

FALLING AND RISING — A HUMAN STORY

© REV. DANA WORSNOP
ATKINSON MEMORIAL CHURCH
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Reading:

Seasons of the Self by Max Cootes.

We need a celebration that speaks the Spring-inspired word about life and death,
About us as we live and die,
Through all the cycling seasons, days and years.
We need the sense of deity to crack our own hard, brown December husks
And push life out of inner tombs and outer pain.

Unless we move the seasons of the self, and Spring can come for us,
Winter will go on and on.
And Easter will remain a myth,
and life will never come again despite the fact of Spring.

Sermon:

One of my favorite classes in seminary dealt with the Death of Jesus in Early Christianity. My classmates were three Unitarian Universalists, a Baptist or two, a Lutheran, a Congregationalist, and a couple of varieties of Catholics.

We brought many perspectives to this most difficult subject with respect, curiosity and humor.

An assignment had us attending Holy Week services in a tradition other than our own. I went to King's Chapel in Boston, a Unitarian Universalist church which I had to convince the professor would indeed be outside my own tradition. King's Chapel sits right on Boston's Freedom Trail. It had been literally the King's Chapel, but after the Revolutionary War, as the Church of England was finding its way to becoming the Episcopal Church of America, King's Chapel took a different path. They called a liberal minister who rewrote the Anglican prayer book to excise all references to the Trinity. Making King's Chapel the first Unitarian church in this new country.

That prayer book is still in use. King's Chapel describes itself as congregational in polity, Episcopal in liturgy and Unitarian in theology – perhaps our most avowedly Christian congregation. Holy Week services included a Maundy Thursday foot washing, a Good Friday communion, and a Saturday midnight vigil. Different enough from most of our congregations to qualify for my assignment.

At their best, the King's Chapel services carried me into the Easter story with power and drama. On Thursday, the communion table was stripped and the cross removed from the altar as we sang "Abide with Me." That's when I first got chills. The choice of hymn was understatedly brilliant. There was no longer any chance of a way out. Jesus was betrayed and would die. Yet who would abide with him? Who would abide with me if God were to die? I felt simultaneously bereft and called to abide with Jesus and with all who suffer – hence the chills.

On Good Friday, the church was lit only by candles. We read Psalm 22 responsively. "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me," was our cry, too. As the story was retold, the candles were extinguish one by one. After the final reading from the gospel of Matthew, "So they went to the guard and made the tomb secure by sealing the stone," the sanctuary was in complete darkness. Indeed the sixth hour had come, and the land was in darkness We sat a few final moments in the silence and the dark, and then the minister slammed the Bible shut.

It was over. The slamming of the Bible sounded like the slamming of the stone over the tomb. Could I hold onto any hope? This darkness had become my own.

Never in my life had the story been so visceral, and I was in high anticipation of Easter morning. How would the glory of resurrection be engaged? What new hope, new life, would I be offered? How would life arise from death and despair? The sanctuary was full, everyone was in their Sunday best as perhaps only Bostonians can manage. The minister ascended the high New England pulpit and he began to preach about flowers. The power and drama evaporated. My let down was palpable.

As Unitarian Universalists, we often have trouble with the Easter story. The bloodiness of the crucifixion, the idea of Jesus' physical resurrection, the whole notion that Jesus had to die for the sins of humanity, the so-called redemptive power of suffering.

We resist, and so on Easter morning we are often more comfortable hearing about things like flowers and pagan symbols of fertility. We avoid this great and powerful Christian myth that asks us to consider the nature of deity, the inevitability of our own mortality, the meaning of human suffering, the creative power of life's constant renewal.

Now in defense of King's Chapel, most of the people there Easter morning had not been through all the drama of the previous services. The sermon I needed to hear might well have been surprising if not downright jarring to them.

Yet how are we to engage this powerful myth of falling and rising again? This marvelously human drama teaching us that hope and love are more powerful than fear and death. We do tend to like the Easter part of the story telling us that up from the ashes new life can arise. There is nothing surprising or unusual in this. Yet if we skip over the hard parts, we lose the power and glory of the rebirth.

Our dilemma is how to enter the story with integrity. We are not alone in this. Jesus' violent and bloody death has been a dilemma for his followers from the beginning.

Christians have been doing all sorts of theological gymnastics to make sense of it ever since. As modern people of progressive religion, our own gymnastics often involve avoiding the story altogether. But that is a dodge to skip over the work of engaging the fullness of this human drama.

The key is to view the whole story as myth, as an archetypally human story of falling and rising again. Jesus may have been a passionate spirit-filled leader, but he was also fully human. His story can be our own.

Yet as Karen Armstrong writes in *A Short History of Myth*, "unless a historical event is mythologized, it cannot become a source of religious inspiration." She credits Paul with transforming Jesus into a mythological character whose message would resonate through the centuries.

The irony here is that just about all we know about Jesus with any historical certainty is that he died.

"Jesus' death by execution under Pontius Pilate is as sure as anything historical can ever be," writes John Dominic Crossan in *Who Killed Jesus*. "For, if no follower of Jesus had written anything for one hundred years after his crucifixion, we would still know about him from two authors not among his supporters... Flavius Josephus and Cornelius Tacitus.... We have ... not just Christian witnesses but one major Jewish and one major Pagan historian who both agree on three points concerning Jesus: there was a *movement*, there was an *execution* because of that movement, but, despite that execution, there was a *continuation* of the movement."

Josephus, the Jewish historian, wrote: "About this time there lived Jesus, a wise man.... He won over many Jews and many of the Greeks. When Pilate ... had condemned him to be crucified, those who had in the first place come to love him did not give up their affection for him. And the tribe of the Christians, so called after him, has still to this day not disappeared."

Tacitus, the Roman tells a less flattering story.

"Christus ... had undergone the death penalty ... by sentence of ... Pontius Pilate, and the pernicious superstition was check for the moment, only to break out once more, not merely in Judaea, the home of the disease, but in the capital itself, where all things horrible or shameful in the world collect and find a vogue."

Crucifixion was the most shameful form of death in Roman times. The Romans reserved it for those they wanted to make an example of. Victims were deliberately tortured and then put on display to die slowly and painfully.

The death of Jesus is historical fact, yet what we do with it is not. We need not accept that Jesus suffered and died on the cross for our sins. We need not see it either as redemptive suffering. That notion has justified all sorts of violence – often against women and children – for centuries.

In her book, *Proverbs of Ashes*, Rev. Rebecca Parker, now president of Starr King School for the Ministry, tells a story of her first years in ministry. A woman came to her, a stranger, who had seen from the church sign that the minister was a woman. She told Rebecca about her abusive husband. "I went to my priest twenty years ago," she said. "The priest said I should rejoice in my sufferings because they bring me closer to Jesus.... He said, 'If you love Jesus, accept the beatings and bear them gladly, as Jesus bore the cross.' I've tried but I'm not sure anymore.... Tell me, is what the priest told me true?"

The question took Rebecca's breath away. "I was a liberal Christian," she writes. "I didn't believe that God demanded obedience or that Jesus' death on the cross brought our salvation.... But just that past Sunday I had preached a sermon on the willingness of love to suffer. I preached that Jesus' life revealed the nature of love and that love would save us. I'd said that love bears all things.... Keeps ties of connection to others even when they hurt you. Places the need of the other before concern for the self."

Finally, Rebecca found words. What the priest told you "isn't true," she said. "God doesn't not want you to accept being beaten by your husband." And both women breathed again at hearing this truth spoken aloud.

This incident changed Rebecca's life and ministry. She rejected the role of the crucifixion as the central metaphor for Christianity. That a violent and horrible death should lie at the center of a religion of radical love and acceptance is not only contradictory, it is dangerous and harmful.

She writes, "God is not the author of human violence and does not sanction cruelty and torture. To inflict pain on ourselves is not virtuous and to inflict it on others is not edifying or transforming."

"The importance of Jesus for liberal Christians is not that he paid the price for sin. Jesus is important because he embodied loving concern for others and called people to love their neighbors. Jesus confronted the oppressive ruler of his day and was not afraid to risk his life doing so."

The dilemma for Jesus' early followers wasn't just that their beloved teacher had died such a hideous and shameful death. Their dilemma arose because even after his death, they had a palpable sense that he was still among them. His spirit had not died, his message of radical love would continue. We can never know exactly what happened. I suspect that some had mystical visions of Jesus physically among them. Others may simply have had a sense that he was walking along the road with them. Or they recognized him in a stranger an indication that his spirit still was alive in the world and in all people.

They had to find a way to carry on his powerful and yes, redemptive message. Not redemption through suffering, but redemption through love.

The myth of resurrection arose to explain the power of the feeling of his presence.

The crucifixion was not an act of divine atonement for wicked humanity. It does not tell us that suffering is redemptive. Jesus died the death of a political and religious radical. The only message I can find in his dying is that love transcends even death. If death has no power over us, then we can be resurrected out of our own misery and despair.

That is the good news of resurrection. Not that Jesus became flesh and rose to heaven to sit at the right hand of the Father. If Jesus is called the King of Kings, for me it is a grand metaphor for how powerful and hopeful a message he brought.

Love triumphs over fear and even death. In the midst of our deepest emptiness and despair, new life and love can and will arise. The traditional Christian call and response of "He is risen. He is risen indeed" is a joyful embrace of the greater truth that we all have the power to rise from the ashes. That we are incredibly resilient. That Jesus' story of falling and rising again is ultimately a human story – our very own story.

For even in the midst of despair we can cry out, "We are risen. We are risen indeed!"

Amen. And Blessed be!

I invite you now to enter into the part of Handel's Messiah that expresses the joy of resurrection. The Hallelujah chorus is that grand celebration of the truth greater than death, that love grows and lives again. That even in our mortality, there is yet something holy and even immortal about a human life.

The king who rose at the first hearing of the Hallelujah chorus, was our own King George III against whom the Revolutionary War was fought. The King who would have sat in the King's Box at King's Chapel had he ever visited the colonies. You may rise in spirit with the king, or not, as you choose.