

«The Miracle of Easter»

Sermon by Rev. Patty Hanneman, April 12, 2009

The Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Hillsborough, NC

The subject of Easter has been a problem for Unitarian Universalists for some time now. Not Easter itself but the idea of a bodily resurrection and a crucifixion ordained by god ahead of time. Both ideas seem to defy logic and many modern sensibilities. A God who would plan the death of his only beloved son with whom he is well pleased, planned for *my* salvation, does not fit my theology. I do not believe that the death of this man, Jesus, brought me into right relationship with God. But I *do* believe in the concept of resurrection, of deep conversion or transformation that brings us back to the right path for our lives, a path consistent with our higher values, a path which I think of as being in right relationship with the Sacred or Life itself. These *resurrections*, if you will, that call to us, surprise us, even threaten us with changes in our lives and new ways of looking at the world are part of what it means to be human. The great sacred myths, like the Easter story, may have their roots in historical events. But their power lies in how they speak to us about the foibles and triumphs of the human spirit. They remind us of the places where we consistently get off track, and what it often takes to return to the inheritance that is ours to live Easter lives.

So let's go back and tease apart the historical events that took place in Jerusalem surrounding that first Easter weekend as recorded in the Christian gospel stories. What actually happened? We can't be sure, but biblical scholars have found it interesting that the week leading up to Easter is the part of the four gospels that show the most similarity, so obviously the event was important enough for many groups to record. We also know that for the three years prior to this week in history, this man Jesus, or Yeshua as it would have been said in his native Aramaic, had focused his teachings, his Good News, on what scholars refer to as his "kingdom proclamation," his relentless insistence that the kingdom of God was at hand, and that his death was a direct result of this teaching.

In my mind, it is impossible to separate Jesus' "kingdom proclamation" from Easter and the concept of resurrection. Because the reason we shout "Halleluiah!" at Easter time is because we have this sense that the kingdom is at hand. What then is this *kingdom* that so many yearn for? What did Jesus mean by the kingdom? When Jesus taught his disciples to pray, he listed as his first request in the prayer, "Thy kingdom come." What he meant by this has been one of the most hotly debated subjects in Christianity through the ages. Every Christian theologian has at least one major paper on the subject. For my definition, I'm using the work of Neil Douglas-Klotz whose doctorate is in the field of biblical hermeneutics, or the science of interpretation. He attempts to look at Jesus' teachings through the lens of the Aramaic language and culture, which the historical Jesus was a part of.

He says first of all, we need to remember that a single word in Aramaic can often mean several seemingly different things, and that a wisdom teacher of that time and culture would have used a lot of word play to confound people; he would have used paradox; he would have been

intentionally unclear, ambiguous, using his language as Zen Buddhists now use koans, to work on the subconscious minds of his listeners in order to create deep “ahah!” moments that would lead to both inner and outer change.

The word that has been interpreted into English as “kingdom” was most likely the Aramiac word “malkuta” – which interestingly enough is a feminine-gendered noun, so “queendom” might be a more accurate interpretation. Other equally accurate interpretations of *malcuta* include concepts like a centralized source of power; an empowering vision of a world we seek; the counsel that can describe the most obvious next step for a group; a turning toward justice and compassion. This sense of *malcuta* can reside within you, or it may reside among you. An empowering vision of life aligned with the Holy, one that is life affirming, is another accurate interpretation of what Jesus was trying to teach.

Malcuta, this life-affirming, empowering vision... it is like a mustard seed that grows branches where birds nest and roots nurture the soil. It may look like a weed, but when firmly planted, it can do wonderful things (Matthew 13) *Malcuta*, you cannot see it! It is within you (Luke 17:20). *Malcuta*, it is like yeast which causes the bread to rise. With this kind of interpretation, the phrase from the St James version, “Repent ye, for the kingdom of God is at hand” could just as well mean, “turn around, you can touch it, it is so close to you, this new way of looking at your life that is so much more empowering and life-affirming than how you’re living now!”

Back to the Easter story. On the Sunday prior to Passover, Jesus and his entourage enter Jerusalem – his mother Mary, Mary Magdeline, his disciples and other unnamed folk. He’s been teaching this concept of *malcuta* for three years now, and it is clear that different factions of those who have heard him teach are looking at the kingdom differently. There have been a few sprinkled through the gospel stories who seemed to get it, but the men closest to him, his disciples, are often still clueless. Where will I sit in relation to your throne? they want to know. Somehow, they truly seem to believe that with God on their side, they can bring down the whole Roman Empire. The chief priests and scribes, the clergy and attorneys of the established Jewish community, believe that the kingdom he speaks of will sideline their moral authority. He had the audacity to curse them in their own temple for charging people to pray, saying that the kingdom, *malcuta*, this new consciousness was crumbling around them but would surely rise again.

And so that week we have the disciples becoming restless, still asking who is most important among them, vying for cabinet positions; promising allegiance, then denying they know him; promising to stay awake, then falling asleep; promising love, but wanting power. And we have nothing but silence from the women who love him. And finally the chief priests and scribes, who become so poisoned with hatred that they tell the Roman officials that Jesus wants to be king.

The most heart-rending part of this story for me is the trial of Jesus before Pontius Pilate. There is rioting in the streets, clouding everyone’s decision-making. No one steps forward as a character witness for this innocent man. People who know him are terrified! How abandoned he must have felt! How misunderstood. And then Pilate asks Jesus to defend himself. “Are you the

king of the Jews? Where is your kingdom?” And Jesus remains silent. What could he say? He is a wisdom teacher. The governor needs a sound bite. They can’t speak the same language.

You know the rest of the story. The man is executed on Friday, his friends cannot prepare his body for burial because Jewish law doesn’t permit it on the Sabbath, and by the morning following the Sabbath, his body is missing. “Be not afraid,” the angel says to his mother Mary, the same three words she heard from the angel announcing that she would deliver this son, 33 years ago. “Be not afraid. Something significant has happened here. I am calling you to a new kind of life. Things are gonna change. You think I’m going to let you stay huddled together in the Upper Room terrified? Oh, no, this is not the life I’ve got planned for you.”

The miracle of Easter is not the resurrection of Jesus, but the resurrection of the hearts and souls of the people who knew him. For forty days after Jesus’ execution, he appeared to his loved ones on numerous occasions. This part of the story I do not question, because it is not uncommon for people to feel and see the presence of a loved one shortly after their death. But in that forty days a miracle seemed to happen. They talked about their ministry with Jesus, they remembered his words at a deeper level, and they finally got it. They *got* what he had meant when he described *malcuta*. They became so infused with love that it took all their fear away. They knew they needed to carry his Good News into the world. They began to gather into communities, broke bread together, shared their resources, began to live the way Jesus had taught them to love. This is the resurrection story. Of a drastic change of heart, a movement from being stuck in Good Friday - of longing for something unnamed, then finally discovering it – to Easter Sunday – breaking through with a renewed sense of hope for a new way forward, a new understanding of what it means to live with a sense of purpose.

Why does the story have to include the grisly death of an innocent man? Why all the confusion? Why couldn’t Jesus have said, “I want a revolution” or “You need to attend to your spiritual life.” Why be so opaque that people still argue about what he meant by *malcuta*? Because this is our human condition, folks. We go about the business of our lives in Palm Sunday mode, feeling on top of the world but not really paying attention. Or we live in Good Friday mode, knowing things are not as they should be but not willing to undergo the sacrifices to get to the other side. Or simply too sad or tired or terrified. And then something shocks us, terrifies us, awes us into an “ahah!” moment, and we lose our fear. The miracle of Easter happens, “Be not afraid; I am with you” - the Sacred urge toward soulful living – grabs us by the nape of the neck and won’t let us go, shaking us out of the Good Fridays and Palm Sundays of our lives. The stone over our hearts is rolled away and we feel a renewed sense of hope. Halleluiah!

The Easter story says that there is no dead end to growing, no dead end to making changes, to taking chances, to being more loving, more compassionate, more just human beings. Easter also reminds us that these acts of resurrection can carry with them the loss of things we cherish. But this concept of beloved community, *malcuta*, that the man Jesus lived for, was misunderstood for, and ultimately died for, will not perish, but is resurrected in each of us when we remember. Halleluiah, and Blessed Be.