

## *Celebrating Easter, when it still feels like Good Friday*

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### **WELCOME**

In spring, in Bellingham, we can predict that flowers will emerge, warmth will return, and that, pretty soon, it will stop raining. So it makes sense to celebrate Easter about now. Beginning again seems doable; yesterday's pessimism might disappear in the garden—just go, and leave no trace.

But the changing seasons cannot be relied upon to change the circumstances of our lives. Suffering and death *can* be precursors to new life. But this doesn't generally happen overnight. So we want to acknowledge and celebrate this holy day—within this season of great blessing. And we also need to acknowledge that sometimes it's more honest to celebrate the small resurrections in our lives. And sometimes that can be enough.

### **LIGHTING THE CHALICE/COVENANT**

**GATHERING SONG**                      #203 *All Creatures of the Earth and Sky*

**CHILDREN'S FOCUS**                      *The Caterpillar and the Ant*

**PHOENIX ENSEMBLE ...**                      *Feelin' Groovy and Teach your Children*

**REFLECTIONS**                              Rev. Paul Beckel

History and myth speak of a religious tradition emerging in ancient days at the intersection of what we now call Asia, Africa, and Europe. Countless spinoffs of spinoffs today refer to themselves as Jewish, Christian, Muslim, Baha'i, and many more. But even within these many varieties there has been a general agreement that there exists a powerful loving god...and something called sin that puts distance between humans and god...and an assortment of methods through which to redeem ourselves: ways to get back on good terms with god, or at least to discharge our guilt, from time to time, so the guilt doesn't become unbearable.

Here are some of those methods that the different traditions came up with to effect redemption or the forgiveness of sin. Burnt offerings are described in the Hebrew scriptures: in some cases, an entire animal was destroyed, in other cases, part of the animal was saved for the priests, or for a shared meal. From this we can easily imagine the evolution of communion rituals, though originally the sacrifices were about communion with the divine, not with other people.

Another method to atone for sin was the scapegoat ritual, again from the Hebrew scriptures, which describe how, once a year, the sins confessed by the gathered community were symbolically placed on the head of a goat; then the goat was driven out into the wilderness to die.

As various christian traditions emerged, the bloody sacrifice of the Christ, god's own son, provided some powerful new alternatives for dealing with sin and guilt. For example, one could participate in a re-enactment of the last days of Jesus, including that communal meal during which he foreshadowed to his impending death as a voluntary sacrifice to benefit those he loved. In the Catholic tradition one could confess one's sins privately to the priest, and make prayers of contrition. And in various Protestant traditions, confession in another sense emerged: confession of one's total depravity, total inability to affect one's own salvation except through acceptance of Jesus as savior.

Along the way other perspectives on sin emerged. It could be blamed on the devil. That one seems particularly satisfying to me. Also, one could see sin as an inescapable predisposition that all of us are born with. Or, the consequences of sin could be put off for now, and dealt with later through eternal damnation or perhaps some temporary misery in purgatory.

But then, in 1805, Universalist Hosea Ballou, published his *Treatise on Atonement*, in which he argued that traditional theology had it backward. It wasn't that Jesus had to take the sins of the world upon himself and die in order to appease his angry father who was fed up with human wickedness. Rather, Ballou argued, Jesus' death released a great spirit of love into the world, helping those who were receptive to this spirit to atone for their own sins and be reconciled with God.

And none of this was about saving Christians exclusively, for as Ballou put it, it was inconceivable that an all-loving god would condemn anyone to eternal misery. Many Unitarian Universalist Christians today find this theology—this understanding of the meaning of Easter—to support their efforts to live with integrity, and hope, in communion with the Divine.

But for others, the meanings of religious ritual and myth have slipped away, especially with the emergence of modern science. At the end of the 1800s the outlandish Nietzsche declared that god was dead. By the 1960s the notion went mainstream on the cover of Time Magazine. And those getting really tired of feeling guilty-guilty-guilty for every little breach of tradition...started saying, even within some churches: "We don't do guilt anymore." Those who saw themselves on the cutting edge of the evolution of social consciousness threw off the notion of guilt entirely and saw the way forward through empowerment. Empowerment for all, and faith that we can accomplish anything that we set our minds to. And along the way science and technology has in fact enabled us to do incredible things, to predict and control all things great and small. We got the power, halleluiah!

But there's the rub. With power comes responsibility—at least for those with a conscience.

It can be very hard to live with power and responsibility. It can be soul-killing. Because the more we know and the more we work to empower ourselves and our children, the more we have to feel guilty about.

Every time I see a photo of a refugee, I suspect that I could, in some small way, alleviate some suffering. And when I hear about a destructive social policy being enacted by my government, it

seems I should, in some small way, be able to make a difference. If I cared enough, I could put my money or my time or my body on the line. No matter what I do, no matter what I give, it could always have been more. For this Unitarian Universalist congregation, there are essentially *no bounds* to what we might hold ourselves accountable for. Really, *other than supporting hate groups, what is NOT within the scope of our mission?*

Honoring the interdependent web of all creation, we know that *everything* we do—or *don't* do—has a *global* impact. Actually, an *infinite* impact, since all we do, and fail to do, theoretically, affects everything now, *and* for all time. So there is almost nothing for which we cannot be, in some way, held responsible. So despite our sophisticated maneuvering, guilt continues to haunt us. But, for many of us, ritual and tradition are unable to provide redemption.

And so, it is a glorious day, and we will find many ways to enjoy it. But to speak of death only in the past tense, and resurrection in the present, feels incomplete, dishonest, perhaps even meaningless.

For many years, my go-to reading on hope has been this one by Linda Hogan:

*There were wildflowers that grew in the far, cool region of mountains. The bricks of Hiroshima, down below, were formed of clay from these mountains, and so the walls of houses and shops held the dormant trumpet flower seeds. But after one group of humans killed another with the explosive power of life's smallest elements split wide apart, the mountain flowers began to grow. Out of the crumbled, burned buildings they sprouted. Out of destruction and bomb heat and the falling of walls, the seeds opened up and grew. What a horrible beauty, the world going its own way....*

I've shared this in many settings over the years. And I've thought about it many more times. I don't specifically remember using it on Easter, as it's applicable any time we might reflect on hope, when hope is hard to find. But when I remembered it this week, another dimension unfolded, something about seeds, which I'd never recognized in this story about seeds.

I've always known that on the day the atomic bomb was dropped on Hiroshima, my father was on a troop transport on his way to Japan. He was spared combat, and I later came to be a part of the interdependent web of all existence. Reflecting this week on hope, guilt, metaphor, and redemption, I saw how, in an intricate way, my life is one of those flowers which Death brought into being. To me that's an empowering metaphor of beauty and purpose. It's empowering, and compelling, and not something I need to feel guilty about.

You didn't come here today to be told what to feel guilty about. Nor did you come for superficial reassurance that evil has been overcome. My prayer for you is that, somehow, this predictable but still astonishing return of spring will enable you to throw open your heart and mind—to receive your own new revelation of the Spirit of Life.

References:

“The Strange Persistence of Guilt,” essay by Wilfred McClay, about 8 pages  
[http://www.iasc-culture.org/THR/THR\\_article\\_2017\\_Spring\\_McClay.php](http://www.iasc-culture.org/THR/THR_article_2017_Spring_McClay.php)

An excellent, short, commentary on this essay — from the New York Times:  
[https://www.nytimes.com/2017/03/31/opinion/the-strange-persistence-of-guilt.html?\\_r=0](https://www.nytimes.com/2017/03/31/opinion/the-strange-persistence-of-guilt.html?_r=0)

## **SINGING TOGETHER**

#344 *A Promise Through the Ages Rings*

## **REFLECTIONS**

Rev. Tessie Mandeville

It has been said that “in God we live and move and have our being”.<sup>1</sup> I love that and it is true for me. One of the ways I experience God is as stories, so, as a hospital chaplain, when I am at the bedside facilitating story telling for my patients and families, or when I’m preaching and telling stories, or when I’m telling a story through singing, or when I’m spending time with friends telling and listening to stories, I am “godding”. I think we live and move and have our being in stories.

Anthropologists tell us that story telling is central to human existence. That it’s common to every known culture. That we use stories to make sense of our world and to share that understanding with others.<sup>2</sup>

I grew up in a culture that used religious stories to shape my life. The stories in the Bible of goodness and evil. Despair and liberation. Mercy and reconciliation. Sin and redemption. Death and resurrection.

I have come to believe that these religious stories hold universal truths. That is not to say that I think Biblical stories should be taken literally but I do think they should be taken seriously.

The author, Wilfred McClay reminds us in his essay, “The Strange Persistence of Guilt”, (a Hedgehog Review that Paul and I used to help inform our homilies)<sup>3</sup>, Judaism and Christianity are the great historical religions of the West and their stories have been central to our culture. They gave us a clear framework and rituals to guide us in our quest for goodness. But as those of us living in the developed countries in the West became more advanced and our technological knowledge grew and our understanding of science broadened, we moved away from religious language and stories. And he argues that we now find ourselves in the 21<sup>st</sup> century rather adrift because we have displaced religious language and stories but we have not replaced them. So he says people have a sense of guilt and sin, but no longer a sense that they live in a loving universe marked by divine mercy, grace and forgiveness. There is sin but no formula for redemption. Sin is a stain, a weight and a debt. But at least religions offer people a path from self-reflection and

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<sup>1</sup> Acts 17:28, Christian scriptures in the Bible, but original quote attributed to Aratus, a Greek poet

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.wired.com/2011/03/why-do-we-tell-stories/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/03/31/opinion/the-strange-persistence-of-guilt.html> and [http://www.iasc-culture.org/THR/THR\\_article\\_2017\\_Spring\\_McClay.php](http://www.iasc-culture.org/THR/THR_article_2017_Spring_McClay.php)

confession to atonement and absolution. Mainstream culture has no clear path upward from guilt, either for individuals or groups. So you get a buildup of scapegoating, shaming and Manichaeian condemnation. “This is surely a moral crisis in the making,” McClay writes.

So maybe we need to reconsider the centrality of religious stories and rituals. I think there are ways to take the stories and rituals seriously without taking them literally. I believe they make enduring claims about the human condition.

Consider Passover, Maundy Thursday, and Good Friday, high holy days we observed this past week. Many people held a Seder and re-told the stories of bondage and liberation—not to remember victimhood—but to reaffirm that we are called to liberation. We are called to redemption. Yes, it is a struggle but we are more powerful than we think. On Maundy Thursday people gathered and told the story of betrayal. On Good Friday people gathered and told the stories of abandonment, fear, death, and loss.

Why are all these stories important? Because the painful truth is that we live in a world in which people are still crucified. Crosses abound. People still experience personal betrayal, abandonment, torture, and death. There is still bondage and enslavement.

My UU colleague, the Rev. Gretchen Haley says this about stories, “...it’s interesting, the parts of the story we lift up, and what we leave out....Our liberal religious orientation to hope – to affirming that everything’s gonna be fine – has sometimes led us to skip over the rituals of loss or betrayal – these darker parts of humanity – not just when it comes to Good Friday.”<sup>4</sup>

It is important to tell these stories too because there are no shortcuts to freedom. There are no shortcuts to spiritual, emotional, and personal resurrection.

I think we live and move and have our being in stories and I would suggest to you today that it is time as liberal religious people to reclaim religious stories and rituals. Re-imagine them, re-shape them, breathe on them anew, but don’t let them go. I know many of us have complicated relationships with certain religious traditions but I wholeheartedly believe there are ways to not throw out the proverbial baby with the bathwater. There are ways to take back the Word, to find what is true for you in the stories, and to let the rest go. It does not have to be all or nothing.

I think our lives depend on it. We need our stories.

The Easter story is full of good news because it reminds us that even after the worst thing has happened, life is still possible. There is still joy. Hope is real and worth clinging to. Morning still breaks. Even when the world seems turned upside down, life still goes on.

The point is not to gloss over the pain and sorrow, betrayal and death. The point is not to pretend that everything’s gonna be fine or that we aren’t scared. The point is not that our hearts aren’t still going to get broken.

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<sup>4</sup> <https://revgretchenhaley.wordpress.com/2016/03/28/the-light-of-morning-easter-sermon-2016/>

The point of Easter is that none of this will have the final say.

Easter is the story of redemption. For something always, always sings. This is the message Easter brings: from deep despair and perished things a green shoot always, always springs, and something always, always sings<sup>5</sup>. That is a story worth telling again and again.

Blessed be and amen.

**CHALICE CHOIR**

*Jabula Jesu*, South African Hymn

*Soon I will be Done*, American Spiritual

**SHARING OUR GIFTS**

**SENDING SONG**

#1050 *Jazz Alleluia*

**CIRCLE 'ROUND**

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<sup>5</sup> Lyrics from Hymn #344 *A Promise Through the Ages Rings*