



NEIGHBORHOOD UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH

301 N. Orange Grove Blvd. Pasadena, CA 91103 (626) 449-3470 information@uuneighborhood.org

At the Tomb

Rev. Dr. Jim Nelson

April 4, 2010

Forest Church, who died this past year wrote this while he was battling the cancer that finally took his life:

If I were only to come to church once a year, I would almost certainly choose Easter. Easter is a better choice than Christmas. Christmas doesn't have death in it, not at its very center anyway, and if you are going to go to church only rarely, church should have death in it.

Christmas does have animals and presents and babies and stars. These are all splendid things. And Christmas has birth. But Easter has death and rebirth. Birth is essential, but for our spiritual journey death and rebirth are far more consequential. Easter also has flowers, of course, but flowers don't really have anything to do with Easter. They have to do with spring. I have nothing against flowers. They are as splendid as animals, presents, babies and stars. But Easter is not about flowers. Yes, flowers are beautiful for a brief season and then languish and die, just like we do. But then they cast their seeds to the wind, seeds that crack open springing new life from the husk of death. It's a pretty metaphor. There is only one problem with it. We are not flowers. And Easter is about us.

Easter is about us. And I would add, Passover, celebrated this past week is about us as well. The two stories go together, at least in the New Testament they do, and maybe in our religious history as well. Jesus and the disciples were Jews, after all, and they gathered together in Jerusalem that fateful time not only – as Christians believe – so that Jesus' ministry could be fulfilled but because they got together for the Passover.

And, the two stories are both stories. There was no Exodus; there were no plagues, and while it is possible that a people who later migrated to Palestine and became the core of the nation of Israel were in Egypt as slaves, these stories in the Hebrew Bible are stories. And, we, after all, have always claimed that there was no resurrection, that Easter is a story, not history.

But that does not mean that the stories are not true – true in the sense they have lessons for us, true in the way fiction can be true, or myths can be true. Facts are not the only true things, after all. There is no fact that tells us to love one another, or treat people fairly; there is no fact that says justice matters, or compassion. There is no fact that says music or art is important.

But these things are true.

So what about these stories? They are not especially happy stories, and you would think that in Spring time happy stories would be primary. We have made them happy stories – about freedom and about new life, but that is not all that they are. They are also stories about betrayal and suffering and death.

Church is right that Easter, and Passover, are about us – they are about our need to be together and our need to take care of our lives.

Do you know the stories?

It begins on Thursday when Jesus has a last Passover meal with his friends. They are all Jews, of course, and the Passover meal is their great celebration of freedom and faith. Jesus tells them that he is going to die soon, and that one of them will betray him. So much for celebration.

A bit later that night – I can't imagine it was much of a jolly dinner - Jesus goes into the Garden of Gethsemane to pray by himself, to ask God that he not have to go through with his death, but God is silent. Jesus must have felt very alone at that moment, and then he is then betrayed by Judas and by Peter; he is brought before Pilate, condemned and crucified and buried.

The disciples are distraught – and who would not be? Having given up everything to follow Jesus, he has been executed alongside common criminals. Not a glorious end at all.

The disciples don't know what to do. They stay in their rooms, afraid and confused. And in the midst of this fear the women go to the tomb to care for the body. I like this part – it suggests that regardless of what happens in our lives, we need to carry on and do something. Attending to the tasks of living, the little duties of everyday is where great things will happen. Mother Teresa was famous for saying that we cannot do great things, only little things with great love. So the women go to the tomb.

And, of course, it is empty. So ends the original version of the oldest gospel. An empty tomb, an angel telling them to go, that what they seek, Jesus, is not there.

Could anything be much plainer or more true – that what we seek is not in the dead but in living? That we need to shake the dust off our feet and our lives and get on with it? That what we think or believe is not as important as what we do, and that it is often the little things that matter most – things like cleaning up and doing the dishes, lending a helping hand to someone – those kinds of things.

Did I say that this is a story about volunteers? The disciples fret about leadership and direction and what to do. Mary and Mary probably were the ones who prepared the Passover dinner, the last supper, and probably did the dishes, and they are the ones who went to the tomb to care for the body.

They did something. They did not just talk or plan or scheme – they got up, dusted off their hands, and did something. They made dinner; they went to the tomb. Forget Moses and Peter – remember Mary and Mary.

They are the heroes of these two stories. Like the ushers here, or the people who do the sound on Sunday morning, our choir and our bell ringers, RE teachers, those who come and clean the sanctuary and work the grounds, who arrange flowers, or help in the office and edit the newsletter, those who bring meals to others and help at memorial services, who canvass others and do the work of justice – those heroes. Mary and Mary, a mother and a working woman – they are the heroes. They go to the tomb and face their fears; they roll up their sleeves and do the work of the world.

Let me end with this: this is from a UU minister. It is an Easter message and a Passover message, and it tells us how freedom and new life can be ours.

All I really need to know about how to live and what to do and how to be I learned in kindergarten. Wisdom was not at the top of the graduate school mountain, but there in the sand pile at school. These are the things I learned:

- * Share everything.
- * Play fair.
- * Don't hit people.
- * Put things back where you found them.
- * Clean up your own mess.
- * Don't take things that aren't yours.
- * Say you're sorry when you hurt somebody.
- * Wash your hands before you eat.
- * Flush.
- * Warm cookies and cold milk are good for you.
- * Live a balanced life - learn some and think some and draw and paint and sing and dance and play and work every day some.
- * Take a nap every afternoon.
- * When you go out in the world, watch out for traffic, hold hands and stick together.

* Be aware of wonder. Remember the little seed in the Styrofoam cup: the roots go down and the plant goes up and nobody really knows how or why, but we are all like that.

* Goldfish and hamsters and white mice and even the little seed in the Styrofoam cup - they all die. So do we.

* And then remember the Dick-and-Jane books and the first word you learned - the biggest word of all - LOOK.

Everything you need to know is in there somewhere. The Golden Rule and love and basic sanitation. Ecology and politics and equality and sane living.

Take any one of those items and extrapolate it into sophisticated adult terms and apply it to your family life or your work or government or your world and it holds true and clear and firm. Think what a better world it would be if we all - the whole world - had cookies and milk at about 3 o'clock in the afternoon and then lay down with our blankies for a nap. Or if all governments had as a basic policy to always put things back where they found them and to clean up their own mess.

And it is still true, no matter how old you are, when you go out in the world, it is best to hold hands and stick together.

Shalom and Happy Easter. Amen.