

To Be Continued

Readings: 'Revival' by Luci Shaw
'At the Tea Garden' by Margaret Hasse
Mark 16:1-8

In the church of my childhood, there was a member named Augusta. We all called her Gussie. Gussie was 81 years older than me. I considered her a special friend. So did my mother. Gussie was the kind of person who just about everyone considered a special friend. She loved her church and she loved the people in it. One of the many special things about Gussie was that she dressed for church. She was stylish and elegant. Her formal suit, hat, and gloves stood out in the congregation. She stood out in Seattle, my hometown, a city not known for its attention to style. Most people there dress in Polarfleece and sensible shoes, as if a hike might break out at any moment. There's nothing wrong with that, but it did make Gussie's elegance stand out. On Easter, Gussie always pulled out all the stops, wearing an Easter bonnet tastefully done up with flowers. Everyone looked forward to seeing the beauty and joy she embodied on Easter morning.

Gussie died in the late 1990s, in her late 90s, after a long, meaningful life and a brief illness. She died in the early spring, only a few weeks before Easter. We all mourned. A few members of the church mentioned how sad they would be to not see Gussie in her beautiful Easter bonnet that year. It felt like the end of Gussie's story, but it was also the beginning of a new chapter for our church. Someone had an idea. *What if we wore beautiful Easter bonnets like Gussie did?* She spread the word. Wear an Easter bonnet this year in honor of Gussie. My mom and I spent a wonderful afternoon shopping for Easter bonnets, remembering Gussie. That Easter morning, the sanctuary was filled with Easter bonnets on the head of dozens of women and quite a few men, puzzling many first time visitors. It was beautiful. The church of my childhood continues this tradition. Now, over 20 years after the death of Gussie, church members and friends, of all genders wear Easter bonnets on Easter morning. People who loved Gussie, People who never knew Gussie, people who weren't born before her death, people who were not part of that congregation during Gussie's lifetime have all been invited into Gussie's story. They all participate in this tradition. Her commitment to beauty lives on in all of them.

That is my Easter story. That is my resurrection. People of all ages, people of all genders wearing Easter bonnets year after year in memory of someone that not all of them remember. That is resurrection. That is the triumph of love over death, which is the Easter message. We remember today that death is never the end of the story. Love wins. Stories are always to be continued. Gussie's story continues on the heads and in the hearts of one congregation as they gather for worship this Sunday just as we do.

Just like Gussie, we will all be resurrected after death. It happens in many ways. It happens especially at memorial services. At the memorial services in this community, stories are told about the deceased. Funny stories. Loving stories. True stories. Stories that reflect who the deceased was and what he valued. Stories that reveal how deeply her life touched ours. We hear stories we never knew before and come to understand the deceased in a new way. In that way, our loved ones keep living, not in their bodies, but in ours. In our hearts, in our minds. As we celebrate the triumph of love over death today, we know that each of us is destined for this sort of resurrection. Death is never the end of the story. Love wins. Stories, including our stories, are always to

be continued. When our lives are over, we will live on in those who love us.

That is more than enough resurrection. That is more than enough Easter. That is more than enough rebirth. That is enough spring.

What is spring but an annual resurrection? The poets know this. 'Nature wakes from seeming death.' 'As the light lengthens, preacher of good news, evangelizing leaves and branches, his large gestures beckon green out of gray.' The world that had been dry and dormant revives itself. Like Gussie, like my home congregation, the world festoons itself with flowers. Spring has sprung.

The season's first crocus shooting up its purple hand might take our breath away. It's hard to not take spring personally. It's hard not to see it as a symbol. Something new is afoot. The dormant time is over in the world of nature, perhaps a dormant time, the tomb-life, is ending in our lives. Hope is present. Life continues. What is blossoming in your life today? Italian poet Diego Valeri writes, 'you who have an eye for miracles regard the bud now appearing on the bare branch of the fragile young tree: It's a mere dot, a nothing. But already it's a flower, already a fruit, already its own death and resurrection.'¹ We are all a part of that cycle. We all are a bud, a flower, a fruit, a death, a resurrection. We are a part of unstoppable cycles of rebirth, regeneration, and resurrection.

Today, our Christian friends, neighbors and fellow congregants mark the triumph of love over death in the story of Jesus. Just when all hope is lost, just when the story seems over, the stone is rolled away and the tomb is empty. The women who were expecting to find the mangled body of their prophet flee in terror and amazement. Death and destruction do not win.

Many of us in this room question the Easter story of Jesus. Did it really happen as the gospels claim? We know enough science to know that bodily resurrection is miraculous. We should hold fast to these doubts. Many of our Unitarian forebearers were martyred for their doubts, for their willingness to publicly disagree with the prevailing tradition. They died so that we might live with free minds. They died so that we might wonder and question and doubt. Death is not the end of their stories either. Their stories continue in us, when our reason and experience inform what we believe.

But doubt cannot be the only thing we hold fast. Many of us need something at our center beyond uncertainty. For me, that center comes from the other half of our religious forebearers – the Universalists. The Universalists put love at the center of their lives and their faith. They believed that all of us are saved. There is nothing that anyone can do to separate themselves from the love that will not let us go. Love always wins. Their understanding of the world, their understanding of love comes from the life and ministry and teaching of Jesus.

My friend Mark is a Lutheran pastor. Once, I asked him how he understands the death of Jesus, the atonement, and resurrection. What is his Easter story? I had a lot questions. Did God really send God's son to die to take

¹ Valeri, Diego. 'An Eye for Miracles.' In *Singing the Living Tradition*. Boston: Unitarian Universalist Association, 1993. #625

away the sin of the world? If God is all powerful, couldn't God have just wiped away sin without the death of Jesus? If Jesus is the Son of God, what kind of parent is God? What kind of parent sacrifices their child?

Mark responded, "to me, Jesus' death wasn't God's plan, Jesus' life was the plan." God sent Jesus to preach the coming reign of God. He sent Jesus to teach about justice and grace. To remind us about forgiveness. To remind us that we are not defined by what we own. That loving our neighbor means loving everyone, no exceptions, even the people we find it hard to love, even the people that we consider our enemies, maybe especially the people we consider our enemies. Jesus' message, unsurprisingly, was hard for people to hear 2,000 years ago. It remains hard for people to hear today. The Roman authorities executed Jesus to silence his teaching because it threatened their authority. The crucifixion wasn't God's plan, according to Pastor Mark. But when it happened, God stepped in with a resurrection. God stepped in to say, 'even if you have given up on love, love doesn't give up on you. Even if you kill the messenger, you can't kill the message. Love won't give up on you.' Love triumphs over death. When Jesus was killed, God suspended the laws of nature to say, 'that is not the end of the story. Love continues.' That is the message of Jesus' resurrection, at least according to my friend Mark. Jesus came back to life to show that love never lets us go because love wins. This prophetic message cannot be silenced by a painful and humiliating death. Today, we celebrate the triumph of love over death. That is resurrection. That is Easter. Whether we agree with Pastor Mark's views on the resurrection or not, we know that death is never the end of the story. Love wins. Stories are always to be continued.

And if the miracle of bodily resurrection is not your miracle, perhaps the miracles of science are. We know that the atoms that make up our bodies were forged in distant stars and have cycled through plants and animals and air and earth more times than we can imagine. These cycles will continue long after us, long after our lives end. That unending cycle is also resurrection. We are quite literally the resurrected. It is a near certainty that our bodies today contain molecules from Jesus' body at the time of his death. The likelihood that a molecule of Jesus is not in us is less than 0.0 then with 4 million zeros after it and then a 1.² We are the resurrected Jesus – and the resurrected Buddha, the resurrected dinosaurs, and the resurrected anything else you might care to name. That is the Easter message. Death is never the end of the story. Love wins. Stories are always to be continued, whether through memories that live in others' hearts or the very fiber of our beings being reused and repurposed in the creation of new life.

Another tale of resurrection comes to us from New York State. At Sing Sing Correctional Facility, an infamous prison, just outside New York City, 15 inmates each year study for a masters degree from a local seminary. This group of men of various faiths and no faith gather five days a week for a year. Professors from New York Theological Seminary travel up the river to teach them. As the men study, they also work within the prison to help those around them. They are chaplain's assistants and drug counselors to their fellow inmates. They teach conflict negotiation and tutor fellow inmates preparing for their GED exams. They study redemption and resurrection and try to live it. The responsive reading we read earlier spoke of living a tomb-life of soul. These men live a very real tomb life – locked up and largely forgotten. The tomb-life they experience in prison gives them 'time to experience the pain of the world and reach out to heal others.'

² from 'Christians and Atheists: Does Communion Wine and Bread Contain Atoms that were Once in the Blood and Body of Jesus of Nazareth?' *Reddit*. Retrieved from https://www.reddit.com/r/DebateReligion/comments/1b7h7m/christians_and_atheists_does_communion_wine_and/c94bw6j

If and when the men who graduate from this program are paroled, most lead lives devoted to service. They strive for redemption and resurrection. Often, they succeed. They pastor churches. They tutor children. They found programs dedicated to helping other people released from prison reintegrate into society. Their recidivism rate is less than 10% over the 30 year life of the program, while 67% the national prison population is arrested again within three years of being released.³

Most of the men who participate in this program were sent to prison for murder, assault, and other violent crimes. They know death well. They have brought death and destruction into the world. Once in prison, they devote their lives to not letting that death and destruction have the last word. One of these men, Orlando Hernandez, explains, “[remorse] is the driving force embedded in my transformation. There hasn’t been a day that has gone by that I have not regretted what I’ve done. I know I can’t make it up to the family [of the person I killed], but maybe I can make it up to others.”⁴ There is resurrection in Orlando’s efforts to make up for the crime he committed. There is resurrection in the service these men offer to others. They hope for the triumph of love over death; they struggle to make it real in the world. Every day, they practice resurrection. They live Easter lives. They trust in the promise of Easter, the promise of spring, the promise of Gussie’s Easter bonnets. They hope that death is never the end of the story, that love wins, stories are always to be continued. Their actions are guided by the hope that even in the aftermath of horrific violence, there are chances for remorse, redemption, and resurrection.

We, as a people of love and a people of hope, a people who believe that everyone is worthy of love—no exceptions—hope alongside them. We might doubt sometimes, but we hope that death is never the end of the story. We hope that love really does win and that it will triumph over death in our hearts, in our lives, in our world.

On this Easter day, a day that rings out with Alleluias, may we have eyes for miracles—the miracles of love, the miracles of spring, the miracles of hope, the miracles of memory.

May we revel in the triumph of love over death.

Death is never the end of the story.

Love wins.

Stories are always to be continued.

May we practice resurrection.

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

Benediction:

Love triumphs over death.

Death is never the end of the story.

Love wins.

³3 in 4 Former Prisoners in 30 States Arrested within 5 Years of Release’ *Bureau of Justice Statistics, US Department of Justice*. Retrieved from: <http://www.bjs.gov/content/pub/press/rprts05p0510pr.cfm>

⁴ Quoted in Rojas, Marcela. ‘Seeking Redemption One Prisoner at a Time.’ *The Journal News*. January 12, 2010.

Rev. Rachel Lonberg

March 27, 2016

People's Church of Kalamazoo

Go in peace and go in love.

Practice resurrection.