

## “Resurrection”

**The Rev. Laura Horton-Ludwig, Minister**  
First Unitarian Universalist Church of Stockton  
April 8, 2007

For Unitarian Universalists,  
Easter is a confusing holiday.  
What are we supposed to make of it?  
We know, of course, that countless generations of Christians have  
celebrated Easter as the anniversary of Jesus’s resurrection after his  
death on the cross.  
For Christians, Easter is a miracle story.  
Something happened that *can’t* happen in the usual run of things.  
People can’t just come back from the dead.  
But the Christian story says, yes, this *happened*.  
It was a miracle,  
something inexplicable,  
something that makes no sense according to the laws of nature.  
And we who are suspicious of miracles  
don’t really know what to do with this holiday.

Most of us pretty much agree  
that we’re not celebrating the literal resurrection of Jesus from the dead.  
And yet we observe Easter every year.  
So it can be a little confusing.  
In one church I know,  
the typical routine is to fill the sanctuary with Easter lilies  
and have a sermon about the Buddha.

We may not be quite sure what it all means for *us*—  
and yet we have this intuitive attachment to Easter  
that we don’t want to give up.  
The celebration, the joy, the *miraculousness* of it all  
is working in us too.

The power of this holiday  
runs so much deeper than whether or not you believe  
one man came back from the dead 2000 years ago.  
The Easter story *I* believe in is about a different kind of resurrection.

I think of the caterpillars from our story this morning.<sup>1</sup>  
You remember Stripe the caterpillar lives in a caterpillar-world  
where the biggest achievement there is,  
is to start at the bottom  
and climb up a giant, squirming pile of caterpillars,  
a living tower that goes up and up and up until...  
no one knows what's at the top,  
but they all figure it must be good  
because everyone's trying to get there!  
So little Stripe the caterpillar starts climbing up and up.  
He has to step on lots of other caterpillars to get higher up,  
but he's got his eyes on the top.  
He gives up the dream to protect his friend Yellow,  
but he has this restlessness inside him,  
this wish to find out what's at the top,  
to see if *that's* the thing that's big enough and good enough  
to make him believe his life means something.

Finally he learns the terrible truth:  
the caterpillars who make it all the way to the top  
just get pushed off by the ones who come up beneath them!  
He's in despair now.  
He's just found out his life's goal was meaningless,  
*worse* than meaningless  
and he doesn't have any idea what to do now.  
He is in a place of spiritual darkness.  
But then he discovers he can be something else.  
In embracing the darkness of the unknown,  
he can become a butterfly—

---

<sup>1</sup> *Hope for the Flowers*, by Trina Paulus.

something more wonderful and beautiful than he ever expected.  
He has to take a huge risk  
and give up everything he knows.  
He has to give up who he was  
and claim the freedom to become something new,  
something he's never been,  
something better.  
And what he experiences is a resurrection.  
What was old falls away,  
revealing new life.

You *know* this is not just about butterflies.  
Every person alive  
can experience a resurrection of the spirit.  
For who among us has not at some time been in a dark place?  
You can't get through life without pain and darkness—  
the pain of being hurt, or hurting someone else,  
the pain of disappointment and struggle,  
the darkness of confusion, of oppression,  
everything that blocks us from living deeply, rightly, and well.

But we are here today to witness that there is no darkness so deep  
that light cannot break in.  
It doesn't matter where you've been,  
or what has been done to you,  
or what you've done,  
There is *always* the hope of rebirth and resurrection.

There is a young man named Lenox Watson  
who's in prison in Texas.  
He is serving a life sentence  
for the murder of a young woman named Shirley,  
whom he shot in a carjacking when they were both only 17.

Ten years after he murdered Shirley,

Lenox Watson entered a program for restorative justice, which brings crime victims and perpetrators together to help both sides find some healing.

Prisoners in the program have to go through extensive preparations and sincerely express remorse before any meeting can be held.

Lenox Watson went through that program, and eventually he met with a woman named Jan Brown.

Jan Brown was the mother of a young girl named Kandy who was murdered by a different man 16 years ago.

The man who had murdered Jan's daughter had been executed.

But Jan badly wanted to talk to someone who had killed, to express her pain and confusion and rage.

Lenox Watson became that person.

He listened to her as she described her suffering.

In return she listened to him tell what it was like to grow up in an angry home.

Lenox said later that until he started preparing to meet with Jan, "I never thought about Shirley, she being a person like she was....

I never thought about her family....

Now I see something different.

Shirley was real, with real feelings.

Her family, they suffered....

I never thought about what I'd done, that I'm here because I took somebody's life....

I feel guilty, shameful, sad, remorseful, sorry."

The Easter story in the Gospel of Luke

tells the story of two criminals who were crucified with Jesus.<sup>2</sup>

One of them mocks Jesus, but the other one tells him to stop.

The first man says, "We are getting what we deserve for our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong."

---

<sup>2</sup> Luke 23:39-43.

He asks Jesus, “Remember me when you come into your kingdom.”  
Jesus answers him,  
“Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise.”  
I take this as a story of great hope.  
This man, the criminal, was not attached to his pride.  
He admitted that he had done wrong.  
He saw that this man, Jesus,  
had found a better way of living.  
And Jesus told him,  
there is room for you in Paradise.  
You will not be excluded because of who you were  
or what you did.  
You are changed inside—  
you don’t want to be that person you were.  
And you don’t have to be.  
You are free to be something different now.  
There is room for you in Paradise.

Two thousand years later,  
we are still the same human beings,  
with the same sorrows and regrets and hopes.  
In their meeting, Jan told Lenox about her misery  
after her daughter Kandy died.  
It was so intense that even her closest friends  
couldn’t stand to be around her.  
As she spoke, Lenox began to cry.  
He said, “I killed someone.  
I’m a murderer. I can’t change that.”

But then a miracle happened.  
Jan said to him, “Murder is what you did on one day of your life.  
It is not the essence of who you are.  
I’m the mom of a murdered child,  
but I’m also the mother of three other kids,  
a writer, a friend, a grandmother.

There's more to me than being Kandy's mother.  
There's more to you than being Shirley's killer.  
You can still make something of your life. Even in here."

Lenox was silent a long time.  
Finally he said, "You mean, I'm capable of hurting someone,  
but today I choose not to do that?"

Today I choose not to do that!  
My Easter message to you is *freedom*.  
Whatever you are today,  
whoever you have been,  
that is not the final word.  
Wherever you are stuck,  
wherever you are ashamed,  
wherever you are in captivity,  
that is not the final word.

You have the gift of freedom  
to choose differently.  
Not that it's easy.  
On the day of his death,  
Jesus didn't work any *outer* miracles.  
He was taunted by all the people saying,  
if you're so great, call on God to save you!  
Come down from the cross!  
There was no outer miracle that day.  
He didn't come down from the cross.  
But he worked an inner miracle just the same.  
"Truly I tell you," he said to the dying man next to him,  
"today you will be with me in Paradise."  
At that moment, out of the depths,  
a man who was dying the death reserved for criminals,  
defined at the end by his worst act,  
heard those healing words,

“you will be with me in Paradise,”  
calling him to remember he could be more than he had been,  
even now.

Even now he was free inside.

After her meeting with Lenox,  
Jan said that she felt peace inside of her  
for the first time since Kandy had died.  
Lenox said, “I feel like a load has been lifted off me.  
As I walked back to my cellblock,  
I noticed the birds and flowers on the other side of the fence.  
I listened to a dude behind me on the food line  
and could hear him breathing.  
I don’t do that kind of stuff...”

He’s coming back to life—

I mean, literally!

This man who was so weighed down by so much  
is lifting up his head and breathing in the breath of life  
and discovering that the world around him is sacred and alive.

He said, “I felt relief....

I keep looking at my hands,  
knowing I’ve killed someone with them.

How I hurt people with them in fights.

How I messed up.

But there’s more to me than this crime.

Or there can be.”<sup>3</sup>

A resurrection indeed.

Amen and blessed be.

---

<sup>3</sup> Jan Goodwin, “After Violence, the Possibility of Healing,” *O* magazine, April 2004, pp. 252–53.