

Sermon Second Chances for website

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Delivered: Easter Sunday, March 27, 2016, First Unitarian Universalist Society of Middleborough

A family service

We've been told: Jesus was crucified and died. His body was taken down from the cross, perhaps hastily wrapped in linens and laid in a tomb carved out of rock. A large boulder was rolled to cover the tomb. The next day was the Sabbath day, when the rules said no work could be done. But when the Sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene and other women followers of Jesus bought spices, so that they might go and anoint his body with fragrant oils and treat it properly. This was and had always been the responsibility of women; to care for the sick and to prepare the dead properly for burial.

So, very early on the first day of the week, when the sun had just risen above the horizon, 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. And they entered and found the tomb was empty and we are told they beheld an angel who told them Jesus was not there. *He* had risen, like the sun on a new day. They were amazed and afraid.

My daughter Katie has a friend who asked her: "Is her sermon going to be about Easter as metaphor?" – a question Kate dutifully passed on. I told her, "No, tell her I can't stand those," to make her laugh. So Easter can be a challenge. We find it hard to look into that dark and dusty tomb, don't we? Truth is, I think the tomb was empty; or shall I say, I *need* to think the tomb was empty. The rest, who can tell? But, the tomb was empty. No metaphors involved.

"A metaphor is a word or phrase that is used to describe people, things, animals, or places. The word or phrase is unrelated to the person, thing, animal or place. We say a metaphor for something is the same as something (even though we know it really isn't). It is a figure of speech and we use it to get our meaning across. "Life's just a bowl of cherries," the old song goes. Meaning, "No worries, life is easy. Life is sweet."

A simile is different. "Mama always said life is like a box of chocolates. Meaning: You never know what you're going to get." That's a simile. It's a form of speech that uses the words "like" or "as" and helps you get the meaning of what you're being told.

Say I wanted to give you a sense of what Heidi is like. If I said Heidi sings like an angel, you'd think she sings really well. That's a simile. If I said Heidi *is* an angel, you'd think – wow, she's a really kind person. That's a metaphor. In either case, you get a clearer sense of Heidi.

Now some folks read the Bible or other sacred writings and they take them literally. They believe all the stories and events happened just as they were written down. Others see them as metaphor and allegory, writings that are meant to convey important messages the ancients wanted us to hear. I regard scripture, whether it's the Hebrew Bible or the New Testament or other sacred writings as metaphor, and fable, and fact, and confession and poetry and promise. They are all these things to me.

Why are there sacred writings and why do we read them? These narratives were precious to our ancestors, whether they were creation stories or heroic battles or tales of love and sacrifice for our sake. They were memorized and told generation after generation and finally written down by people who

meant to convince us there is something greater than all this that means us well in spite of all the awful things that can happen.

Scripture tells us justice and love and power are in the world, even if we cannot always see it or understand it. And this good news is expressed in the strongest, most persuasive language the ancients could conjure. Sometimes the language is beautiful or exciting; sometimes it is scary or sad.

I go back to this language to express deep feelings when I have no words of my own; when I have doubts and long to feel comfort and strength. And sometimes I use Hebrew words because they are so expressive:

Psalm 130: Out of the depths have I called thee O Lord, hear my voice.
Mizmohr ku'flammet shir haMaalot mMaamaQiyim q'ratiykha adonai.

My soul waits for you, more than watchmen for the morning, more than watchmen for the morning. naf'shiy lardonäy miSHom'riym laBoqer shom'riym laBoqer

There are Sundays when I light the candles on the altar before we start worship and I say to myself,

Psalm 19: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart
Be acceptable to you, O God, my Rock and my Redeemer

Y'hiyu l'ratzon imrey fi v'hegyon libi l'fanecha Adonai tzuri v'goali

And I feel God in all of us here and around us in the earth underneath us and the flame and the air and the rain. And I think I want to contribute one thing to all of this morning wonder.

I learn from reading sacred texts. There are stories about people who can be pretty much like we are today: heroic and grouchy, fiercely loyal and loving, stubborn, scared, inspired, clueless, devoted.

The message we get from sacred writings is that there is something greater than we are that means us well, so it deserves our loyalty and right conduct. People who figure there might be some truth in scripture tell us we need to believe in the good and behave well. How we are supposed to be loyal and how we are supposed to behave well varies from faith to faith and culture to culture. As Unitarian Universalists, we do so by trying every day to treat one another and the world as we would like to be treated. We try to offer respect, empathy, and compassion – even when we don't always feel like it, or don't always understand what's going on.

One of the things that is important to Unitarian Universalists is that when we read scripture, we need to bring to it all we are and all we know. We bring to it our reason and our doubts and our hopes. And we decide for ourselves what will help us get through a tough time, or be a better person. It is up to each of us to decide what in scripture is metaphor, fable, fact, confession or promise. What might teach us a lesson we need to learn, a new way of looking at things, so that we can live the way we think we should – even though it can be hard?

So, I think the tomb was empty. I don't have the urge to go back in time to see if it really happened. I think the tomb was empty:

Because we don't know everything.

Because it is important to remember that there is mystery in the world.

Because an empty tomb is the ultimate narrative of defiance – death does not conquer us.

Grief does not conquer us.

Because an empty tomb means the end is not necessarily the end but could be a new beginning.

For me, the message is we have a chance, a second chance. After we think we've ruined things, or bad things happen that might ruin us, we have a chance to make things right and live good lives.

To share a meal and cherish one another,

to share a lily and create a garden

to end loneliness.

What second chances have you received in your life? What second chances have you given someone else?

May it always be so, and Happy Easter.