Easter Sunday: The Hope that Raises Us

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Opening Reading Jan Richardson, "Blessing of Hope," from *The Cure for Sorrow*

Reading from Mark 15-16

Sermon

This reading is the oldest gospel account of Jesus' death and resurrection. It's also the one where nobody sees the resurrected Jesus – a problem that was dealt with later, in an updated ending and in the accounts that followed. But here, the women are left in an unsettled place of grief, horror, loss, despair … and fear. And the author doesn't tell us what they make of it, or what happens next. Do they really say nothing to anyone and just go back to life as it was? Or do they wonder if maybe something is going on that they don't understand? Do they find hope in that uncertainty, and in each other? Do they see a possibility that what looked like the end maybe isn't quite, and that perhaps they still have more to contribute than they imagine?

We aren't told. Instead, this passage seems to ask us "what would you do?"

One of the things I appreciate about the book of Mark is that the author is often more interested in asking that question: "What would you do" than in giving us answers. An early Unitarian, perhaps.

And on one level, that's what this story is about. It's personal. When we find ourselves in an ending, with loss and grief that might become hopelessness, when we're deeply afraid … what do we do? Where do we turn? Can we imagine the possibility of a new beginning? How do we hold on to our faith in what matters most, when all seems to be lost?

These are questions for all of us - moments like that are part of being human. And even when later gospel writers use details of the resurrection to point us toward answers, this is still a story about being human and what we choose.

In later years, a lot of doctrine got layered onto this story. You may have encountered it – maybe you learned it growing up, or someone has earnestly explained it to you, or you've run across its many cultural references. Doctrine about Jesus' unique divinity, and God requiring this sacrifice and resurrection in order for sinful humans to reconcile with God and enjoy life after death.

It's doctrine that some find helpful for making meaning of this story and of our own losses and fears. If you hold it close, that doctrine calls you into a particular way of celebrating Easter and orienting your life. But if that doctrine doesn't work for you, that doesn't mean that there's nothing in this story for you. Ours is a non-doctrinal faith. But too often, in spite of our professed commitment to free and independent thinking, we allow others to define for us the meaning of our Christian heritage.

I know I did, with this story. I walked away from the whole thing because of my personal aversion to the idea of redemption through violence. I knew it was just doctrine, but the meaning

I'd learned early on just felt permanently stuck to the story. But then I encountered some modern progressive Christians with different takes on it – they were United Church of Christ, Methodist, Episcopalian – reimagining their relationship to this story within the framework of their faith. We Unitarian Universalists are not the only ones who do this. And I learned from them.

I'm not here to tell you that one way of relating to this story is better than another – or that you need to relate to it at all - just that whatever you choose, this is our story, and there's more than one legitimate way to find meaning in it.

But it's not an easy story – it never was, and for many of us it comes with baggage. So instead of wrestling with it, we (as a faith tradition) often take an easier path – at Easter we talk about spring, daffodils, new life and transformation in the natural world. Good topics, but they're not resurrection.

So stick with me, if you will, as we explore it a little today.

I find it helpful to go back, as best we can, to those first century followers of Jesus. For when we do, we find something that's often left out of our modern telling.

All the stories about and attributed to Jesus are personal and spiritual teachings about how to live a good life, how to treat each other. And. Both Jesus himself (as conveyed by first century writers) and the stories, including this one, were also political.

Within the Roman-occupied world, Jesus lived in a Jewish area that was controlled by a small number of authorities who were propped up by the Roman army. Offerings in the temple were supposed to be used to feed the poor, but they weren't. The wealthy were supposed to share generously, but didn't. And so the gap between the tiny wealthy minority and everyone else was growing; many people were very poor, even starving.

Into this corrupt and oppressive system, came Jesus, telling people that there is another way – not just to live – but to construct our world. This is key to all of these stories: they're not just about how to be good people – they're a response to ongoing systemic injustice.

Jesus positioned himself with the marginalized, oppressed, and exploited, he called out those with power, whoever they were, taking on the government, religious leaders, the military, the whole economic order. He offered a different way to structure society that prioritizes caring for the vulnerable over the preservation of power structures.

He taught, through stories and his own example, what such a world might look like, and how we might help bring it into existence by acting as if it is already here. He ignored the societal divisions that keep unjust systems in place, taught his followers to care for all … even eat with anyone (which was a radical and politically significant act); and he spoke of reversals of power to come – "Blessed are the meek" was not about encouraging people to be timid – it was a promise of a world in which the blessings of this life reach those who have been left out.

Much of the political in these stories is lost to modern ears – it requires a far more detailed knowledge of history and ancient languages than most of us have - but first century Jews and others who were dominated by the Roman empire, heard it loud and clear. These stories and teachings were not just esoteric spiritual words, and they were not about some promised afterlife – they were about the world we're called to create now.

Everything about the Jesus of biblical accounts was personal and political. This followed a long tradition of ancient Hebrew prophets who saw no separation between our spiritual lives … and changing the world. For such prophets, the personal invitation into a better way of being human and the political call to create a more just society on earth were one and the same.

In an unjust world, Jesus claimed the authority to speak of and for a world that is structured differently - where the last become first and the poor are exalted - a world that he said was here, now, and we access it when we live with love. And, he directly challenged those who abused power - that "son of god" language, for example, was co-opting a phrase that was normally reserved for Caesar.

Because it was political, Jesus probably knew how this was going to end for him. Systems do what they do; those with power will kill to hold on to it.

And because it was political, when Jesus was executed, his followers didn't just lose a teacher or a friend – they lost that vision that they had just begun to imagine might be made real.

What would you do?

In that time of fear and despair, it's not hard to imagine resurrection reframing everything – personally and politically. Personally, whatever the intent behind the later stories, they were a human expression of "Easter" experiences of presence and new beginnings after a profound Good Friday loss. Politically, where his death might have been seen as a triumph of Empire over justice – now we have the victory of physical human frailty over military might; connection and care over domination. With this reframing, his values and vision might still be possible.

Perhaps they are still possible. Societal priorities are still messed up, and seem to be getting even more so, but maybe it doesn't have to be that way. Looking around our country, and the actions of our country in the world, we might feel firmly entrenched in an anti-democratic, xenophobic and racist Good Friday world where systems do what they do – but maybe there's a way out. Maybe hate and violence don't get the last word; maybe purpose, courage and hope are found in choosing to follow those who do hard things and take risks in pursuit of that Beloved Community, where the world is organized differently – aligned with a universe we understand as rooted in love. A world we help bring into being when we act as though it is so.

These people, 2000 years ago, living through fear, oppression … the end of the world as they knew it, were able - through this story, and its spiritual and political implications - to keep the vision, the values, and the messages of hope alive. The resurrection was not the point of the story. The resurrection affirmed that different understanding of the world and our place in it - offering a hope that is more than just words.

Hope not made of wishes but of substance, of sinew and muscle and bone, hope that has breath and a beating heart. A tangible, human hope that raises us.

How often do we ask ourselves, is this it? Is this just the way my life or the world is? There's injustice, or suffering, or there's something about the way we're living that just isn't working - but maybe this is all we can hope for. It's just how it is.

Resurrection says … maybe not.

Resurrection says there's a power at work in the universe that is greater than the power that causes harm. A power that brings down tyrants and the systems that enable them, that lifts up the

oppressed, that heals, that feeds. And resurrection says that power – that we often call Love - can be known in moments of suffering, weakness, even death. When we sing "Spirit of Life" together each week, that's what we're singing about.

Resurrection takes that power, that Love, that hope and makes it human. Resurrection says it is not time to give up on this world, the holy is still at work within and among us, the story is not over, and there's always something we can do.

This Easter, what will we do?

This church, at its best, is a practice of coming together, transforming ourselves, and prioritizing people over power structures. Our faith calls us to a life that moves beyond the confines of unjust systems – personally and politically. And, when we heed that call, we undermine those systems - the change extends beyond our walls, and offers a very human hope that raises us from the dead – this day … every day.

One aspect of this different way of organizing ourselves involves paying attention to our own participation in the Empire of our day that privileges a few and harms a great many. This is important internal work, with leadership from (among others) our Inclusivity Team, our Green Sanctuary Team, and the Board and Ministry and Operations Team – continually trying to revise our governance to be more democratic and inclusive, even when that means processes change and power relocates.

The Easter story doesn't give us a simple, tidy ending – instead, it's an embodied story of holding on to what matters through death and beyond. It's a story of questions for us, and a story of hope. This and other stories of our religious heritage give us language and inagery to talk about these deeper things - language that's always imperfect, but as humans it's what we have to work with. And that's OK, because the words are never the point.

Whatever words you choose to speak of hope, and what you will do, my prayer for you, this Easter, is to know in your bones that hope of substance, not wishes, that raises you as often as needed – again and again and again.

May it be so.

Amen