

Abundant Life, Expansive Love ©

A sermon preached by the Rev. Lee Bluemel
At The North Parish of North Andover, MA, Unitarian Universalist
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*“Those whom we love and lose are no longer where they were before.
They are now wherever we are.”*
– St. John Chrystostom (344-407)

“For lo, the winter is past, the rain is over and gone...”
– Song of Solomon (a Sabbath reading during Passover)

“Come and have breakfast.”

These are the words attributed to Jesus
when he appears on a beach one day just after daybreak
while his disciples are fishing in the Sea of Tiberias.
It wouldn't be all that remarkable a story-
in the gospel accounts, Jesus was *often* eating with people.
But the surprising thing about this story, of course,
is that it happens *after* Jesus has died.

As the story goes, Jesus just appears on the beach-
although the disciples don't know it *is* Jesus.
He tells them how to find some fish, gets a charcoal fire going,
offers what bread and fish he has to the guys, and tells them,
“Bring some of the fish that you have just caught.”
Then he says, *“Come and have breakfast.”* So they do.

It is a sweet, every day sort of interaction, this breakfast,
this resurrection story that takes place on the beach. I like it.
There are no great theological pronouncements or angels or crowds-
just a small group of men eating fish and bread, cooked over a charcoal fire.

When we talk about Jesus, we Unitarian Universalists tend to focus on his life and teachings, his expansive love and radical welcome table. We don't tend to focus so much on how he died, the stories of what happened afterwards and the theology about it all. But in our lives, we, too, are faced with the themes of this part of the story: the finality of death and struggles with guilt and grief and despair.

We know from our personal and collective lives that there are times when corrupt and life-crushing principalities and powers seem to utterly triumph over the innocent and the good, or when mourning or despair has a hold over us or the land. There may be days in our lives when it feels like we're waiting to rise from the dead or when we've been stuck way too long in the tomb of the soul. There are times when death seems to have the final word.

But we also know that death alone does not put an end to relationship, and those we have loved are somehow with us, still. We know that as life unfolds before us, our love of life can be renewed.

We know there are those who resist life-crushing powers by turning again and again towards life and love, encouraged sometimes by the smallest moments. I think of the young people who say of the friends they've lost not just "rest in peace" but "rest in power"- rest in us, as we carry your energy and dreams forward.

This past December, the Sikh leader and movement organizer, Valarie Kaur, famously spoke about times of crisis. She said,

"In our tears and agony, we hold our children close and confront the truth: The future is dark. But my faith dares me to ask: What if this darkness is not the darkness of the tomb... but the darkness of the womb?"

In other words, what if, as individuals, as a congregation, a nation, or a faith we are not dead, but waiting to be re-born?

What if we are not finished and done, but on the cusp of an abundant new life signified by giving and receiving an expansive love?

Do we face the darkness of the tomb or the darkness of the womb?

These questions are similar to the ones being asked by the characters in the Resurrection stories.

So I invite us to take a closer look at them today.

Now, these are mystical stories, faith stories, mythic-poetic stories.

They are not about facts;

if they were, it would be a problem that the stories don't all match.

They don't.

Each gospel was written separately, each writer offering their very own version of early Christian testimony to Jesus' resurrection. They are theological stories.

They are also human stories.

I can only imagine the harsh impact of Jesus' crucifixion among his followers.

With Jesus, it seems they had experienced abundant love and acceptance.

They had discovered new life even in the midst of intolerable conditions, the constant threat of violence, ongoing oppression, suppression and for many, abject poverty.

What a loss to have experienced *such* abundant love and then to be treated by the Romans like they were mere trouble-makers, zealots, throw-away lives, people to be pitied or humiliated- instead of the very people who could teach them what every human being most needs to know- *especially* the Romans. The Romans who crucified their prophet.

One can imagine the flood of every difficult emotion they might have felt in the wake of such violence and loss.

Some of those feelings may be familiar to us if we have lived long enough, and seen and experienced enough of life.

I imagine they would have been deep in the depths of despair,
in the raw pain of grief, of a loss too great to bear.
They would have felt stripped down and vulnerable,
struggling to accept the finality of one so loving and so good, one so loved, gone.

I imagine them terrified and traumatized by the brutal violence of Empire-
and fearful of what might become of them and their children.

I imagine them in shock and horrified that everything had gone so wrong,
that their moment of triumph had turned into a brutal tragedy,
that life had turned on a dime.

I imagine them full of fear and rage towards those in power.

I imagine them feeling betrayed by one of their closest companions,
untrusting now of one another,
perhaps distrustful of their own instincts and judgment and faith.

I imagine them regretful and plagued by guilt
for what they had done or not done,
for falling asleep when they should have stayed awake,
for deserting him when the soldiers closed in,
for denying that they knew him in an attempt to save their own skin.
Feeling guilty of cowardice and mistakes;
guilty of not paying close enough attention;
guilty of assuming they had more time—
for believing Jesus would always be with them, at least for a while longer.

I imagine them feeling defeated by the power of Empire,
sinking in the quicksands of despair and hopelessness.
I imagine them feeling bewildered and lost without him,
perhaps even abandoned, even while knowing that made no sense.

And then, having nowhere left to turn, turning to the tangible tasks at hand:
going through the motions of expected ritual, the embalming of the body,
only to discover that even that was stolen from them-

the chance to complete the rituals of death, to be with his body one last time.

Some of us may have experienced feelings like these,
and wondered how, and when- or *if*- we would leave
the tomb of our loss or despair.

Now, I was not raised with these stories,
so it is intriguing for me to read them as an adult –
and to consider how something so big as a world religion, as Christianity,
arose from these few, curious, simple stories.
They are stories in which the disciples don't recognize Jesus,
or when they do, he disappears;
stories in which he is mistaken for a stranger, a traveler, a gardener or a ghost.
There are stories of disbelief, of walking or eating together,
of being breathed upon or blessed or taught
before Jesus ascends to heaven.

The gospels *do* set the scene in a similar way.
They agree that Jesus died on the cross on the day before the Sabbath,
and that Joseph of Arimathea approaches Pilate
to ask for Jesus' body *before* the Sabbath arrives.

When Pilate grants him his request,
Joseph wraps the body in a clean linen cloth
that same afternoon and has it lain in a new tomb,
witnessed by some women.

The entrance to the tomb is closed, likely by a disk shaped stone
rolled edgewise in a gutter.

Then it is time for the Sabbath, the day of rest. Nothing happens.

In the early morning hours of the day after the Sabbath,
women return to the tomb. And here is where the stories diverge.

In the earliest versions of the gospel of Mark,
the earliest gospel written about 40 years after Jesus' death,
there were *no* resurrection appearances.

Rather, three women go to the tomb, find the stone rolled back,
and encounter a young man in a white robe, a heavenly messenger, sitting inside.

He tells them *"Do not to be alarmed,"*
that Jesus has been raised and will see them in Galilee.

The gospel then ended abruptly with these words,
*"So they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they
said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid."*

Later versions add on a short ending,
or a longer one with three resurrection appearances.

In these, he appears once to Mary Magdalene
and once to two disciples as they walk in the country, but no one believes them.
Finally, he appears to 11 of the disciples, upbraids them for their stubbornness,
and charges them to spread the gospel news. After that, he is taken up into heaven.

The **gospel of Matthew** was written a bit later than Mark,
in the 80's or 90's, for a Jewish audience, some 50 or 60 years after Jesus died.

In this version, the stone is *not* rolled away when the women arrive at the tomb.
Rather, an angel of the Lord does that task in very dramatic fashion
right in front of their eyes. As it says,

*"After the Sabbath, as the first day of the week was dawning,
Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb.
And suddenly there was a great earthquake; for an angel of the Lord,
descending from heaven, came and rolled back the stone and sat on it.
His appearance was like lightning, and his clothing white as snow."*

This dramatic heavenly messenger tells the women *"Do not be afraid"*,
and says that Jesus has been raised and will see them in Galilee.

In *this* gospel, the author was clearly combatting a rumor that Jesus' disciples stole the body.

Jesus' religious enemies warn that the disciples will

"go and steal him away, and tell the people, 'He has been raised from the dead,'

They bribe the guards at the tomb with money

so they'll lie- after they've seen the angel- and say instead

"His disciples came by night and stole him away while we were asleep."

In Matthew, there is only one resurrection appearance recorded.

The 11 disciples go to a mountain in Galilee where they meet Jesus

who gives a speech, sending them out to make disciples of all nations,

and telling them *"...remember I am with you always, to the end of the age."*

In the **Gospel of Luke**, written about the same time as Matthew, when the women enter the open tomb there are *"two men in dazzling clothes"* who reassure them and tell them Jesus has risen.

They run and tell everyone, but no one believes them-

although the disciple Peter *does* run to the tomb to see for himself if it's empty.

In this gospel, there are two resurrection appearances.

One happens to two disciples on the road to Emmaus.

A man joins them on their walk whom they don't recognize,

and they fill him in on the recent events.

He explains the scriptures to them; they invite him to stay and eat.

This stranger blesses and breaks the bread, they suddenly realize it is Jesus,

and in that moment, he vanishes.

They turn around to go back to Jerusalem and tell the other disciples about it.

In Jerusalem, Jesus appears among them all, saying *"Peace be with you."*

They are startled and terrified, and think they are seeing a ghost.

He reassures them, and then asks, *"Have you anything to eat?"*

Here we are with the eating again! First things first!

They give him a piece of broiled fish.

Then he explains the scriptures to them
and leads them from Jerusalem to Bethany.

There he blesses them, and then withdraws and is carried up into heaven.

The gospel of John was written latest of all, about a decade later still,
Sixty or seventy –some years after Jesus had died.

This gospel has the most resurrection appearances, four in all.

Mary Magdalene is weeping at the empty tomb
when she notices two angels in white, sitting inside.

They ask her why she's weeping; she explains she doesn't know where the body is.
Then she turns and sees a man she thinks is the gardener, and the dialogue repeats.
Then he calls her by her name and she realizes it is Jesus.

He tells her "*Do not hold on to me,*" and that he is ascending to God.

That night, Jesus appears to the disciples
as they gather in a house shut tight and locked and says, "*Peace be with you.*"

He breathes on them so they receive the Holy Spirit.

A week later he returns to the house for a third sighting,
to convince the disciple Thomas, who missed his first visit, and was doubting.

The 4th encounter is the one we began with- the one on the beach
while the disciples are fishing.

They see a man on the beach who invites them to breakfast.

Once eating, they don't dare ask him "*Who are you?*"

(He doesn't look the same, but by now they know it's Jesus- this keeps happening.)

They eat some fish and bread together.

He talks to Simon Peter one-on-one.

He tells them, "*Follow me.*"

So there you have it: These are the funny stories about brief encounters upon which a world religion is built.

They also capture and symbolize the events that turned Jesus' followers' lives around, from mourning to praise, from defeat to power, from death to life.

Sometimes it is just such small moments that can turn our lives around too- an encounter with a stranger, a simple meal with friends, a reminder that what we've been given by those we love is far more than can be taken away- even by death, a reminder to follow the path of love.

A reminder that we have the chance and the choice, over and over and over again, to respond to the gifts of life and love that we have received with an expansive love of our own.

"Follow me."

"Peace be with you."

"Do not hold on to me."

"Have you anything to eat?"

"Come and have breakfast."

"Remember I am with you always."

And then, the breath of blessing.

For those who freely follow Jesus, these are the words of resurrection.

For me, they offer a good message for those *we ourselves* will one day leave behind. The message is this:

"Live. Go ahead, live!"

It's OK- you can let me go. A new life is waiting for you with open arms.

Forgive yourself and live, keep going.

I'll be with you in ways you won't even know. My wish for you is peace.

So eat. Have your breakfast! Greet the new day.

There is abundant life within it. There is plenty of reason to love."

Let us join in the spirit of meditation, reflection and prayer:

Spirit of life and love, of God and Source, of Goddess and earth,
we give thanks for each moment of renewal and new life among us
and those we love--
thanks for new life that we have fought hard to reach,
thanks for new life that were unexpected and we did not foresee,
thanks for new life which is yet to come.

Renew this congregation,
so that we might turn our faces and open our eyes more often
to the glories of the abundant life that surrounds us,
and that our own hearts might swell more often
with a deep and expansive love--
not just for our own sakes but so that we might offer
a more constant and holy witness to the world.
Amen.