

The Empty Tomb
Rev. Terasa G. Cooley
Unitarian Universalist Church of Arlington
April 21, 2019

Prayer

Blessed be the flower that triumphs at last
Over the snows, over the centuries, over the seemingly barren times,
Over the heavy feet of cattle and of soldiers
treading down the fragile places of the earth.

Blessed be the flower that triumphs at last
Over the tangled branches, over the withered stem,
Over the seemingly meaningless pain,
Over the tearing thorns of roses and of barbed wires.

Blessed be the flower that triumphs at last
Even over the hand that gathers it, cuts it off from life,
From roots, from the memory and taste of iron and tears in the soil.

Blessed be the flower that triumphs at last
Over the closed rooms that are not its home, over efforts to domesticate
Its wild truth, over the vain words of priests and poets.

Blessed be the flower that triumphs at last
Bringing the breath of wind and the ancient cries that precede language
And defy words, bringing in its frail truth,
Humbly, prophetically, unconscious of self.

Blessed be the flower that triumphs at last
Over us, over pasts and futures, over words and silences,
Over deaths and lives, placing them all in their proper place,
Restoring to all things their joyful smallness.

Blessed be the flower that triumphs at last.

Sermon

So there they were: a ragtag group of people who had never been singled out in their lives. A fisherman, a prostitute -- people who were hardly ever considered special -- suddenly they were a part of something more incredible than they could imagine. This extraordinary man had come into their lives and they followed him, not even really knowing why. Their lives now felt important; they understood things that they never really knew before; it was like a gray cloth had been pulled aside, and behind it was this brand new sparkling world full of adventure.

And the adventure kept growing. The group of followers got larger and larger, and they began to be known wherever they went. Sometimes huge crowds would gather just to see him, and they would be touched by people who just wanted to touch something attached to him. He did something to people, not through a magical power from far off, but by showing them they had the magic within themselves, that everyone carried the key, if they would just use it.

But then it started to get too big. The crowds grew larger and more rowdy. The man was more and more outspoken in his criticisms of the powers that be. That wasn't such a problem before, but now that they were so well known people began to pay attention, and the crowds kept getting bigger and bigger. One of them wanted the man to use his influence politically, but he refused. He was after something deeper, more

meaningful, something that would change people's inner lives, as well as outward circumstances.

So the worst thing happened. The political one betrayed him, turned him into the authorities, told stories about him. They couldn't imagine it, one of them who had traveled so far with them, turning on him now. But the man seemed to expect it.

Things got really ugly then. They were all going to be arrested, and they had to do it, they had to pretend that they didn't know him, or else they would go down with him. They felt terrible: confused, guilty, afraid, sad, angry with him that he let things go this far.

And then he was gone – killed in the most humiliating way possible; cruelly executed with the common criminals and then his tortured body was thrown into a mass grave. One of his rich followers bribed the government to at least get his body back, and put it into a tomb and rolled a heavy stone across to keep out the looters.

They were stunned. They didn't know what to do, where to go, who to see. They stayed hidden away, in case they were still at risk, and could hardly look at each other for their shame and grief. Two of them, his mother and his lover, thought that at least they could go and properly prepare his body for burial. As they walked there, they realized that they wouldn't be able to move the stone by themselves, and thought about what they would do. When they arrived, they realized they didn't need to worry. Someone else had rolled away the stone, but worse: the body of their beloved was gone! Where could it be? Did grave robbers take it? Did

some malicious enemy take this opportunity for revenge? Or, was it possible, that something else far more mysterious had happened?

Whatever this story may mean to you theologically, we have to admit it's a great story. And biblical scholars tend to agree that that is truly the original end to the story. This is where the oldest gospel, the gospel of Mark ends. The parts about the resurrection and Jesus appearing to the apostles came much later, when the other gospels began to be written down and repeated. And it is at this point that I prefer to let the story end: facing the empty tomb, not knowing whether the emptiness brings hopelessness or new life.

For this is the story I think at some level we can all identify with. Haven't most of us, at some point in our lives, encountered something wonderfully exciting, something so deep and real we think it will change our lives forever. And then, inevitably, something about that experience disappoints us; we find it isn't the cure all for whatever ails us. We discover that perfection doesn't exist in this world. We find ourselves responding in selfish, self-protective, fearful ways. And we are left with all that emptiness.

Perhaps it's my own wishful thinking, but I believe that what Jesus, the human being, intended, was not that people would create stories of his bodily resurrection, but that they would finally listen to what he had been trying to tell them all along: that the magic was in themselves. That the kingdom was not something off in another world, in another age, but here,

among us now, between us now. That emptiness is not necessarily a disappointment, but the embodiment of hope.

What happens when we face the empty tomb is up to us. We can turn away in hopelessness, discouraged that someone or something has disappointed us yet again; or we can choose to dig deeper within ourselves to bring it alive within us. We can choose to have faith in the renewal that comes, knowing that often it comes simply because we have faith that it will.

This is a message echoed in the natural world around us. Despite the fact that this feels like the slowest, longest spring on record, that the warmth and refulgent green will never come, deep inside ourselves we know that eventually it will. We know this because we have seen it before, we trust in the cycles of life.

The same is true of us spiritually: our souls cycle through periods of great excitement and enlightenment, and then suddenly things seem to go underground, making it hard, and cold and dry inside. But if we choose to see that empty time as an opportunity for rebuilding, for new life to come, then, almost miraculously, it comes.

The poet Karin Boye put it this way:

It hurts when buds burst,
There is pain when
Something grows and when
Something must close.
Then, when it is worst and
Nothing helps.
They burst, as if in ecstasy, the
First buds of the tree,
When fear itself is compelled

To let go,
They fall in a glistening veil, all the
Drops from the twigs,
Blinking away their fears
Of the new,
Shutting out their doubts about the journey,
Feeling for an instant how this is
Their greatest safety,
To trust in that daring that shapes the world.

To trust in that daring that shapes the world. That is what Easter calls us to do. To trust, not only in something new coming from outside, but in our own abilities to bring about our renewal. It is only in emptiness that new life can take root. Renewal will come, it will come. It lies just inside, and outside, that empty tomb.

Come, let us sing an alleluia together to celebrate this cycle of life that bursts into bloom in our spirits.

Closing Words

Let us now know in a new way,
What we have always somehow sensed before,
That the magic of renewal lies within us,
That God's peace will make us whole.
Amen.