

Homily—What New Day Dawns for Us Today?

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Today is Easter Sunday, the holiest day in the Christian calendar. There are many ways to tell this story. One way: “The tomb is empty!” an old friend used to say, her face and gestures illuminated with such joy and happiness, with complete faith in the Lord Jesus and fulfilled in her faith that the Son of God died to redeem her sins. Another way: Easter celebrates the resurrection of Jesus from his death at the hands of the Roman state. And, it is the women, not the apostles, who go to the tomb and discover the confusing news that Jesus’ body has disappeared. The women are the ones to whom Jesus first re-appears. The women, powerless as slaves in Roman culture. It is significant that they witness change and carry the news of resurrection and a new day. Yet another way: Easter comes in the spring, a time of birth and rebirth, the Christian story intersecting with the stories of old gods, of dawn goddesses. Ēostre. Ostara. The return of the light in the northern hemisphere after the dark winter. The flowers coming up out of the ground once more, bringing such joy with their fragility. Yet, despite this glorious time, this glorious day in Mankato, things are not strictly ok, at this time of Easter, in this time of birth and rebirth. Everything is not ok.

It’s simply not. COVID-19 continues to kill hundreds of people in this country every day, thousands across the world. People are shooting each other left and right. As of yesterday, by one count, there have been 126 mass shootings in the United States just this year, including an event yesterday in Wilmington, North Carolina. Last week, two ministers whom I know personally witnessed killings, one outside of Atlanta and one in Bismarck. There are many motives and explanations for these shootings—crime and vengeance, mental illness and despair, anger and resentment, bigotry and hatred and power. What unites all this death in this time of rebirth is that it is so sickeningly easy to do in this country. It is so sickeningly easy to get a gun and start killing. Disease and gun violence at astronomical rates, on top of the daily losses we suffer, the ordinary wages of living fleshy human lives. Keeping a positive attitude under such circumstances can be really toxic, when hopefulness is just another word for willful ignorance. There has got to be something better on this Easter morning, regardless of which Easter story is compelling for you. Regardless of your beliefs about the holy, or mine.

Easter, Ostara, Holiest of days for Christians and holy for pagans, too—a day of renewed faith, of celebration that we are not abandoned on a barren earth of pain and strife. A day of hope for a future of glory, when pain is no more and struggle is ended. A new life, so different from this sick and violent ordinary one. But what about for those of us who do not put our faith in such a story and in such gods? What if God has gone on, left us here, like the women and the apostles, wandering about and wondering what to do. What if God is waiting for us somewhere out ahead, while we remain here celebrating an arrival that is already over, celebrating the arrival of spring in the guise of god. What is a new day for us? What do we expect to discover when it arrives? Will this new day actually arrive, and will we know it when we see it?

I grew up on the music of *Godspell*, of *Jesus Christ, Superstar*, too. In 1970, 1971, I was a young middle-schooler, singing those songs incessantly. They were ingrained from listening to AM radio, and also

through the popular though only once-a-month Folk Mass, our priest's tacit acceptance that the world was changing and even the Universal Roman Catholic Church needed to adapt a bit if it hoped to hang onto the young people. At Sunday dinner in my godparents' home, my teenaged god-sister regularly confronted her parents with this music, which they found blasphemous and undignified. Jesus was for them the Infant of Prague, clothed in church vestments and a crown, not barefooted and wandering in the streets, despite what scripture says. All of this conflict between the parents and the kids, between the teens with guitars and tambourines and the priests on high, it seemed rather exciting at the time. But at the time, I had also seen the movie *Night of the Living Dead*, in 1968, the ghoulish and culturally responsive zombie movie shot outside of my hometown of Pittsburgh, PA. That same year, Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated. Bobby Kennedy was assassinated. The Viet Nam War was televised. American soldiers massacred Vietnamese families in My Lai. American people, especially young people, protested and rioted.

The world was a wounded place in my young eyes. How was I to prepare the way of the Lord? How was I to pray for the nearness of God, when God already seemed far away, and the priest asked me about my childish sins without doing anything more than chanting about the sins of the world. At least that is how it seemed to child-me, growing up with the contrast between Sunday Mass and work-a-day woundedness. The world remains a wounded place, a wounding place. Brutal killing for sure, but more often casual violence, senseless and ingrained prejudice, unintended neglect. I found I could not have faith in an omnipotent, omni-present, all-knowing God. Neither my mind nor my heart could look at my world and see the evidence of such a god. And so early on, if I were to avoid falling into hopelessness and despair, I had to learn to have faith in a world brutal and ugly more often than not. I had to learn to have faith in possibility, trusting in humanity knowing full well what we are capable of doing to each other. Somehow, I chose faith, long before I defined my choice in such religious terms.

The world is a wounded place, and all of us living beings are vulnerable within it. Vulnerability means that we are all capable of being wounded and we are all capable of wounding. None of us is exempt, no matter how righteous we think we are. Now, what if all of our actions were oriented toward responding to those wounds, responding to and not avoiding or pushing them out of our comfort zone? What if we responded, not with hand-wringing and careful analysis of the problems at a conceptual level, but rather from listening to the woundedness, giving attention to the wisdom and knowledge of those most intimate with wounds? What if we turned for knowledge and guidance toward those most impacted? Could this be the dawn of a new day for us?

When Jesus emerged from the tomb, it is said, the only people present were women. In the Gospel of John, the women wondered if he were the gardener, which is a lovely thought within our emergent springtime. The women carried the good news to the apostles, who became the evangelists. Yet it was the early followers of Jesus, many of them women, who took on his actions as their very clothing. Radically democratic, not in the sense of voting but in the sense of deliberate inclusion, the early followers of Jesus created common cause among themselves, the dispossessed of their time—the outcasts, the refugee, those hungry and unhoused because of diseases of the mind and body, women who rejected their assigned places in the social order, the widowed and orphaned and destitute and

propertyless. They bound together, remade themselves within a flesh of acceptance and sharing. Only later did the theology become an oppressive tool of state regimes. Only later does Jesus the Son of Man become the Christ, the sacrifice for sin, the only path to redemption. Initially, the people awaited the second coming in community, making a way of giving and peace, creating a way of living which honored their teacher and brother, their beloved sibling. Their god was a god becoming, a god as wounded and vulnerable as they, subjected to authority and power, the future uncertain. A god in process, just like us. Might this god be, might this be the new day dawning, we diverse and contrary Unitarian Universalists can see and accept?

There were many years when my distrust and dislike of Christian theology, at least my limited understanding of it, prevented me from enjoying the songs of *Godspell* and *Jesus Christ, Super Star*, many years when I could take no lessons from the story of Jesus's crucifixion. But I have learned to substitute new words for the language that might alienate me from good action in the world. I have learned to think "Attention" when I hear the word "Prayer," to think "Opening" when I hear the word "Worship." I have learned to think "Challenger" when I hear the name "Jesus." I have learned to think "Relationship" when I hear the words "Holy" or "Divine" or "Sacred." I have learned to think "Connection" when I hear "God." I don't get too fussed up about those religious words anymore. I know the "More" feeling when I feel it, know it when it is moving in me. I try to pay attention and be still, so I can feel and see it more. Why? Because it helps me to be more attuned to other beings and their needs and wants. It helps me be more attuned to my own. It helps me to think about how I want to live this one life I am sure of, a process of becoming that should not end until death. From there, I have no idea. How can I? But I surely do not want to stop changing and becoming until that inevitable end. I have no wish for death in life, and that is my prayer for all of you as well.

How might we live day by day, preparing ourselves to really become more compassionate and more just? We imagine life not as a tomb, but as a womb where we become enfleshed, taking on a new skin, a new character. Out of the ruins and rubble, of struggle, we build together a beautiful city of humanity, creativity and generativity forming real hope and faith in a good future. There can be no stasis in our individual lives, as there should not be any in our collective lives. We are each other's people. We Unitarian Universalists, we practice accepting the reality of each other's divine, even if it is not our own divine. Our collective life as a religious community orients toward compassion and justice. And so our pledge drive is not simply about the building and grounds or paying the Minister and Staff their salaries. It is about becoming in a world that is too often oriented toward stasis and death. Our action to remain a thriving collective is about changing a status quo that keeps power concentrated in the hands of a few while others are left in the tomb of injustice and inequity and loneliness. In charity, we give to ameliorate the groaning bellies of hungry children. In mercy, we make connection with the imprisoned and the marginalized. In justice, we work to overturn laws that deny rights. No simple happy-talk but a beloved community continuously becoming more so by our intentional work to make the world better than it is.

To become is a lifelong process. Nothing is constant, not even the self. What ensures our becoming is an unfolding of our truest self, a labor which cannot be carried out alone. A labor celebrating new

beginnings, holding risks together, leaning into unknowns with the promises of support and companionship. A companionship listening to the future calling to each of us, helping one another find our place in the shared labor of collective life, supporting each other in what it is the world's ache is asking of us. There is no me without you. We shape one another. The Sacred that birthed us weaves our lives together so that we can only find ourselves through shared becoming. This is loving and being loved. Your people are my people, your divine my divine. Our work making a beautiful city of humanity.

May we keep on becoming. May we hear the whispers of days gone by, of the forbearers of this Fellowship whose dreams are still emerging. May we have faith in the promise of the future we will celebrate together, living within the promise of our individual journeys, and our collective ones, too. May we sing praises for this morning and all mornings, springing fresh from the work of our hands for compassion and justice in a hurting world. May we praise with elation, that life is good and all deserve to thrive in this, our very short time, as you remember, today and every day, that you are loved, you are worthy, you are welcome, and you are needed. May your feel it so, may it be so, and may the people say "Amen."