

“A Broken Hallelujah”

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N.B. – These sermons are made available with a request: that the reader appreciate that, ideally, a sermon is an oral/aural experience that takes place in the context of worship – supported and reinforced by readings, contemplative music, rousing hymns, silence, and prayer – and that it is but one part of an extended conversation that occurs over time between a minister and a covenanted congregation.

Meditation Reading

“A Remnant of Resurrection” by Joyce Rupp

the time for daffodils has come
bunches of six, ten, or twelve,
with tightly wrapped buds,
arrive from warmer lands.

like sentinels of invitation
they keep my wintered heart
leaning into Spring.

the directions say to cut
at least a half inch off the stem,
then place in water and
wait for the surprise.

behold, in the early hour of dawn,
I see resurrection on my kitchen table,
every yellowed daffodil hurraing the morning,
stretching outward in the etched-glass vase.

but what captures my attention
is one small, thin remnant,
voluntarily discarded,
beneath the smiling daffodils.

this dry, transparent cover,
a cast-off tube of protection
once concealing a fragile bud,

conveys the price of blooming.

I pick up this remnant of resurrection and hold it for a long, long, silent time,
wondering what soul-shroud of mine needs to be unwrapped,
before I, too, am blooming.

Reading **“Passover” by Lynn Ungar from *Blessing the Bread***

Then you shall take some of the blood,
and put it on the door posts and the lintels of the houses . . .
and when I see the blood, I shall pass over you,
and no plague shall fall upon you to destroy you,
when I smite the land of Egypt.

-Exodus 12: 7 & 13

They thought they were safe
that spring night; when they daubed
the doorways with sacrificial blood.
To be sure, the angel of death
passed them over, but for what?
Forty years in the desert
without a home, without a bed,
following new laws to an unknown land.
Easier to have died in Egypt
or stayed there a slave, pretending
there was safety in the old familiar.

But the promise, from those first
naked days outside the garden,
is that there is no safety,
only the terrible blessing
of the journey. You were born
through a doorway marked in blood.
We are, all of us, passed over,
brushed in the night by terrible wings.

Ask that fierce presence,
whose imagination you hold.

God did not promise that we shall live,
but that we might, at last, glimpse the stars,
brilliant in the desert sky.

Reading *The Gospel of Mark 16:1-8*

When the sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices, so that they might go and anoint him. And very early on the first day of the week, when the sun had risen, they went to the tomb. They had been saying to one another, “Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?” When they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had already been rolled back. As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man, dressed in a white robe, sitting on the right side; and they were alarmed. But he said to them, “Do not be alarmed; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here. Look, there is the place they laid him. But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you.” 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.

Sermon: “A Broken Hallelujah”

They “fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.”

That’s where the earliest recorded account of the Easter story ends.

Not with Jesus talking to Mary Magdalene in the garden,
not with Jesus breaking bread with his disciples in Emmaus,
not with Jesus showing his wounds to a doubting Thomas.

But with the women in Jesus’ life shocked into silence,
overwhelmed with fear at what they’d just witnessed,
stunned at the confounding news they’d heard only moments before.

It was an inauspicious start to what would come to be called Christianity.

And, it was a broken Hallelujah.

All the other stories—the miraculous ones meant to make the case—
would be added later, as other gospels were written in the decades to come.

Eventually, in an effort to tidy things up,
The Gospel of Mark itself would get a few extra verses added,
tacked on by another author in another time
so that the gospel wouldn't be left
with quite as rough and ragged an ending.

But, there is something, I think, to be said for the original.

There's something about the unsettling messiness of it that just feels real.
Because it's in its messiest moment, that I catch sight of a glimmer of truth.

The same goes for the story of Passover.

Though the Egyptians kept detailed records about pretty much everything,
no historical evidence has yet been found confirming the Israelites
were actually held there as slaves.

It's an odd administrative oversight, given that their captivity
is thought to have stretched for more than four centuries.

It's enough to prompt the question of whether any of it actually happened.
If the Israelites were really kept in bondage.
If the plagues of locusts, pestilence, and boils
were simply for dramatic, literary flair.

But, a lack of hard evidence, of course,
doesn't prove a case one way or the other.

And, what we've been left to depend on in its absence
is the timeless tradition passed down through the centuries—
the Passover story told and retold of the Israelites being freed from captivity
and entering into a covenant with their God.

While this oral tradition doesn't exactly qualify as history, in its purest sense, there is, for me,
something in the account from *The Book of Exodus*,
that, like that ragged ending of Mark, has the enduring ring of truth.

It's the part one might have been advised to leave out
if the goal were to paint a more flattering portrait.

But there it is—in all its telling glory.

Every year, the most compelling part in the Passover story for me
is the awkward bit about the whining—the grumbling of the Israelites when they have had
enough with wandering in the desert
and long to return to the good old days when they were slaves.

There's something there that speaks to the truth of the human experience, and I find it,
if not convincing as historical evidence,
at least persuasive in speaking to the universal human condition.

How hard it can be to cherish what we have,
even when it has come to us at such a great and precious price.

In both of these great stories,
amid all that stretches us beyond the bounds of belief,
from the parting of the Red Sea to the resurrection of the dead,
there is something that can still speak to our hearts, if we keep them open.

The very Unitarian-leaning Anglican bishop John Shelby Spong
points up a important difference in how scripture is typically approached.

He says that the Christian tradition has tended to ask, “did this happen?”
wanting to prove whether every last detail can be believed,
while the Jewish tradition has more often asked, “what does this mean?”

I'm finding the latter to be an increasingly satisfying question,
even if and when it can't be readily answered.
And, of course, it's a question not only for interpreting ancient texts,
but for looking at our lives, as well.

“What does this mean?”

It's the question so often on our lips when heartbreak falls across our lives
and we seek some measure of understanding.

It's the prayer on our hearts
when there's nothing left to do but pick up the pieces
and try to find the way forward.

And, it's the religious question that I believe
sits at the centre of our human experience.

What does any of this—what does all of this—mean?

Of course, answers aren't easily found.
At best, we catch mere glimpses along the way.

Like all of you, I've cobbled together a collection of fragments,
a few bits of meaning from here and there
to help me make some sense of life.

And, if there's anything that's become clear—
anything that I've pieced together from my few fragments—
it's that this life is beautiful, but bittersweet—
and that it calls us to sing out, from the depths of our being,
broken Hallelujahs—songs of praise and thanksgiving
tempered by what we know this life can and will ultimately ask of us.

Now, I realise this isn't quite the traditional good news of Easter.

With all the Hosannas and the Hallelujahs,
with the flowers and the eggs and the chocolate bunnies everywhere,
and with the sun finally shining (at last!),
it's perhaps poor form to bring it up.

But, what gives this day—what gives this life—its enduring beauty
also has something to do with life's brokenness—those moments
when the profound cost of our being alive is made known to us
in ways that touch us to our core.

Those stunningly human moments when we see
that our gratitude and our grief are bound together—
that life's suffering is weaved through and through with love and with joy.

It's right there on the seder plate each year:
alongside the egg and the parsley and the matzah,
there are bitter herbs to be eaten as a reminder
of the cruel conditions of slavery.

In the celebration of Passover,
the bitter and the sweet are always present and always together.

Because you cannot genuinely savour the taste of freedom
unless you've also known the bitter sting of slavery.

And, so it is with the great jubilations of Easter.
With resurrection, death is always somewhere in the background.
They are forever bound together, or else the other has no meaning.

C.S. Lewis hit it on the head when he said
that, "nothing that has not died [can] be resurrected."

On this day of great gladness, as we celebrate the persistent promise of life,
it is the grief and pain of loss
that gives any hope of resurrection its surest power.

The poet Kahlil Gibran got at this tension that sits at the heart of human life.
He said:

Your joy is your sorrow unmasked.

And the selfsame well from which your laughter rises
was oftentimes filled with your tears.

And how else can it be?

The deeper that sorrow carves into your being,
the more joy you can contain.

Is not the cup that holds your wine

the very cup that was burned in the potter's oven?

And is not the lute that soothes your spirit,
the very wood that was hollowed with knives?

When you are joyous, look deep into your heart
and you shall find it is only that which has given you sorrow
that is giving you joy.

When you are sorrowful look again in your heart,
and you shall see that in truth you are weeping
for that which has been your delight.

Some of you say, "Joy is greater than sorrow,"
and others say, "Nay, sorrow is the greater."

But I say unto you, they are inseparable.

Together they come, and when one sits alone with you at your board,
remember that the other is asleep upon your bed.

Verily you are suspended like scales
between your sorrow and your joy.

It's not an easy place to be—suspended there between joy and sorrow,
caught all of our lives between what can break our hearts
and what can break open our hearts to their deepest purpose on this earth.

But to be there—to be suspended there and to know that you're there—
is the hidden blessing to be found in this, life's hardest of bargains.

That hidden blessing is found
when we know how unpredictable and precarious life can be
and begin to cherish how precious is each day we are given.

That hidden blessing is found
when we look upon the gifts in our life,
and know things could so easily be otherwise.

That hidden blessing is found when we look to our losses—
of the ones we've loved but who are now gone—
and know that our grief is the tax we gladly pay to have loved.

And, that hidden blessing is found
when we look to ourselves and sense the stirring of life
where once was only pain, where before was only suffering,
where hope has at last been born from dreams that once had died.

When that blessing is truly found,
the only thing that makes sense is for our hearts to sing—
to sing out the Hallelujah song of being fully alive, with all of its bittersweet beauty.

Like only he could, the poet e. e. cummings
wrote what I would call the definitive words to that song of praise:

i thank You God for most this amazing
day: for the leaping greenly spirits of trees
and a blue true dream of sky; and for everything
which is natural which is infinite which is yes

(i who have died am alive again today,
and this is the sun's birthday; this is the birth
day of life and love and wings: and of the gay
great happening illimitably earth)

how should tasting touching hearing seeing
breathing any-lifted from the no
of all nothing-human merely being
doubt unimaginable You?

(now the ears of my ears awake and
now the eyes of my eyes are opened)

I am moved by the depths of gratitude and joy in cumming's words.
My heart is full just listening to his recognition of his own resurrection:
"I who have died am alive again today."

May the same be true for us all this April morning.

May we sing out Hallelujahs, even if they're broken.

May we sing out Hallelujahs,
even more so *because* they have the blessing of being broken—
because we have come to know the high cost
of love, of freedom, and of life itself,
but still can't keep ourselves from singing
in that great Hallelujah Chorus.

Happy Passover.

Happy Easter.

Happy Spring.

Amen.

Closing Words

The great Howard Thurman said: "Don't ask what the world needs.
Ask what makes you come alive, and go do it. Because what the world needs is people who have
come alive."

May we who have died, be alive again today and in all the days we are given to live.