...
Finding our heart's center... of love... compassion... life.

And from our heart's love, may our prayers grow...
Prayers for those who are hungry, lonely, without a home...
Prayers for those in the crossfire of war far away...
 or living with fear on the city streets closer to home...
Prayers for peace...
Prayers for healing for those in need of healing...
Prayers for strength for those in need of strength...
Prayers for life's renewal for each and all...
 this Easter, this spring... and for time to come.

Sermon

When I was growing up our Presbyterian household celebrated Easter as perhaps many of you did – or still do: Easter egg hunts, visits from the Easter bunny, jelly beans and chocolate, Easter lilies, Easter bonnets and songs about Easter bonnets... and... the story of Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection.

Quite a mix.

Yet as a child I just took it all in stride. It is, after all, a rare nine-year-old who would ponder deeply or even question the connections between chocolate bunnies on the one hand and saviors raised from the dead on the other. And I wasn't that rare nine-year-old.

Just took it all in.

Which means that it is all imprinted forever on my brain. Which means that for me *all* of that is still Easter.

Which *doesn't* mean that in the years since I haven't given some thought to the strange juxtapositions of the season.

And my general conclusion is that our sometimes worn and tattered human spirits simply need Easter – or something like Easter, call it what you will, with whatever variety of expressions of renewal and even resurrection. We human beings need times in our lives when we celebrate the renewal of life, when we remember and celebrate that from winter comes spring, when we recall that out of the depths of despair and darkness and suffering new life *can* emerge. It has before, and it can again.

And so, though I no longer understand the story of Jesus' resurrection in any literal sense, I surely do understand the power of the mythic image of the dying god reborn. It is an ancient image; the Christian story is not the only version. And it is an image which more vividly than any words can speak to our inner knowing that the spirit does or at least can rise from seeming death, rise again to new life, to what we might name a spiritual rebirth.

And we do need reminders of the possibility of such renewal and rebirth.

I've quoted at other Easters poet May Sarton's words suggesting powerfully why we need such reminders:

Life... has been, from the start, a challenge. And that is the point... something like New England itself... above all the power to endure and to be renewed. ...here the roses grow beside the granite.

And we do see this "power to endure and to be renewed," not only in nature but in one another. Each day someone finds a renewal, one might well say a resurrection, of the spirit – renewed life in the midst of grief, sobriety after years of addiction, a home after years of homelessness, healing after a long illness... or healing of the spirit even in the midst of an illness that will not be cured. Each day someone finds a resurrection. That includes us. I've seen it. You've seen it. We're surrounded by examples. We're here after all!

Of course as May Sarton reminds us, it isn't always easy. "Life has been, from the start, a challenge," she wrote. And sometimes it may well be a long time waiting for that next resurrection of the spirit, that next renewal; and unlike the more or less dependable seasons (spring *will* come, even though we can't say precisely when), in our lives there actually is no guarantee.

In the woods where I most often run early in the morning, I don't often see others; but I do see a few early morning folks now and then. The other day someone I see at rare intervals was out walking her dogs. I shouted a greeting and a "How are you doing?" Her response, "Okay... hanging in there," had a tone that it seemed to me carried a little edge; I heard in her few words that maybe times were hard and all she was doing right now was using that "power to endure" of which the poet wrote. To endure I hope for her sake with a faith that renewal, a resurrection of the spirit, would come; but maybe for the time being just to endure. We've all had those times.

And we do know that our human lives are *not* precisely like the turning of the seasons, a turning which eventually does come each year, even if not with precise predictability.

But – some good news here – there is another way of looking at the difference between the seasons and our human lives. We can't do anything to hurry the arrival of spring; but we don't need to be passive in the face of life's tribulations. In fact, we'd better not be. We can make a *choice* to endure. We can make a choice to do more than endure. And – maybe most

importantly – we can make a choice to help others do more than endure. Because sometimes we just can't do it alone.

In Dr. Rachel Naomi Remen's book, *Kitchen Table Wisdom*, she tells a story about her mother. Two days before her mother's 80th birthday her mother declared that she wanted to climb the Statue of Liberty. She had lived in New York for most of her life, but had never been to the top of the Statue of Liberty, much less walked all the way up. Now she wanted to climb to the top, and this with a serious heart condition.

Well, Remen realized that if they rested every few steps, her mother could make it. And that is what they did – though it took six hours. Finally, a handful of steps from the top, one last pause, and her mother “eyed the last few steps between her and her goal with resentment. ‘Why,’ she said, ‘couldn't we have done these first?’”

So, Rachel Naomi Remen's mother found the spirit to choose to endure and more than endure – quite literally to rise up in fact – and with some humor too! But she also needed a companion, because sometimes we just *can't* do it alone. Nor should we have to.

It isn't easy to make that choice to endure and find renewal of the spirit.
But it is possible. And our shared companionship makes it more likely.

Knowing this, Dr. Remen, a physician much of whose work is with cancer patients and their families, says that she often suggests to her patients that the day before their treatment begins – whether radiation, chemotherapy, or surgery – they bring together a small circle of family and friends, and that they bring a small stone to that gathering. Each person in the circle is invited to say a word about some hard time or crisis of any sort which they went through and then to name the personal quality or qualities which helped to bring them through – maybe it was determination or maybe patience or maybe humor. And then they say directly to the person who is preparing for treatment, “I put determination into this stone for you,” or “I put faith into this stone for you.” And so on.

(What quality would you put into such a stone? What gets you through?)

Finally of course the stone is returned to the patient, to keep, if they choose, throughout their treatment.

Magic? The mysterious influence of prayer or positive thinking? Or simply the power of knowing that others care, that you are not alone?

For millions of Christians, the story – what for them is the hard and fast reality – of Jesus dying on the cross *for them* tells them that they are not alone, that whatever happens they are not alone, that Jesus is their companion, and that his death and resurrection for our sake means that they, too, will get through.

That's *powerful* reassurance and solace.

Yet, for me, that supposed supernatural miracle is not at the heart of my living and enduring and renewing. Which is why I resonate to Mary Oliver's words from her poem “Logos”:

Accept the miracle.
Accept, too, each spoken word
spoken with love.

... words which suggest to me the *natural* miracle of words spoken with love, whether *by* us or *for* us – words of encouragement, words of hope, or words simply of companionship and presence.

My sermon title – “If not now, when?” – speaks to the urgency of the need for such words, for such love.

That title, as some of you may have recognized, comes from Rabbi Hillel, an older contemporary of that other rabbi (which as you know simply means teacher) Jesus – it was Hillel who said:

If I am not for myself, who will be for me?
And if I am for myself alone, what am I?
And if not now, when?

Simple words – but a lot packed in.

“If I am not for myself, who will be for me?”

We must tend the fires of our own soul, nurture the depth of feeling in our own hearts.

“And if I am for myself alone, what am I?”

But, then, we must not only be for ourselves – we discover and we must discover that we are part of a larger family of life, that we are nothing or less than nothing until we know and feel this.

“And if not now, when?”

And then the final, urgent question: When are we to tend our hearts, when are we to tend to others? If not *now*, when?

To me, to end the Christian story of Easter with the empty tomb – as we did in this morning’s reading from the Gospel of Mark – is to leave us with precisely such transformative questions. For the empty tomb, more than stories of post-resurrection appearances – leaves us it seems to me with exactly what we need, with the question of our lives, with the challenge of our lives, namely: Will we tend to our souls? Will we tend to others? If not now, when?

How, after all, *would* we truly want to live? Don’t we want to seek our own depths, to more often live and act and speak from a place of compassion and love? Don’t we want to help others? Don’t we want to learn to see through our anger to our more loving self? Don’t we want to be part of the global peacemaking team? Don’t we want to be among those who heal the earth because we love the family of life of which we are a part, and who accept that we are responsible for dramatic changes in the earth’s climate and ecosystems and who choose to rise to the challenge? Don’t we want to love?

In answer to all of these questions: Of course! And if not now, when??

And this *is* the difference between the passing seasons and us human beings. This *is* the difference between the creatures of the wild and us. *We* can choose.

Our resurrections of the spirit, our renewals of life, are not dependent on the whims of the seasons. Yes, sometimes all we can manage is to endure. And yes, sometimes renewal comes as if a free gift of grace. But also, and again and again we can *choose*. Choose love – of our *deeper* nature and of our neighbors. Choose love – of our *flawed* nature and of our neighbors in spite of *their* flaws.

Finally, this word.

I find it reassuring to remember that not all flowers bloom at the same time. Now the snowdrops and crocuses, soon the daffodils. And so the procession will continue. Eventually roses and summer wildflowers, and then the early autumn continued gift of goldenrod and other late bloomers.

Not everyone blooms in the spring. Not all resurrections of the spirit happen on schedule or on cue. And there are no guarantees in the midst of a sometimes hard life.

But we can still ask ourselves the question: If not now, when?

Henri-Frederic Amiel put it succinctly:

Life is short.

Oh, be swift to love! Make haste to be kind!

--Henri-Frederic Amiel

It might make all the difference.

If not now, when.

So may it be.