

This Resurrection Madness

*A sermon delivered at the Lakehead Unitarian Fellowship, Thunder Bay, Ontario
by the Rev. Suzanne Wasilczuk
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[Readings at end of sermon]

[With thanks to Ted Loder for his poem "I Praise You for This Resurrection Madness" in *Guerrillas of Grace* and Judith Viorst's *Alexander's Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day*]

The Easter Story.

It had been a terrible, horrible, no good, very bad few days for Jesus.

It had started out not so very bad.

Jesus had traveled to Jerusalem, and entered the city on a donkey. Or a colt.

Depending on which story you hear.

Some said that riding a donkey fulfilled Isaiah's prophecy – the arrival of the Messiah.

Some said riding on a colt acclaimed Jesus as a leader, a king.

Others said riding on a humble ass showed Jesus' solidarity with the fishermen and carpenters, with the *campesinos*, the humble farmers.

A humble transport for a humble man, who worked for humble folks.

At any rate, the religious authorities heard folks calling him Messiah. The Promised One. Savior. He who would lead the people.

The authorities labeled Jesus heretic. A threat to the priests and to the Temple.

Pilate, the head of government in that area, heard Jesus called a king. Pilate labeled Jesus a subversive, a threat to the Roman empire.

It was the start of a terrible, horrible, no good, very bad couple of days.

But then, celebration, of the *seder* – the Jewish Passover – proved a calm spot in the week. Bread – the staff of life – the bounty of the earth – symbol of growing life – bread was shared.

And wine. Fruit of the vine. Filling veins with warmth, a feeling of companionship and of goodwill. Wine was shared.

Bitter herbs to remember the bonds of slavery. Sharp foods and sweet foods – to remember the vicissitudes and the victories on the journey.

"Slavery to freedom, sorrow to happiness, mourning to celebration, darkness to light."
[from a Varda Livney Recycled Paper Greetings card]

The Seder – a feast of freedom and the potential for bounteous life.

Then the terrible, horrible, no good, very bad day resumed.

In a garden called Gethsemane, Jesus asks his friends to stay awake with him while he prays, while he meditates on his future. His friends fall asleep.

Then one of his friends points out Jesus to the Roman guards. Threat to the state. Revolutionary. Order and stability upthrown. Definitely an undesirable.

Some call this the ultimate betrayal. Traitor! Judas!

Others say the kiss was needed, a necessary act for the story to unfold as it must. Judas as player of a role, as God's patsy.

Whichever it was, kiss and tell is never a good spot to be in – whether you are the kisser, or the kissee.

The day just gets worse. Another friend denies he ever knew Jesus. Three times.

The Roman guards take Jesus to Caiaphas, the chief priest of the Temple. It's the middle of the night. An emergency session is called. Charges are made:

Jesus cavorts with sinners and prostitutes. No visible means of support. Unmarried. At the age of 33! And he hangs around with semi-employed fishermen, a tax collector, an assortment of bums. And women followers, too! A menace to order and stability and the status quo, no doubt.

It is said he's called King, which to a Jew means the Messiah [the promised deliverer of the Jewish people].

But such a pathetic excuse for a Messiah. A real Messiah would be glitzy, ritzy, star-quality. Not a hick from the boonies. Who wants to change the world. Who asks folks to look beyond class, beyond gender, beyond tribal identity. Who says the meek shall inherit the earth. Blessed are the peacemakers. Ideas too odd, too scary to contemplate. Poppycock. Rubbish. Crazy talk.

The religious assembly says: "He is guilty and he must die."

A really, really bad day.

As if a bunch of very conscientious, dutiful priests weren't bad enough, Jesus is taken before Pilate, the governor in the area. And we all know how fearsome protective and closed-minded a governor can be. Jesus is taken before Pilate.

Pilate – he knows which side his bread is buttered on – Pilate calls together the priests, the leaders, and the people. He confabs with Herod, the other secular authority in the area.

Pilate suggests Jesus be flogged and released.

But, when you don't trust any kind of change, when you're scared and angry, when times are tough and you're filled with fear, someone's got to be blamed – someone's gotta pay.

Today that fear might manifest in bullying, a variety of sexual humiliation, torture, a bombing, a mass shooting. For Jesus it's a whipping, a scrap of purple cloth and a crown of thorns to signify his royalty, and lots of verbal abuse.

Making fun of his idea of kingdom. A kingdom of love and justice. As if that could get anyone anywhere in the courts of wealth and power.

And Pilate washes his hands of the whole affair. Let someone else, anyone else, decide Jesus' ultimate fate, be responsible.

Today his fate might be a beating or a stoning, a firing squad or hanging, lethal injection, or electrocution.

For Jesus – crucifixion.

Many folks follow the procession to the killing field. Especially a group of women – Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Joseph, the nameless mother of the sons of Zebedee. Women followers. In his daily life Jesus noticed women, talked with them,

respected them, welcomed them as disciples into his kingdom of love and justice on earth. Women followers. Outrageous! for the time.

And Jesus says to them now: “Women of Jerusalem, do not weep for me, weep for yourselves and [for] your children.”

Weep for the kingdoms ruled without love, the kingdoms not ruled by justice. Weep for the sorry place of women, and children, the weak and the powerless, in this country, in other lands, now, and for decades, centuries, millennia to come. “Weep for yourselves and [for] your children.”

Most of us know the rest of the story. Jesus dies on the cross, asking forgiveness for his tormentors, his torturers, his executioners.

After it’s over, this execution of a good and just man, Joseph, a member of the Jewish priesthood, the Sanhedrin, asks for Jesus’ body. Joseph and Nicodemus, a law professor, wrap Jesus’ body in a linen shroud, and carry him to the garden where he will be interred. Those women disciples buy and prepare spices and ointments to anoint the body. The next day is Saturday, the Jewish Sabbath, a day of rest.

And it is written, in the gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke:

Mary Magdalen, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome bring the spices, so that they might go and anoint him. Jesus is placed in the tomb, a stone covering the opening. And very early on the first day of the week, when the sun has risen, they [go] to the tomb, saying:

Who will roll away the stone from the entrance to the tomb?

They [look] up and [see] that the stone ha[s] already been rolled back, and on the right they s[ee] a young man. They [are] alarmed. But the man sa[ys] to them:

Why do you seek the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen.

So they [leave] the tomb quickly, for terror and amazement and great joy ha[s] seized them.

[Adapted from Matthew 28, 1-8, Mark 16, 1-8, and Luke 24, 1-5]

And this is how Jesus – the memory of his life and teachings – this is how Jesus lives on, is saved. In wonderment, amazement and great joy. “Salved, anointed by gentle hands where [he is] most tender.” A body crucified. A life saved. A mystifying turn in the story.

Jesus is dead. But Jesus – his words, his works – live on.

And the message of today – whether or not on this Easter day you call yourself Christian – the message of today is this: Love is strong as death. Love never dies. The arc of the moral universe still – slowly, slowly – bends toward justice.

The life of Love and Justice lives on, is alive in the universe. In many guises. Under many names. Embodied in the minds, the hearts and hands of many faiths, in many lands.

After death, after betrayal, after the flaying, the beating, the battering by the world –

Do you believe me when I say
 you are neither salvaged nor saved
 but salved, anointed by gentle hands
 where you are most tender?

When our hearts are wintry, grieving, or in pain, Love's touch calls the dead and bare
 fields of our hearts back to life again.

When we feel dead and buried, hopeless, in the dark.

When [we] are waiting, waiting in the deep, endless dark

Finally, finally, one day the stone rolls back. Light leaks into the darkness.

What is it in our lives that we need to roll away, roll away to let the light in?

When [we] are waiting in the dark
 Life [comes]
 As company or caller;
 whether
 the friend [we] trust to seek [us out],
 or the waiting spark [of life within us].

Something within us, something, someone outside of us, moves us, penetrates.

For far too long
 [we] have been walking
 in [our] sleep,
 wearing these ankle-weights.

And now
 the trees are trembling
 in this light
 and soon the birds,
 with tiny magnets in their wings,
 will be pulled back to us.

Some say Jesus is dead. Jesus is risen.
 I say, when we have experienced that terrible, horrible, no good, very bad day... or week,
 month or year...
 When we have felt dead, love's touch calls us back to life.

Whether we plant the seed, or another plants the seed for us.
 Whether we save this Earthly Garden, or the garden saves us,
 the lock of our stone cold heart is picked.
 The door of our tomb rolls away.
 And we are once again set "upon the royal road to new life."

That's the Easter story. The Easter story worth saving.

May it be so. May we make it so. Blessed be. And Amen.

“Coming Out of Darkness” by Deborah Gordon Cooper [former poet laureate of Duluth]

This morning
for the first time
in a long darkness

I heard the water sing,
taking the ice apart
with her quick fingers

like a woman unraveling a shawl.

And something in the earth
under the snow,
under my feet,
awoke and sang along.

And something in my bones
under my skin,
under my coat,
was humming too
as if it almost knew
the melody.

For far too long
I have been walking
in my sleep,
wearing these ankle-weights.

And now
the trees are trembling
in this light
and soon the birds,
with tiny magnets in their wings,
will be pulled back to us.

“Salvation” by Lynn Ungar
By what are you saved? And how?
Saved like a bit of string,
tucked away in a drawer?
Saved like a child rushed from
a burning building, already
singed and coughing smoke?
Or are you salvaged

like a car part – the one good door
when the rest is wrecked?

Do you believe me when I say
you are neither salvaged nor saved
but salved, anointed by gentle hands
where you are most tender?
Haven't you seen the way snow curls down
like a fresh sheet, how it
covers everything, makes everything
beautiful, without exception?

“Easter” by Lynn Ungar

What I want to know is simply this:
Who rolled away the stone?
Did Jesus, reviving from the touch of Judas' kiss
turn miracle to muscle on his own?
Or did some savior of the Savior move the rock
to let life enter from outside –
Resurrection as a sort of picking of the lock
that separates the bridegroom from his waiting bride?

Perhaps the stone itself got bored
with waiting for a happy ending to the story,
and rolled itself away, to set the body it had stored
upon the royal road to new life and eternal glory.

You might say it does not matter,
but when you are waiting in the dark
a person wants to know if Life is company or caller,
the friend you trust to seek you, or the waiting spark.

[Both readings from *Blessing the Bread: Meditations*, Boston: Skinner House Books, 1996.]