

“Rising Up” Reflections on Easter Sunday

A series of reflections by Rev. Dr. Jan Carlsson-Bull
Unitarian Universalist Church in Meriden
Meriden, CT
Easter Sunday
April 5, 2015

Rising Up: What I Know

[Sing]

I know this rose will open.

I know my fear will burn away.

I know my soul will unfurl its wings.

I know this rose will open.

What do I know? A few things, like a rose that will open and what it will mean for how my spirit will soar when I see it happening. I know that the snow is melting, and beneath the ground all winter long—however harsh this winter was—the rose that will open, the crocus that is already appearing, the daffodil that will soon be in bloom, the daffodils that have bloomed in the warmth of greenhouses and are in the hands of our children—were far more than a trick of Mother Nature just placing a magic wand on the earth and producing the wonders of spring. Seedlings, roots, nutrients, and more were at work all winter long.

I know this is so, because humankind over the course of thousands of years have arranged and written and reported their observations about what happens. It is work grounded in witnessing and questioning and analyzing and documenting and witnessing and on and on in a cycle that forms the process that we recognize as science. Science and discovery go hand in hand. Discovery and wonder are first cousins. Wonder and awe fill the appeal of what it is to know. Or is it the other way around? I’m still discovering what I think I know. It’s so simple, and it’s so complicated.

Rather like Easter. Science—multi-faceted as it is, filled with theories and evidence as it is, is ever in flux. Discovery is as fluid as our curiosity. Wonder is a gift common to both.

I wonder.... We begin to wonder at birth. We blink, we’re startled by sounds we’ve never heard, we stretch with our senses and grow into a child like this morning’s children who held their daffodils and were invited to wonder about three basic questions about those daffodils: What do you know? What do you believe? What do you imagine?

Wondering precedes knowing. Wondering is all encompassing. Knowing is more defined. How easy it is to think that knowing is “for sure.” How easy it is to think that knowing is about being certain.

How could we possibly be certain, how could we possibly know for sure, how could we possibly know at all about a story that flies in the face of what we think we know?

As Unitarian Universalists, we tend to take pride in saying that we know that Jesus—the man, the prophet, the rabbi—lived about two thousand years ago (according to research done on “the historical Jesus”). Of the little we know of his life from what was written long after his life, we can guess that Jesus was a good person, a really good person. We can say that some reported that he was brutally murdered by folks who just couldn’t get their arms around his message of love and his lifestyle of wandering around with a group of ancient hippies and befriending people who lived on the edges of what was acceptable by most. But, but, but—and we go on and on with our buts—but he was just human, and for sure, he didn’t come back to life after he died.

When we lose someone dear to us, when we lose a pet, when we lose a grandparent, when we lose a friend, what is it that we know? We know that we have loved that person. We know that we hurt. We know that we grieve. And we know very little about what happens next, because as far we know or think we know, we haven’t yet experienced it ourselves.

Easter is not about knowing. Easter is about love and loss and hurt and grief....and hope. The story of Easter is about hope against hope.

[Sing]

I [hope] this rose will open.

I [hope] my fear will burn away.

I [hope] my soul will unfurl its wings.

I [hope] this rose will open.

Rising Up: What I Believe

Beliefs are the stuff of war and peace, shame and dignity, fear and love, dread and hope. To say, “I believe...” is more about *how* I see and hear something than about *what* I see and hear. Hope drives what we believe. What we believe can give us hope.

What we believe can also cause us to feel ashamed and afraid. What we believe can lock us up as if we’re in a house with no doors or windows and we mistake the house for the whole world. What we believe can lead us to try to make sure everyone else believes the same.

What we believe can also cause us to claim dignity for ourselves and affirm “the dignity and worth” of everybody else. What we believe can give us courage when we’re afraid. What we believe can allow us to bend and flex and understand that what I believe and what somebody else believes can be so far apart that unless we’re willing to understand beliefs like the many patterns and colors of a kaleidoscope, we’re in deep trouble.

Sophia Lyon Fahs, whose life and legacy we celebrated just a couple of weeks ago, understood. Her life—all 101 years of it—was a journey of beliefs that became increasingly limber as she grew in understanding herself and most especially, children. As a mother, a teacher, a teacher of teachers, and at the age of 82, a Unitarian Universalist minister, Sophia struggled long and hard with what and how she believed.

“Some beliefs,” she wrote, “are rigid, like the body of death, impotent in a changing world. Other beliefs are pliable, like the young sapling, ever growing with the upward trust of life.”

I believe that Easter is a holiday, holy day, that invites us to stretch and flex, like Sophia's young sapling, so that we can hear the Easter story of resurrection as a story filled with meaning for how each and all of us can be touched and changed by the transforming power of love. The specifics of what did or didn't happen after Jesus' death are not the meaning of the Easter story, and the story of Easter varies in those specifics from telling to telling. I believe that the meaning of the Easter story is that the power of love is greater than the powers of oppression that try to conquer it. Jesus' death was an execution by officials of an Empire desperate to maintain power, so desperate that they stamped out anybody who stood in their way. Jesus' resurrection was a triumph of Love over Empire, Love over oppression.

I believe that Love rose up on Easter. I believe that Jesus' friends, Mary and Mary Magdalene and Peter and others, experienced the presence of this person who had been executed just a few days before, because the power of the love they had known filled them in such a way that it was as if Jesus were still with them.

We speak of the Spirit of Life, the Spirit of Love. Some say God. Some say God is Love. Whatever and however we name a force so powerful that it's toppled empires and changed the lives of the most ruthless, love breaks free from tombs of the heart and mind. Love astonishes us at moments when we least expect it. Love resists oppression and risks all for compassion. I believe that Love rises up again and again—love beyond knowing, love beyond belief.

Rising Up: What I Imagine

Easter calls me to imagine. How else can I stretch the arms of my heart around a story that seems preposterous? Hmm, for the children here, who knows what "preposterous" means? [responses] What a wonderful word that invites so many possible responses—asserting what we know (or think we know), claiming what we believe (which can change over time), and imagining. Imagining isn't just for fairy tales. Imagining is for any of us wrestling with the natural instinct of our hearts to rise up and embrace the possible, even when we're told that what we imagine as possible is simply impossible and that's that.

What do I imagine about Easter?

I imagine that a very long time ago halfway across the world, a young man lived with so much love in his heart that he had to share it. I mean *really* share it. Gospel means "good news." Gospel is fluid; that is, it's not just one story or a single way of understanding what happens. This young man had good news; he *was* good news, and he had to share it. He held a Gospel that *needed* telling, *craved* telling, and burst through the seams of whatever risk was involved and *was told*. I'm talking about the Gospel, the good news, of love. The primary teller was the young man Jesus.

The little we know of Jesus' life tells us that he was a nonconformist—another big word. Who of the youngsters here can tell us what a nonconformist is? [Responses] (I think we have more than a few right here in this sanctuary.)

If Jesus had conformed, he would have cowered in fear at the ruling powers in the land in which he grew into manhood. He would have hunkered down before the officials of the Roman Empire. He lived in a country ruled by people with no patience for compassion, forgiveness, listening, and love. From petty official to Emperor, they were ruthless. Whoever stood in their

way, they imprisoned or executed or both. At all costs they held onto their power...which means they were afraid. A band of nonconformists led by a full-blown Rebel spreading a Gospel of Love was a great threat to them. Jesus knew this and took the risk. He was brutally murdered by the Empire.

But the story goes that he came back to life. I imagine that the life he lived was more powerful than any Empire. Of course he came back to life! I imagine that lives lived in love and compassion today are more powerful than any single person or nation or corporation or other force that tries to silence or do away with altogether those who practice and proclaim the Gospel of Love in our own time.

I imagine that the very force of Easter, the story, the legend, the realities of heart and mind, are alive and well in our midst. I imagine that if we open our hearts to Easter, we too can resist brutality in the streets, greed in the towers of capitalism gone viral, shame that fills so many young people told that they can't learn, rage that fills people of all ages when they can't get what they want and haven't heeded a deeper yearning for grace, gratitude, and compassion.

I imagine that the power of Easter can touch each of us. Perhaps it will mean a call to a friend with whom we're disconnected or even estranged. Perhaps it will mean a call to a family member with whom we had an argument long ago that we allowed to sever our relationship. Perhaps it will mean a call or a letter to our Congressperson to remind her/him that a treaty with a nation we've long called our "enemy" is possible. Perhaps it will mean a renewed commitment or a first-time commitment to get involved with a task force, a movement even, that works toward sustainable living on this planet that we share.

I imagine that the power of Easter can call you and me into a place of understanding that we are alive by the grace of the Spirit of Life and Love. I imagine that the power of Easter can call you and me into a place of gratitude, for grace gives birth to gratitude. I imagine that the power of Easter can call us into a place of generosity, for gratitude gives birth to generosity of spirit and deed.

Does Easter call for celebration? Yes, and so does life. That we are here and now together breathing, thinking, wondering, imagining, singing on this Easter morning tells me that life rises up again and again. When life is filled with love, we soar.

So may it be and Amen.

Sources:

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