

# “Resurrections Revealed”

Rev. Shawn Newton  
First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto  
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There once was a young Jewish boy,  
riding home from Hebrew school with his mother,  
who asked him, “So, how was class?”

“Ugh. I hated it,” he said.

“Come on, Sweetheart, it couldn’t have been that bad.  
What did you learn today?”

“Well, we learned about Moses,  
and how he told the Israelites  
to rise up against Pharaoh and leave Egypt.”

“And then Pharaoh chased after them  
and they were trapped at the Red Sea.  
And then Moses told the Israelites to build a bridge over the sea.”

“And they planted explosives on the bridge as they crossed it,  
and when Pharaoh’s army got on the bridge,  
the Israelites blew it up.”

“Um, Honey, I don’t think that’s how the story goes.”

“I know, Mom, but if I told you what the Torah really says,  
you’d never believe me.”

\*

Sure enough.

The story of Moses parting the Red Sea is a bit hard to buy,  
even if you’ve had the benefit of seeing Cecil B. Demille’s version,  
filmed with its towering walls of green Jell-O.

This Easter morning, here in the middle of Passover,

we hold together two complicated biblical stories.

A story of a march, against all odds, to freedom.  
And a story with a miraculous claim of resurrection.

Stories that in their details  
stretch far beyond belief  
for many of us as Unitarians.

Skeptics that we are, many of us rightly question  
whether any of this actually happened.

If the Israelites were really kept in bondage,  
and then found their way to freedom.

If Jesus, once dead and buried, somehow rose again.

One can engage in theological and historical debates about all of this,  
and people certainly have since ancient times.

It should be said that Passover and Easter  
have come to mean so much more culturally  
than the scriptural stories that have been passed down.

Still, there is something  
to returning to the stories that endure.  
For the stories that we keep,  
can keep us when times are tough.

In Judaism, it's said that Jews read through the entire Torah each year,  
not because the Torah changes, but because they do.

And so it is for us all when we revisit the world's great stories,  
whether we take them to be literally true or not,  
that they have the potential of landing for us in a different way,  
depending on where we are in our lives.

A number of my Jewish friends this week have half-jokingly remarked,  
as they prepared for seder dinners online  
with their nearest and dearest,  
all positioned behind laptops or phones,

that it is oddly ironic that in-person Passover gatherings, with their remembrance of the ten plagues in Egypt, were cancelled due to the present plague of Covid-19.

As I've reflected on these ancient stories in recent days, in light of all that we're going through right now, the meaning I've found in them for this moment that we're in is realizing that these stories did not unfold in a single, shining instant.

Instead, they played out over much longer periods of time, times full of uncertainty.

Enduring the plagues and escaping to freedom through the Red Sea was only the beginning for the Israelites.

They had 40 hard years ahead of them in the wilderness before finding their way to the Promised Land.

And it took Jesus' followers days and weeks and years to understand what it meant that he was still somehow alive to them, even though he had died. Something his followers still grapple with to this day.

What I find most meaningful about these stories, though, for us, in the here and now, is that for the people who told these stories to be able live into the promise of freedom and resurrection meant there was no going back to what they had known before.

Even when they hated the hardships of the wilderness, it wasn't an option for the Israelites to go back to Egypt.

And though they might've longed for a return to the glory days of following Jesus around Galilee, his disciples, for better and for worse, had a very different future in front of them.

When the Prime Minister said this past week that this—  
this strange time of physical isolation—  
is our new normal for the foreseeable future,  
he was telling us that there isn't going to be a day  
when things will magically return  
to exactly the way they were before.

Our new reality,  
as unwelcome as it may be on so many levels,  
will leave us and the world we live in forever changed—  
and, actually, more than changed: transformed.

It's not yet clear what shape that transformation will take.  
The end of the story has yet to be written.  
We are merely, somewhere, in the middle.

What we do know is that we're still in a time of crisis.  
People around the planet are in a world of hurt.

We are witnessing suffering on a heart-wrenching scale,  
and many are understandably worried about their own well-being,  
and the well-being of those they love—  
be it about their health  
or their ability to make ends meet.

We are in the midst of some very difficult days.  
And it is perfectly natural  
that we might be feeling anxiety or fear or despair.

We must be gentle  
with ourselves and each other in these trying times.

And we must lean into everything we know  
of compassion and understanding,  
to help each other keep going, to keep moving,  
towards the hope and freedom of a brighter day.  
We are all in this together.

\*

I, for one, don't believe in "*the* resurrection,"

but with all of my being I believe in resurrection,  
because I have seen it happen countless times  
in people who summoned up stores of resilience  
they didn't even know they had.

I have seen resurrection happen in communities  
when people were willing and able to encourage one another—  
to, literally, instill courage in one another,  
to impart courage from one heart to another's.

This is some of the most important work  
we do in this world, at any time.

And it more vital now than ever.  
In this way, we are all essential workers.  
Workers of love and compassion.

\*

As I've said, we are living through a time of great transformation.

It may not feel like always it,  
from the safe confines of our own homes—  
when we're just trying to figure out  
how to handle the hardships of isolation,  
or how best to get groceries,  
or how on earth to teach our children long division or spelling.

To be sure, this transformation is proving itself  
to be brutal and bewildering for so many.

And, yet, as we celebrate Easter and Passover,  
let us hold in our hearts the sacred truth  
that there will be a time beyond the one we're living through.

We are called, even in these hard days,  
to begin moving towards that future,  
choosing the paths that best serve and uphold life,  
and that bring forth the very best of our humanity.

\*

The author Cynthia Ocelli writes that:

For a seed to achieve its greatest expression,  
it must come completely undone.  
The shell cracks, its insides come out  
and everything changes.  
To someone who doesn't understand growth,  
it would look like complete destruction.

Such is the way of transformation.  
Such is the sacred process in which we now find ourselves.

It may not in any way be what we might have asked for.  
But now that it is here,  
it presents us with possibilities, all-too-rare.

Possibilities to reshape our lives and our world  
in ways that bring life more abundant to all.

Such is, I believe, the essence of the Passover and Easter stories.  
The hope for nothing less than the transformation of the world.

To be sure, that is a grand order.  
And more than any one of us could or should try to take on.

But some part of it belongs to each of us.  
And it is our work to find the seed of hope that is ours,  
and nurture it through these times.

\*

The Unitarian minister Carl Scovel tells the story of

a Zen master from Japan [who, some years ago]...  
visited [a] Trappist monastery for an extended stay.

The Abbot hoped that his monks might learn something  
about meditation from their visitor.

The visitor was impressed with the devotion of this community

and eventually offered to conduct a retreat  
for the residents who were interested.

Several monks registered...,  
and on the first day of the retreat  
the monks were given their koans.

A “koan” is a short verbal puzzle  
that a teacher gives to his students.

The students meditate in silence on this puzzle  
and after a specified amount of time  
return to the master to report their reflections.

On this occasion the first monk entered the master’s room  
and found him kneeling before two copies of the [Christian scriptures]  
one in English and one in Japanese.

The monk sat down before the master and waited.

The master said in broken but clear English,  
“You know, I like Christianity well enough, but...”

He paused and glanced down at the books before him  
and then looked up again.

“But, I would not like it *without* the resurrection.”

The master then leaned forward  
so that his face was quite close to that of the monk.

“Show me your resurrection,” he said.

“That is your koan. Show me your resurrection.”<sup>1</sup>

Friends, this is our koan, too.

In these difficult days,  
moving toward all that we hold dear,

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<sup>1</sup> Carl Scovel, “The Resurrection Gives Us Life” in *Never Far From Home*.

serving life, and seeking hope,  
let us show to ourselves, to one another, and to all the world  
*our* resurrection.

Let us nurture the promise, the possibility,  
of life renewed and renewing in each of us,  
that we might bear witness with our very being  
to the hope for a better world  
that is still waiting to be born through each of us.

So may it be.