

## **Roll Away the Stone and Accept Life's Miracles**

UU Church of Vancouver  
Easter Sunday April 9, 2023

### **Reflection on the Theme – Wendy Raunig**

I am sharing with you all an experience I had the other day while walking the dog. Coming out of a driveway a lady was backing up.... I couldn't tell if she saw me or not so I slowed down, she proceeded to back up then saw me. Startled, she stopped her car, but I waved her forward. She rolled down her window, saying something like "I looked left, right but not left again...I didn't see you and, in the future, will be sure to always look one more time to the right". I went on to explain I watch cars very closely as I am the vulnerable one out here with no shell. It was a brief exchange that ended in us both smiling at each other. As I continued my walk back towards home with Ozzie, our dog I found my mind reflecting on her words.

It was so refreshing to me, to hear her words, taking ownership for her lack of attention in the situation. We all make mistakes, we all make errors, we all do and say things we wish we could take back. Rather than wishing we could take back grievances, why not embrace our foibles and accept them and state them. Words can be so powerful in this way; they give us avenues to voice.

Usually, incidents like that which we all encounter daily can end in harsh words, hurt feelings, confusion, or misunderstandings about perspectives. Being able to stop for a second and see each other was an awesome experience. I can only be one person as can that neighbor of mine, but I do know the impact she had on me that day. This makes me hopeful that we humans given the right headspace can be in community with each other.

I would like to share an excerpt from Deanna VanDiver who wrote:

We may not know or agree about what lies beyond this life, but it's our conviction that our actions— and our inactions – have consequences for the web of all existence. While fascinating and mysterious, we do not place our hopes for salvation in what happens after death. We find our salvation here on earth: showing up for each other with mercy, respect, and compassion. How are we relating to our neighbors, friends?

As faithful individuals, we are called to relationships of care and accountability.

Our presence matters. How we relate to each other creates the conditions of hell or heaven here on earth. May we remember and affirm that we are all in this together, friends: we are all in this together.

## Roll Away the Stone and Accept Life's Miracles © by Jennifer Springsteen

It is Easter Sunday. The day Christians celebrate the miracle of Jesus' resurrection and the day Unitarian Universalist's squirm in their pews hoping for sermons about new life and the interconnected web of existence or even an Artificial Intelligence or AI written pagan sermon. Anything but Jesus. Please don't squirm, but I will talk about Jesus this morning.

Our Unitarian ancestor-preacher William Ellery Channing said Jesus came to teach with his lips and to be a living manifestation of his religion. Not to be admired, but approached. Channing said Jesus does little good if not approached. So here we go.

I told the story from this pulpit of being called into the ICU where a man sat reading the bible while his wife lay unconscious in her hospital bed. He asked if I believed in miracles and while I knew the woman would not recover, I said, "Yes I do."

The Catholic Church defines a miracle (which is required for sainthood) as *a sign or wonder such as a healing, or control of nature, which can only be attributed to divine power.*

So, what did I mean exactly when I said to that man that I believed in miracles? Why had I said it so quickly?

We use the word *miracle* for much of the wonders of the world: the birth of babies, the returning of spring despite the hardness of winter, the return to health after a long illness, or escape from an accident or tragedy.

Schucman and Thetford professed the greatest miracle was awakening to love. In [A Course of Miracles](#), they wrote: "Let us be still an instant and forget all things we ever learned, all thoughts we had and every preconception that we hold of what things mean and what their purpose is. Let us remember not our own ideas of what the world is for—we do not know. Let every image held of everyone be loosened from our minds and swept away." It's like genesis. Starting again. Salvation.

The concept of this passage, as I interpret it, is that once we've removed all the barriers of rationalization, we might see the world again in a most beautiful and wondrous state. It doesn't matter really that we can understand something scientifically like a great nebula, rainbows, or the tiny waving hairs on flagella, our breath is still taken away at the thought of them. They are miraculous!

I was a child in the Episcopal Church. I loved waving the palm fronds (and when the adults weren't looking, using them as swords). Every year, I had white Easter dresses with white tights and black patent leather Mary Janes. My mother pulled my hair back in broad ribbons. I looked at those stained-glass windows where Jesus hung on the cross, blood on his hands and feet and I was horrified. That image of suffering and defeat never went away, no matter the passage about his having risen. I couldn't figure out what I could have done wrong in my short time on

earth to cause Jesus such sorrow. What kind of father would ask that of a son? Not mine. And not the God I was told is a God of love.

Again at the hospital, discussing my frustration at having nothing to say to an Iraqi war vet, counting time by the changes of his colostomy bag, my chaplain supervisor asked me, "What's your theology of suffering?" My what? She shook her head. "You better figure it out. There can't be two patients in the room."

My supervisor chaplain differentiated pain and suffering. She said pain was curable, that it could be diagnosed and medicated. Suffering, she claimed, was of the spirit, and suffering needed to be healed, not cured.

Crucifixion and resurrection are the heart of the Christ story, and I'll confess to you it confuses me greatly. I'm not the only one grappling with the story. Because our UU roots are embedded in Christianity, I've been reading quite a lot about it in seminary. I'd like to share some of that with you.

A theologian named Henry Nelson Weiman teases out the man, Jesus, from the events of his life. He said Jesus didn't hand something down to the disciples, but rather, he was a catalyst, an "agent" to the events that grew out of the experience, more like a neutron. He said, "Jesus broke the atomic exclusiveness of those individuals so that they were deeply and freely receptive and responsive to each other." In essence, this phenomenon wasn't just Jesus as a solitary self, it was his Jewish heritage, the exact moment in time with Jews being persecuted as they were by the Romans, and then the disciples themselves being ready to hear something new, something big and life-changing. Weiman goes on to say that when Jesus died, there was another release of creative power that had been constrained. Rather than being lifted from the dead literally, Jesus' teaching, creativity, and love rose again in the disciples and spread, becoming the living Christ and no longer the man named Jesus.

Howard Thurman addresses three elements that made the events of Jesus' life work and teaching to be so receptive: he was a Jew, he was poor, and he was a minority. Jesus was not mindless of how he was situated in this social and political climate, quite the opposite. He adopted humility as a technique for salvation—the Romans could not control his inner life: "The kingdom of God is within" Jesus said. Thurman reminds us that message is one Black Christians can cling to as it cuts through despair. He says that is because "Hatred is destructive to the hated and hater alike."

And yet somehow, Christianity flipped and became a religion for those who have power and could piously give—or not—to those beneath themselves to elevate their personhood. In fact, the very words in the New Testament that spoke of liberating the oppressed have been used to justify their oppression. It doesn't make sense how this turn came about. It helps me understand why many Black UUs embrace Liberation Theology, the goal of which is to eliminate oppression. James Cone writes about the connection of Black Christians to the cross and suffering. He says, "I have seen with my own eyes how that symbol empowered black people to stand up and become agents of change for their freedom."

It seems to me if we UU are doing anti-oppression, anti-racist work, we must recognize the importance of the Christ story for Black Christians.

Our dear Unitarian Universalist Rebecca Ann Parker, who gave us the words to the song "There is a Love Holding Us" examines in her book, Saving Paradise, why the image of Jesus' crucifixion didn't appear until 1,000 years after his death. Now it is a mighty symbol in Western Christianity. Parker tells us that it is a myth that suffering is holy and sacred, that to suffer in silence is obedient and virtuous. She argues that when we emulate the "silent suffering" of Jesus, we have been told we are accepting the greatest love of all. So then, conversely, to refuse to suffer is to refuse God's love. Parker disagrees that a loving God would expect such obedience of Jesus or of us.

I want to express here also that in addition to accepting these images of the suffering body of Jesus, as a Nation, we came to accept the images of the suffering bodies of Black and Brown people, too. What does it mean to claim one person died for the sins of others and others died for their own? And if Jesus died for sins, why have they continued to be committed in his name?

Parker tells us the importance of Jesus' suffering did not arrive in Christian minds and hearts for some thousand years after his death and James Cone tells us the cross is critical to understanding Black liberation. How do we hold it all?

What we understand about suffering shapes our thoughts about what is holy. About what holds us when we are hurt, weak, tried, and tired. What we understand about suffering matters to how we behave with one another, to animals, and to the earth.

If we approach the person Jesus, to his living and not dying stories, we can build a more approachable connection. I like remembering the story Erin told earlier, the Parable of the Good Samaritan from Luke. It is a story about one person helping another in a time of great need, saving them from possible death. And it's more than that. There arose a schism between the Samaritans and the Jews during Jesus' time, and Samaritans were regarded as lesser-than, outsiders. So in this parable, we see two men of the highest morals: first a priest and then his assistant, cross the street so as not to be bothered by an injured person, a Jew like them. But the Samaritan, the one who even the injured man might have spat at on a better day, acts with goodness in his heart. He is one who loved his neighbor, the one we according to Jesus, we should immolate.

In the Unitarian Universalist tradition, Salvation is defined by humans having the capacity to save one another from suffering. See our roots are still in this Christian parable: we won't pass one another by, and we refuse to hold up the bodies of those who have suffered as lessons for how to live in this world.

At Gethsemane, Jesus tells Peter, "The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak."

I understand this passage as Jesus rationalizing what is sure to happen at this deflated end of his campaign, but his body, his human self isn't ready to go. His suffering comes at the hands of people. Of laws and of *people*. In the musical Jesus Christ Superstar, the disciples sing, "Can we start again please?" It is the people who need a do-over, not some tyrannical father whose punishment is somehow also a gift.

This is probably why Unitarian Universalists are encouraged not to talk about Jesus on Easter. It rills us up. DEEP BREATH.

Our lives are a miracle, and we can't do them over. There is just this one time with its messy learning and unlearning, complicated love, and yes, suffering. Is it any wonder we don't crumble under the weight of it all? We don't. The toddler learning to walk falls and stands and falls and gets back up again. We get our hearts broken many times, and we love again. There is so much goodness to cling to in this world, and that is our strength through suffering.

So here we are on this beautiful day, with these stories to grapple over, with one another to comfort. And here is this bow-wrapped package of a day: daffodils in bloom, the perfumed buds of Daphne, the green green grass. What had seemed dead has been returned to us, and God aren't we grateful?

Will you pray with me?

Spirit of life and of love; Great Mystery. We thank you for the miracle of this day, for the one yesterday, and the tomorrow we hope will come. We are counting miracles like beads on a chain, Holy one, grateful to be witnesses of it all. Blessed be and Amen.