

Easter Water Communion
[Edited Transcript]

A Sermon by E. Arlen Goff>
May 31, 2002

High Street Unitarian Universalist Church

March 31, 2002 (Easter Sunday)

Opening Words

-- attributed to Kalidasa

Look to this day!

For it is life, the very life of life.

In its brief course lie all the verities and realities of your existence:

The bliss of growth,

The glory of action,

The splendor of beauty.

For yesterday is but a dream, and tomorrow is only a vision.

But today, well lived, makes every yesterday a dream of happiness

And every tomorrow a vision of hope.

Look well, therefore, to this day.

Lighting the Chalice

We light this flame in memory of years past that have brought us to this hour, and to the countless lives, known and unknown, that have made our lives possible.

We light this flame of life in affirmation of the strength that is ours to live this day, and the potential we have to create a better tomorrow.

We light this flame of faith that our minds may be enlightened, our love deepened, our path together illumined by understanding and peace.

First Reading

Albert Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*

He comes to us as One unknown, without a name, as of old, by the lake-side, He came to those men who knew Him not. He speaks to us the same word: 'Follow thou me!' and sets us to the tasks which He has to fulfill for our time. He commands. And to those who obey Him, whether they be wise or simple, He will reveal Himself in the toils, the conflicts, the sufferings which they shall pass through in His fellowship, and, as an ineffable mystery, they shall learn in their own experience Who He is.

Second Reading

Luke 24.13-35, *Revised English Bible*

That same day two of them were on their way to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem, talking together about all that had happened. As they walked and argued, Jesus himself came up and walked with them; but something prevented them from recognizing him. He asked them, "What is it you are debating as you walk?" They stood still, their faces full of sadness, and one, called Cleopas, answered, "Are you the only person staying in Jerusalem not to have heard the news of what has happened there in the last few days?" "What news," he said. "About Jesus of Nazareth," they replied, "who, by deeds and words of power, proved himself a prophet in the sight of God and the whole people; and how our chief priests and rulers handed him over to be sentenced to death, and crucified him. But we had been hoping that he was to be the liberator of Israel. What is more, this is the third day since it happened, and now some women of our company have astounded us: they went early to the tomb, but failed to find his body, and returned with a story that they had seen a vision of angels who told them he was alive. Then some of our people went to the tomb and found things just as the women had said; but him they did not see."

"How dull you are!" he answered. "How slow to believe all that the prophets said! Was not the Messiah bound to suffer in this way before entering his glory?" Then, starting from Moses and all the prophets, he explained to them in the whole of scripture the things that referred to himself.

By this time they had reached the village to which they were going, and he made as if to continue his journey. But they pressed him: "Stay with us, for evening approaches, and the day is almost over." So he went in to stay with them. And when he had sat down with them at table, he took bread and said the blessing; he broke the bread, and offered it to them. Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him; but he vanished from their sight. They said to one another, "Were not our hearts on fire as he talked with us on the road and explained the scriptures to us?"

Without a moment's delay they set out and returned to Jerusalem. There they found that the eleven and the rest of the company had assembled, and were saying, "It is true: the Lord has risen; he has appeared to Simon." Then they described what had happened on their journey and told how he had made himself known to them in the breaking of bread.

Meditation

with words ...

e e cummings

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 of 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)

Third Reading

Morton Scott Enslin, *The Prophet from Nazareth*

The usual – to many the natural – understanding of the Easter hope, as it finds expression in these early stories, is in terms of a changed Jesus. To me there appears a far profounder change, without which our hopes would be dead: Not a changed Jesus, but changed disciples. Jesus was the same. He had sown his seed, had lived his life, had built himself into the lives of those with whom he had lived and worked. Pilate's contemptuous reply to the Jewish leaders at the cross is even truer of Jesus: What he had written, he had written. The change was not in any physical transformation of the body he had tenanted, but in the outlook and convictions of the men and women whom he had touched

They “saw the Lord.” Indeed yes; but was it the one with nail-pierced hands, or was it the one with whom they had lived and labored. Did they not see him as he had stood by the side of the grief-stricken mother and had brought comfort? as he had faced the haughty leaders, and undaunted had challenged them to their faces? as he had gathered the children around them? as he had struggled alone with God on the mountainside in prayer? as he had talked with humbled publicans, with men and women at whom the proper people had pointed the finger of scorn? as he had stood before Pilate? as he had shared their evening meals? Back in these familiar scenes, everything spoke of him. As they sat at table, he was with them “in the breaking of bread”

Have the years taken him from us? Are we to feel that since he walked the hillsides of Galilee amid circumstances far different from our own, was of different race from us, was concerned with problems, many of which for us do not exist, dreamed dreams that will not come to us, that he has no message for us? For many people today the answer is yes. They stand dismayed at the gulf which separates him from them. The comfortable old beliefs by which they had sought to bridge that ever-widening gulf have been taken away. Like Mary Magdalene, they come in sorrow to shed a final tear over him in farewell, and they cannot even find the body to weep over. The years have taken him away. Those who come to weep now know not where they had laid him.

But when Mary wiped the tears from her eyes and turned around, there stood the ever-living Christ behind her, with hand raised in blessing. In this unforgettable picture the author of the Gospel of John has left us one of the world’s great heritages – if we have eyes to see it aright. Jesus is not dead, but is living. Not the body which walked the Palestinian hills, but that essence of the divine which made Jesus Jesus; that quality which drew men to him, which transformed them, which enabled them to see aright the kind of life God wished them to live – that still lives. Jesus is not dead, can never die. He was never placed in any tomb, but has lived in the hearts and lives of millions of men and women to whom he is endlessly calling, demanding that they follow with him to the only goal.

Message

E. Arlen Goff

“The Lasting Impact of an Extraordinary Life”

Her name was Mary Pate Shelburne. In my mind’s eye, she stands no more than five feet tall, though in many ways her impact on my life, and the lives of others, was gigantic.

She was my high school English teacher. We studied Beowulf and Shakespeare under her tutelage, along with Hawthorne, Twain, Dickinson and e e cummings (her favorite). She was a legend at West End High School in Birmingham, Alabama.

I never saw her ride her motorcycle to school. I was told that she had to stop biking after she fell and broke her hip. But Roger Wells, Mike White and I had the privilege of riding with her across town to see the movie version of John Knowles’ novel *A Separate Peace*. We toiled from West End to East Lake in her 2-door Oldsmobile coupe, complete with rally wheels and a Hurst shifter in the floor. She actually peeled rubber out of the school parking lot. She was cool. She was in her sixties. We all wished she were our grandmother.

During our senior year, we were required to do a term paper. Before we could graduate, we had to prove that we knew how to write, or at least how to compile others’ thoughts in some semblance of

order with appropriate footnoting. I elected to do my paper on “The Evidence for the Resurrection”, based on the works of Josh McDowell, Michael Green and Frank Morrison’s classic *Who Moved the Stone?* [You will have to remember ... I was the son of a Southern Baptist pastor. I was convinced that I was called to follow my father’s footsteps into the ministry. The Jesus Movement was in full swing, and I was a budding fundamentalist.] Now, I’m pretty sure that Ms. Shelburne probably wanted me to do something more literary. But my stubborn Southern Baptist faith prevailed.

I made an “A” on the paper, and I’ll never forget the note she wrote on the title page: “Arlen, I’m sure that in the future you will preach wonderful Easter sermons based on the work you have done on this paper.”

I’m not sure that what I am doing today is what she had in mind.

Here we stand, on Christendom’s holiest day, hearing stories once again about empty tombs, earthquakes, angelic messengers and grief-stricken disciples. Once again, we hear the words of scripture, “He is not here, he is risen!” And, once again, for whatever reason, we find ourselves believing and not believing, wanting to believe but unable to do so.

For years, we have struggled with this “either-or” approach to Easter faith. Perhaps, it is part of what it means to live in a culture so Christianized, that we are only given the options of accepting the full story in its literal form, or denying its truth for our lives. It seems that we are all crypto-Fundamentalists. If a story is not literally true, then it can have no meaning for us. But we operate in this way only with the Christian scriptures. We treat no other form of writing in this way. We know how to appreciate simile and metaphor, hyperbole and humor, myth and legend ... and know that all can be bearers of meaning for us. Indeed, many of us find the strongest meaning for our lives in the poetic, the imaginative, the creative ... that which stretches us beyond the material and the real.

And so, on this day, we approach the Easter story.

In his book *Resurrection: Myth or Reality*, Bishop John Shelby Spong approaches the resurrection of Jesus in a marvelous way. Utilizing the latest in biblical scholarship, he goes back to the original sources, the writings of the Christian Scriptures, and mines meaning from ancient words. He does so without being a slave to the literal character of the biblical texts, and breathes fresh life into an ancient story. He finds ways to affirm the earliest testimonies of those who said, “We have seen the Lord.”

And he does this while acknowledging the problems inherent in the Easter story ... affirming the inconsistencies apparent in the biblical record.

Questions like ... who really was the first at the tomb? were there two angelic messengers, or only one? how is it that the disciples were all gathered together in Jerusalem when the gospels also say that they all fled back to their homes in Galilee? and the list goes on and on.

In the end, Bishop Spong, like Morton Scott Enslin, argues that the best argument for the reality of the Easter faith is not in a transformed Jesus, but rather in the impact that same Jesus had on the lives of those with whom he walked the hills and valleys of Galilee. The Easter moment is thus not that point in time when the earth trembled, angelic beings descended from heaven to roll away the stone from a borrowed tomb, and a revived Jesus walked out alive. The Easter moment is that point beyond time

and space when, in the minds of the men and women who knew Jesus, it became apparent that they have witnessed a life lived in genuine connection with both the divine and the human, that their lives have been touched by a love which calls forth loving and being loved, that they have come to know one whose impact upon their lives reaches beyond death, whose presence will always be with them in the powerful memory of a changed life. He lives, because they could never be the same after walking with him.

Bishop Spong states: “At its very core the story of Easter has nothing to do with angelic announcements or empty tombs. It has nothing to do with time periods, whether three days, forty days, or fifty days. It has nothing to do with resuscitated bodies that appear and disappear or that finally exit this world in a heavenly ascension. Those are but the human ... vehicles employed to carry the transcendent meaning of Easter by those who must speak of the unspeakable and describe the undecipherable because the power of the event was undeniably real.” (Spong, *Resurrection: Myth or Reality?*, page 21).

Thus, our approach to the Easter story is not as myth versus reality. Rather, the myth is the bearer of reality, the legendary carries life, the poetic provides power for change and the creative and imaginative elicit meaning for life and love and communion with all that is holy.

So perhaps the true meaning of Easter is that death cannot conquer the impact of a life well lived, that the love and influence of those whom we cherish reaches beyond the grave, and that our own lives find lasting meaning by giving ourselves to the work of “creating a better tomorrow.”

And so, perhaps, we participate in the Easter moment when these words attributed to one of our spiritual forebears (Ralph Waldo Emerson) find expression in our own lives:

To laugh often and much;
to win the respect of intelligent people
and the affection of children;
to earn the appreciation of honest critics
and endure the betrayal of false friends;
to appreciate beauty; to find the best in others;
to leave the world a bit better,
whether by a healthy child,
a garden patch
or a redeemed social condition;
to know even one life has breathed easier
because you have lived.
This is to have succeeded.

The simplest way to look at Easter is that it affirms that the life of Jesus, that itinerant preacher from Nazareth in Galilee, was a success. It is the bearer of meaning for millions not because of an empty tomb or an expiatory death, but because of a life well lived, a life that exhibited that divinity is best found in the profoundly human ... that even ordinary lives can have lasting impact.

During my senior year in high school, after I had written my term paper on the resurrection, Mary Pate Shelburne recommended a book to me. It was the medieval Christian classic by Thomas a' Kempis, *Of the Imitation of Christ*. I have a feeling that Ms. Shelburne suspected that I bore the marks of

a budding mystic. I purchased the pocket-sized hardbound *Oxford Classics* edition of the book, and carried it around with me for a number of years. I started reading it hundreds of times, but could never really get past its medieval language. I finally gave it away in a stack of used books.

Now, I'm sure that the whole point of imitating Christ has meaning for many folks. It finds its most current expression in the "what would Jesus do" movement which has found its way onto bracelets and bumper stickers and devotional guides, and has spawned copycats such as *What Would Buddha Do?* or *What Would UU Do?*.

But I didn't know Jesus. I did, however, know Mary Pate Shelburne. For me, she is a more likely candidate for imitation.

And so I end with these words from Mary Oliver: "What will you do with your wild, wonderful and precious life?"

So may it be.

Flower Communion

The Unitarian Universalist Flower Communion service which we are about to celebrate was originated in 1923 by Dr. Norbert Capek [pronounced Chah-Peck], founder of the modern Unitarian movement in Czechoslovakia. On the last Sunday before the summer recess of the Unitarian church in Prague, all the children and adults participated in this colorful ritual, which gives concrete expression to the humanity-affirming principles of our liberal faith. When the Nazis took control of Prague in 1940, they found Dr. Capek's gospel of the inherent worth and beauty of every human person to be-as Nazi court records show-- "...too dangerous to the Reich [for him] to be allowed to live." Dr. Capek was sent to Dachau, where he was killed the next year during a Nazi "medical experiment." This gentle man suffered a cruel death, but his message of human hope and decency lives on through his Flower Communion, which is widely celebrated today. It is a noble and meaning-filled ritual we are about to recreate.

In the spirit of this Easter moment, as you gather flowers this morning, remember those who have made a lasting impact on your lives, and resolve to share something about them with a friend, relative or co-worker during the coming week.

Extinguishing the Chalice

Knowing how quickly the flame of truth might be extinguished, how easily the chalice of fellowship broken, let us be vigilant in our faith, keep peace in our hearts, and make care for one another the watchword of our lives together. So our light shines out ... everywhere ... into the world.

Closing Words

To laugh often and much;
to win the respect of intelligent people
and the affection of children;
to earn the appreciation of honest critics
and endure the betrayal of false friends;

**to appreciate beauty; to find the best in others;
to leave the world a bit better,
whether by a healthy child,
a garden patch
or a redeemed social condition;
to know even one life has breathed easier
because you have lived.
This is to have succeeded.**

--- Ralph Waldo Emerson

**Tell me, what will you do with your wild,
wonderful and precious life.**

----- Mary Oliver

Go in peace.