

Resurrection and Resilience

Unitarian Universalist Church of the Restoration Easter Sunday, April 24, 2011

As I listened to Jim Walter's April 3rd, 2011 sermon, I found myself responding to his pointed questions, "For what purpose has God delivered you to this community, now?" "What do you bring to this very moment of all that you have learned in your lifetime?" Those are big, big questions. You might say that they are Easter questions. They are questions of the rebirth and renewal, the resurrection of this community.

Easter is really the most important Christian religious holiday. The Easter story defines Christianity. Without the story of the execution and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth, Christianity would never have become a separate religion. It would have remained as a Jewish group.

The name Easter comes from Eostre, the Anglo-Saxon Great Mother fertility goddess of the dawn. Spring appears to bring life back from the seeming death of winter, and many, many stories celebrate this return of life. Early Christians in the Northern hemisphere adapted the pagan spring festivals of rebirth, renewal and fertility to the Christian celebration of Jesus' resurrection.

In his recent book, *The Future of Faith*, Harvey Cox says this about Easter:

There are shelves of treatises about 'what actually happened' on the first Easter Sunday, and the gospel accounts are not consistent. What is clear, however, is that although the disciples had lost hope and fled in panic after the crucifixion, *something* happened to convince them that Jesus and the coming peaceable kingdom he embodied had not been defeated by death. The disciples soon came to believe that in some sense that is hard to define, he still lived. . . .ⁱ

Whatever we think of the story, I think that the basic message that we can take from Easter is this: Love is stronger than hate, love is stronger than death. In his book, *Jesus Was a Liberal*, UU Minister Scotty McLennan wrote, "Jesus teaches that the final answer is love- infinite and eternal love"ⁱⁱ

A little more from Harvey Cox:

The Easter cycle with all of its harshness, joy and impenetrability . . . says that who Jesus was, as the embodiment of a 'different possible world' was not ultimately defeated by the crucifixion, but continues. . . . It suggests that communities of love and reciprocity, forgiveness and compassion are within our grasp, even if they cannot be fully realized."ⁱⁱⁱ

Isn't this what the Unitarian Universalist Church of the Restoration, you, dreams of being "a community of love and reciprocity, forgiveness and compassion." Is it now an Easter season, a season of resurrection, rebirth and renewal for this spiritual community?

Restoration has already demonstrated resilience. This community has lasted for 190 years, through many hard times as well as good and vital times. Those of you who stayed at Restoration through the past several years of hard times have shown resilience and commitment. Now, it is spring, “the time of the singing birds.” It is Easter.

In your order of service today is a proposed Restoration covenant. This document, put together from what you said in the October 2010 workshop, reminds us of our aspirations and intentions. It attempts to put into words how we want to be with one another as we do our best to be that “a community of love and reciprocity, forgiveness and compassion.” Later in the spring, you will be asked for a vote of approval of this covenant.

Coming back to Jim’s April 3rd sermon, I listened to Jim’s questions “For what purpose has God delivered you to this community, now?” “What do you bring to this very moment of all that you have learned in your lifetime?” I found that I had my own answers. I have told many of you that I did not expect to be in Philadelphia or at the Church of the Restoration when I completed the requirements for ordination as a Unitarian Universalist minister. In fact, at times, it still seems quite surprising to me that I have become a minister, at all. And yet, ministry does bring all my life learning and skills to this very moment and to this community. Many of you have said that I seem to be a very good fit for Restoration, and that feels true to me, too. It seems that, for this very moment, you are my people and I am your minister.

Last Wednesday evening, a small group of Restoration leaders gathered to look through twenty years worth of Restoration’s goal statements, vision work, aspirations from workshops and committees. We looked to see what continuities there were, what has been accomplished, what is still valid. There is a lot that continues!

I have come to understand that some of you have felt that you were being told that you had to completely change who you were, to be something very different. I don’t think that is so, not at all. I read that a few years ago some people thought the congregation’s name was an obstacle to growth and should be changed. I am so glad that you did not change the name. Restoration is a hopeful and historic Universalist name. It refers to the “Restoration of All Souls in God.” In other words, the inherent worth and dignity of all, that all people are held in love.

Some things need to be changed as this community is re-born and is made whole again. That is what the original biblical words translated as salvation mean: healing and being made whole. Sometimes, it feels to me that this congregation has developed a bad case of low self-esteem and scarcity thinking. These things are changing, are healing. Part of my increasing feeling that I fit at Restoration is that this community is and has been a spiritual community. We have lots of different ways of understanding and expressing that feeling and lots of different practices, but this is a community filled with the spirit.

I think that is a large part of what people feel when they visit Restoration. They talk of warmth and welcome which are certainly two very important things. We aspire to be welcoming to all souls, and I think that visitors can feel that we are a spiritual community. I think that is part of what folks mean when they compare us to some other UU congregations which they describe as feeling cold and intellectual. Here we have a long tradition of valuing head and heart, spirit and soul. I want you to be restored to your Universalist tradition, to your own truest and finest selves.

So my answers to Jim's questions are very big ones; they feel like spiritual calling. And they are impossible to do alone. Dear ones, I not only want to work with you to revive and restore Restoration, but I also want to be part of a revival of Universalism in our near community, in Philadelphia and in the world beyond. We have excellent good news that the world is desperately hungry to hear again. So here are some ways that I suggest change: Be proud of our tradition, Be ready to share what saves you, that is what heals you and makes you feel whole, and Be ready to invite people to come to Restoration, to share what you have found, and to be restored.

May it be so. Amen. Blessed Be. Ashe.

ⁱ Cox, Harvey. *The Future of Faith*. Harper Collins E Books, 2009, pp. 50-53.

ⁱⁱ McLennan, Scotty. *Jesus Was a Liberal: Reclaiming Christianity for All*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2009, p. 210.

ⁱⁱⁱ Cox, Harvey. *The Future of Faith*. Harper Collins E Books, 2009, pp. 50-53.